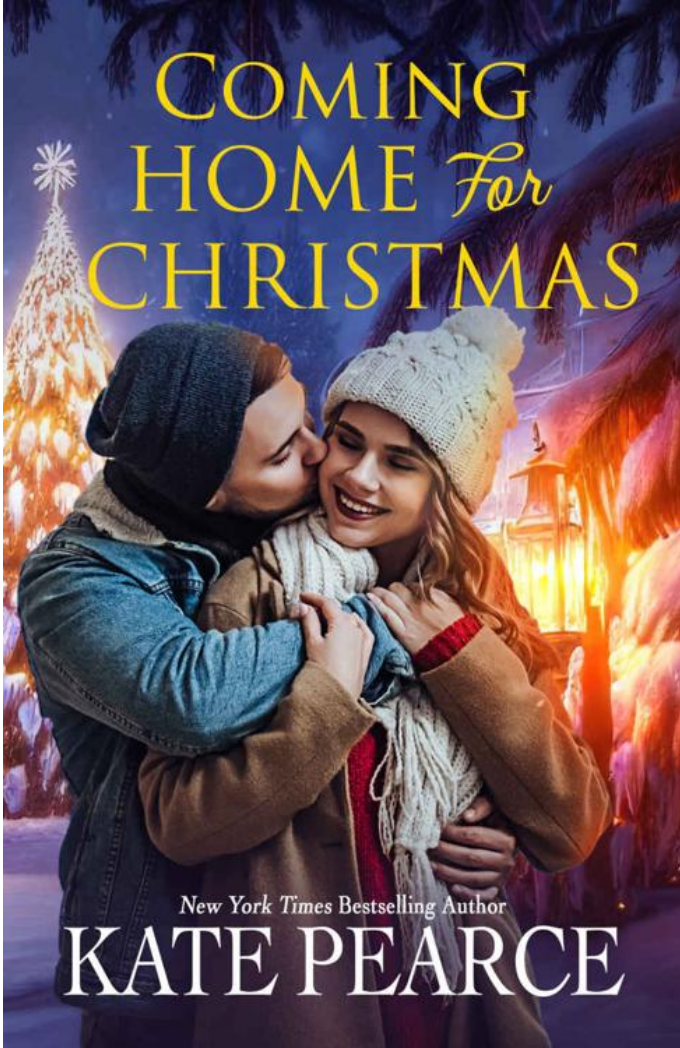


COMING
HOME *For*
CHRISTMAS

New York Times Bestselling Author

KATE PEARCE



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Coming Home for Christmas

KATE PEARCE



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Coming Home for Christmas

KATE PEARCE

Chapter One

Quincy, Northern California

Caleb Erickson gripped the steering wheel as his truck gave another death howl and veered to the side of the snowy highway as if looking for a place to die.

“Don’t you fricking dare,” he growled as he wrestled for control on the ice. “Just eight more miles and we’re home!”

Home ... that wasn’t the right word anymore for the place he’d been born and raised, especially not since his mother had passed away. Now he was an occasional and reluctant visitor to a man who barely bothered to acknowledge his existence. He breathed a sigh of relief as the lights of the town appeared ahead of him. He could stop at the Gonzaleses’ place and see if Mike could take a look at his truck and get him out to the ranch. Even as he had the thought, the engine gave a death rattle and gave up on him. Caleb steered toward the snow-banked pavement so he wasn’t blocking the through street before he gave in to the inevitable. The sudden silence after the horrendous clanking of the past few miles was almost a relief. Snow fell around the cab, blurring the holiday lights strung along the shop fronts as it melted on the windscreen.

Caleb got out of the cab and tried to orientate himself in the biting wind. Most of the shops were dark or boarded up for the winter, which wasn’t encouraging. There were lights on in the coffee shop, but when he trudged over to try the door, it was locked. He got out his cell phone only to realize he’d forgotten to charge it during his all-night drive down from Seattle and it was as dead as the town.

“Dammit,” Caleb muttered as he shoved it back in his pocket. Now he’d have to walk to the mechanic’s shed at the end of the street and see if Mike was around. He pulled his knitted hat further down over his ears, zipped up his collar, and headed down the center of the deserted street because it was easier to walk on than the sidewalk. Even before he reached the premises, he realized he was on a fool’s errand. The huge barn doors were closed, and all the lights were off.

He turned a slow circle, his teeth chattering as he viewed his hometown. He had no phone so he couldn't call anyone and no truck to get anywhere anyway. He couldn't even turn and run because he'd end up dead in the snow.

His glance passed over and then came back to a familiar old-fashioned house opposite the coffee shop. It was double fronted and four stories high with a wide covered porch all the way around it. He squinted through the snow. There were lights on and it looked almost welcoming. Caleb sighed, his breath frosting in the freezing air.

He retraced his steps past the hulking shadow of his truck. There was no one else out, but that wasn't surprising. In conditions like this the best thing to do was hunker down at home and wait for the worst of it to pass. He opened the gate of the white picket fence and approached the steps up to the porch, where a lighted sign next to a brightly lit Christmas tree proclaimed:

GRANNY SMITH'S B&B
OFFERING THE COMFORTS OF HOME SINCE 1943.

Caleb grunted as he ascended the creaking steps. If Mrs. Smith had been here that long it might explain why she was always so cranky. She'd never liked the local kids and had chased them out of her yard and away from her fruit trees with a dedication and speed that had defied her age.

The front door opened just as he was about to knock, and he was confronted by a smiling vision in a ruffled pink apron covered in blobs of chocolate.

“Good evening!” she trilled. “I'm so happy you are here!”

Caleb almost took a step backward. He wasn't used to being met with such enthusiasm, being broad, well over six feet tall, and having a natural disinclination to smile.

“I was expecting Mrs. Smith,” Caleb said.

Her smile dimmed. “I'm afraid she passed away last year.”

“Sorry to hear that.” Caleb half turned away. “And I apologize for disturbing you.”

“Don’t you want to come in?” He frowned as she pushed the door open even wider. “Do you need something?”

“I need somewhere with a phone so I can call Mike about my truck.” He gestured behind him. “It’s broken down.”

“You can do that here,” she offered. “I really don’t mind. It’s not as if I have any actual guests to look after right now.”

There was something disconsolate behind the brightness of her tone, but that wasn’t his problem. He needed to get to a phone and if she was willing to let him in, he’d accept her offer.

“Okay, thanks.” He wiped his boots on the mat and stepped into the wide hallway. From what he could see nothing had changed in the place since he was a kid. There was a glass chandelier in the center of the ceiling and the wide planked flooring was good local redwood that was probably original to the house. The only difference was that the whole place was decked up like a Christmas wonderland with blinking lights, holly, and at least two more fully decorated trees.

She directed him toward the reception desk to the left side of the hall.

“The landline is there.” She paused, her blond hair illuminated by the light from the chandelier. “Can I get you some coffee? On the house, obviously.”

“That would be great.” He walked over to the desk. There was a list of local numbers right beside the phone, including the one and only taxi service, the hair salon, and the mechanic’s shop.

He called the number, and when no one answered he left a message about his truck and hung up. His gaze swept the ornate furnishings in the front parlor and the heavy fringed drapes that blocked the view of Main Street. It was deadly quiet inside the house, apart from the sound of someone humming as they approached his space.

Little Miss Sunshine smiled brightly as she set the mug of coffee on the desk in front of him.

“Did you get what you needed?”

Now that he thought about it, there was something naggingly familiar about her.

“Nope. My truck stopped running and I can’t get hold of Mike.”

She sighed. “That’s terrible. How are you going to get home?”

“You know who I am?”

“Of course, I do, Caleb.” She looked slightly hurt. “Didn’t you remember me?”

He studied her face and frowned. “Uh, yeah, I guess ...”

“It’s nothing to worry about.” Her smile dimmed. “I suppose I’ve changed quite a bit, although we *have* met several times over the years when you came back to visit your parents and I was here with Gran. Obviously, I’m quite forgettable.” She drew herself up. “I’m Lucy Smith.”

* * *

This wasn’t quite how Lucy had envisioned meeting Caleb Erickson again. She’d had dreams—many dreams of how he’d see her walking through town, and he’d be struck dumb by her beauty, fall to his knees, and kiss her feet for being such a little shit to her when he was a teenager. Not that he’d been any worse than the other boys, she’d just cared more because she’d always had a horrendous crush on him.

“Lucy Smith?” His brow creased as he considered her. She knew exactly when he remembered her because his expression changed to one of horror. “Little Lucy?”

“I’m five foot four. Just because you’re overgrown doesn’t make me short.”

He angled his head, his gaze dropping from her face to her toes and then back up again.

“Nice apron.”

Her cheeks heated. “It’s one of Gran’s. I borrowed it while I was baking my holiday cookies.”

In fact, she’d hoped some of her grandmother’s legendary cooking magic would rub off on her while she attempted to replicate her recipes. It was Lucy’s first holiday season without her gran, and she was missing her badly.

“Oh!” She pressed her hand to her cheek. “I forgot to put the timer on.”

She ran back toward the kitchen, where the smell of burning already permeated the room. “Darn it!” She grabbed a towel and opened the oven door to discover she’d rolled her gingerbread too thin, and the edges had started to scorch. She set the cookie tray on the side and went to open the window.

“I’ve got it,” Caleb said as he reached right over her head and released the catch on the frame.

“You’re not supposed to be back here,” Lucy pointed out as she hastily removed the failed batch of gingerbread people from the tray before they engraved themselves on the surface forever.

“I’m not a guest.” Caleb was looking around the kitchen as he leaned against the sink. “Not a lot has changed in here.”

“Why change things when they still work?” Lucy asked as she quickly rolled out a new batch of dough and cut the shapes. She couldn’t afford to do anything to the place anyway.

He shrugged his wide shoulders, his cool gaze now on her. “I remember you at school.”

“Yup, I was that annoying little kid who followed you and my brother Dan around all the time.”

“Yeah, you were definitely annoying.”

Lucy tried not to roll the dough too hard or accidentally throw the rolling pin in his general direction. Caleb had always been a straight talker, so why was she surprised that he spoke the truth?

“We’d do anything to get away from you.”

“I remember.” Lucy put the new cookies in the oven. “You tied me to a tree in the backyard with my jump rope once.”

Caleb frowned. “That wasn’t nice.”

“No, it wasn’t, especially as it started raining.”

He shoved his hand through thick reddish-brown hair that matched his tight beard. “I guess I should apologize.”

“It was probably Dan’s idea.” She offered him an out as she washed her hands.

He winced. “No, that one was all me.”

“Then I accept your apology.”

He’d brought his coffee through with him and sipped it as he stared at her. She considered what to say next. As a hotelier she shouldn’t ask any personal questions, but as a resident of Quincy, she felt some responsibility for his personal safety—or that was what she was going to tell herself.

“Did you call your dad?”

He set his mug down by the side of the sink. “Not yet.”

“Won’t he be worried?”

“I didn’t tell him when I planned to arrive, so he’s not exactly expecting me.” He hesitated as he pulled his phone out of his pocket. “My cell’s out of battery.”

“You can charge it right there.” She pointed at the electrical outlet. “It looks like the same brand as mine.”

“Thanks.” He plugged it in and turned back to her.

Lucy made herself meet his gaze. “I’m sorry about your mom.”

“Me, too.”

“You must miss her.”

“Yeah.” He picked up his mug. “Is there any more coffee?”

“Help yourself.” Lucy pointed at the dresser. “There’s a whole pot right there.”

“Thanks. You can put it on my tab.”

“As I said, coffee’s free,” Lucy reminded him, her gaze fixed on his broad shoulders and long jeans-clad legs as he turned his back on her. He’d certainly filled out since high school. She’d seen him occasionally when he’d come into town, but she’d never had much opportunity to talk to him without blushing and stammering like a fool. It wasn’t surprising he’d erased her from his memories. But it was definitely a setback when she’d given him her heart when she was nine and decided she was going to marry him.

“Stupid ...” Lucy murmured to herself before addressing Caleb again. “Shall I see if there’s a taxi available to take you out to the ranch?”

He turned to look at her, his expression guarded. “I’d rather wait for my truck to be fixed.”

“You know what it’s like here. That could take a while and Christmas is less than a week away.”

“As I said, Dad isn’t expecting me, and I’d rather have my own transport.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” Lucy said cautiously. “But wouldn’t you rather be home than stuck here with me?”

“You don’t want guests?” He raised his eyebrows.

“Of course, I do.” He had no idea how much she needed them right now.

“Then you’ve got one.” He nodded. “Is it okay if I get my stuff from my truck while you sort out a room for me?”

“Absolutely.” She nodded like she was in a trance. Caleb Erickson was staying in her house. Voluntarily? And he was even willing to pay for the privilege?

“Great.” He drained his mug.

She froze as he walked over and paused to look down at her. He leaned in so close she could smell the coffee on his breath and flicked her nose.

“You’ve got cookie dough on your cheek.”

“Thanks.” “I’ll get going before the snow buries my truck.” He nodded at the back door. “I’ll come in this way, so you don’t have to leave those cookies again.”

A minute later he was gone, leaving Lucy gawping at the door like a fool.

The timer pinged, making her jump, and she checked the cookies, and reset it. If she hurried, she could get Caleb’s room prepared and be back down to take the cookies out. With that thought she ran up the wide staircase and stood on the landing. Where to put him? She turned toward the rear of the house and selected door number three. There was a king-sized bed, and a walk-in shower big enough to accommodate his tall frame.

She considered him naked in that shower and almost tripped over her own feet.

“Be professional, Lucy,” she admonished herself as she made sure the gas fire worked, that there were warm towels on the heated rack, and that all the potions and lotions for the bathroom were present and correct. She’d aired the bed on the previous day and just had to turn down the covers.

Even as she smoothed a hand over the sheets where Caleb would soon lay his head, the timer went off in the kitchen and she hurriedly descended the stairs. A blast of cold air from the opening back door heralded Caleb’s return. She turned to smile at him as he set his bags on the tiled floor.

“Perfect timing.”

“It’s really snowing out there.” Caleb took off his hat and gloves. “I’d forgotten how bad it can get.”

“You don’t come back very often,” Lucy remarked as she transferred the cookies to a wire cooling rack.

“Maybe I don’t consider it home anymore.”

She looked up, saw the bleakness of his expression, and decided not to say a word.

“Seattle might be wet, but it’s not so remote.” He moved restlessly around the kitchen, his gaze everywhere. “The gingerbread smells like the kind my mom used to make.”

“Help yourself,” Lucy offered. “I’m making enough to feed a nonexistent army of guests.”

He took a piece, bit into it, and chewed slowly. “This is good.”

“My gran’s recipe.” Lucy smiled at him. “Have you eaten tonight?”

“Nope.”

“I know it says bed and breakfast on the door, but I do offer dinner, and I haven’t had mine yet.” Lucy paused to check his expression, which didn’t help much because he’d always been hard to read. “It’s a chicken casserole with dumplings.”

“I could go for that.”

“Great!” She turned off the oven. “It’s been sitting on the bottom shelf cooking away all afternoon while I baked the cookies. I checked it just before you arrived and it’s ready to go.” She paused. “Would you rather eat by yourself in the guest dining room, or here with me?”

He frowned. “Here.”

“That makes life much easier.” She found plates and silverware and put them out on the pine table along with the casserole.

“Can I help?”

She glanced at him as she went by. “What would you like to drink?”

He shrugged. “Water’s fine.”

“I definitely have that, and there’s iced tea and lemonade in the refrigerator.”

She left him opening random cupboards looking for glasses while she went into the old washroom that housed the industrial-sized freezer, backup refrigerator, and extensive pantry. She decanted lemonade into a jug, found some ironed napkins, and came back into the kitchen to find Caleb had taken off his sheepskin-lined jacket to reveal a thick black sweater over jeans.

He'd always been the ideal man for her, and nothing had changed. She finally remembered to take off her apron.

"Nice to see you getting settled in." She set the jug and napkins on the table.

"It's warm in here."

"I'm glad to hear it. We had to replace the whole heating system last year and it cost a fortune."

"I guess it would." He sat opposite her. The light brought out the red tones in his dark auburn hair. He nodded at the casserole dish. "Smells great."

Lucy helped herself and let Caleb do the same. A comfortable silence fell between them, enhanced by the ticking of the kitchen clock and the patter of hailstones on the windowpanes. It felt like they were the only two people in the world and that she was living out her most personal of fantasies. Except, in her dreams, after dinner, Caleb would sweep her off her feet and carry her up the stairs to bed.

She took another peep at his face, only to find his gray gaze trained on her.

"What is it?" She touched her nose. "Is there something else on my face?"

"I was just looking." He paused. "I'd forgotten how pretty you are."

She took a hasty sip of her lemonade and ended up choking herself so badly that Caleb had to get up and slap her on the back.

After he resumed his seat, she jumped out of hers, and started collecting the plates.

"There's apple pie and ice cream if you're still hungry?"

"Apple pie would be good, but I'm avoiding anything with the word ice in it."

"I hear ya." Lucy nodded. "I'll warm some up for you."

He grimaced. "I guess I should try and call Dad while you're doing that."

“You go ahead.”

She determinedly turned her back as he held the phone to his ear and eventually started speaking.

“Dad? It’s me. I should be with you by Christmas Day. Anything you want me to bring from town for you? Call me back when you get a chance.”

He set the phone on the countertop and looked over at Lucy. She decided not to ask him why it would take him four days to travel the eight miles up to the ranch.

“He almost never answers his cell or landline.”

“My grandma was the same. She always answered the B&B number, but never her own phone. It’s probably a generational thing.”

“Did she leave you this place?”

“Yup.” Lucy smoothed a hand over the scarred surface of the pine table. “I think I’m the only one in the family who loved it as much as she did.”

“What about your parents?”

“Back in Seattle. Dad’s working at the hospital and Mom’s a tenured professor at the university.”

Caleb nodded. “I hear from Dan occasionally.”

“Nice.” She smiled. “Probably more than I do. He’s a terrible correspondent. He only calls when he’s stuck somewhere and needs money.”

“Sounds like Dan.” Caleb started on his apple pie. “This is good.”

“Thanks, I made it.” Lucy cut him another slice and indulged in a little fantasy about him coming home to her every night for pie and ... other things maybe involving whipped cream.

“Have you ever left here?”

She set down the spoon. “Yes. I went to college at Humboldt.”

He half smiled. "That hardly counts."

"Maybe not to you, but I enjoyed it." Lucy deliberately ignored the many implications behind his words. "Not everyone gets into Stanford like you did."

"Did you apply to anywhere except Humboldt?"

"Of course, I did. Caleb Erickson, are you judging me? I was offered a full scholarship there."

"Hell, no." He leaned back in his chair until it started to creak. "Nothing to do with me. You just always struck me as a smart little kid."

"I'm only six years younger than you are." Lucy pointed out.

"Yeah?" He studied her again, his hand smoothing over his mouth and beard. "I thought it was more than that."

"I'm twenty-eight, and for your information I spent several years working for a multinational hotel chain before I decided to come back here and help Gran out. So, stop trying to treat me like a country hick."

His eyebrows rose. "Still as feisty as ever then."

"I had to be, growing up with Dan as a brother."

"I bet." He returned his attention to his apple pie.

Lucy waited for her temper to settle. She rarely got mad, but Dan and Caleb had worked out exactly how to yank her strings, and it seemed nothing had changed.

"Would you like some more coffee?" Lucy reverted to professional mode as she cleared the table.

"No, thanks." He stifled a yawn behind his hand. "I think I'll turn in. I drove down overnight."

"Then I'll show you to your room." Lucy washed her hands and went to help him with his luggage.

"I've got it." Caleb waved away her help and she didn't argue. She walked back through to the main hall, ascended the stairs, and stopped at the door to number three.

“We still use old-fashioned keys here.” She unlocked the door and handed the key to Caleb, who went into the room. “As you’re the only guest, breakfast can be anytime you want. I don’t think I’ll be going anywhere in this weather, so just come down to the kitchen when you’re ready to eat.”

He had his back to her as he set his bags down and looked around the room. She stayed where she was and pointed out various things rather than intrude on his space.

“It’s a nice room.” He nodded.

“You’re welcome.”

He came back toward the door and looked down at her. “Thanks for taking me in.”

“It was my pleasure.”

He leaned in and dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “Night, little Lucy.”

“Night—” Before she’d even finished speaking, he shut the door in her face, leaving her standing there opening and closing her mouth like a goldfish. Eventually, she turned and went down the stairs to begin closing up for the night. Caleb Erickson was back in town for the holidays, staying in her B&B, and he’d just dropped a friendly kiss on her head like she was six ...

Lucy sighed. Would he ever see her as an equal, or was she doomed to be his best friend’s little sister forever? She had a few days to make him see her in a different light and she was determined to take advantage of them. Fate had dropped Caleb on her doorstep for a *reason*. Now all she had to do was decide what to do about her unexpected gift.

Chapter Two

Caleb breathed in the unfamiliar smell of lavender-scented sheets and slowly opened his eyes. Light filtered in through the heavy drapes, but the absence of sound was so absolute that he lay there and let it surround him. It was never quiet in the city. There was always something flashing, beeping, wailing, or adding to the background roar of crowded humanity.

He'd hated it when he'd first moved on campus at Stanford, but over the years, he'd convinced himself that it was the buzz he needed to stay alert and successful. These days it felt like a clamor he could do without sometimes, which he guessed meant he was getting old. Not that he'd ever been much of a party animal. He'd been too big, too shy, and too awkward to make many friends or belong to the right clubs. Even his love of playing football had fizzled and died when he couldn't even make it into the training squad. If it hadn't been for Dan and a couple of other guys, he wouldn't have stuck it out.

He yawned hard enough to crack his jaw and stretched his arms over his head. He had no idea what time it was, and for once he didn't care. The last couple of years had been so hectic he'd hardly had any time to make the journey down to see his parents.

His stomach rumbled and he decided to get up, take a shower, and go and see what little Lucy Smith could rustle up for him for breakfast. She'd been a cute kid with an annoying habit of attaching herself to him and Dan and refusing to be shaken off. They'd constructed elaborate plans to avoid her—some of which he now regretted ...

Having no siblings of his own, he hadn't known how to deal with a sweet-looking girl, but Lucy's ability to thwart his and Dan's plans had shown him she wasn't averse to a bit of trickery herself. At first, he'd been gutted when she'd looked at him and cried until he'd realized she could cry at will and always deployed her ultimate weapon to get him and Dan into the worst trouble possible. So, he'd hardened his heart and

followed Dan's lead in getting as far away from her as possible.

And now she was all grown-up and probably bearing a truckful of grudges against him, which she wouldn't act upon because she was a professional hotelier. At least Caleb hoped that was the case. She hadn't poisoned him last night, so he was hopeful he'd stay alive for the rest of his stay. She was still pretty cute, and she had a dry sense of humor he really appreciated.

He turned on the shower and was pleased when it ran hot and true, and he could get his broad shoulders into the space without getting stuck. There was sandalwood shower gel and shampoo that he used lavishly before drying himself off and checking his bag for a fresh set of clothing. When he opened his door, the fresh smell of cinnamon and coffee reminded him he was hungry.

He padded down the stairs in his socks and headed for the kitchen. The door was ajar, and Lucy was chatting away to someone he couldn't yet see.

"Could you just *try*? I mean I love you, and you do nothing for me in return."

Caleb frowned. What kind of loser was she dating? She deserved way better than that. He pushed the door open wider, ready to give the unknown person his most ferocious glare and realized there was no one else there.

"Oh!" Lucy spun around. She'd obviously been talking on her phone. "Caleb! I didn't hear you come in!" She rushed toward him. "Would you like breakfast?" She glanced at the clock. "Well, technically I suppose you could call it brunch now. I left the menu on the table and coffee and juice are available on the side."

He stared down at her and wondered whether to say anything. Technically she wasn't his responsibility, but years of considering her as a little sister couldn't be ignored.

"That dude you were just talking to?"

“What dude?” A crease appeared between her brows as she studied him, but he was committed now.

“The one who doesn’t do shit for you?” he added, even though she knew damn well who he was talking about. “Ditch him. You deserve better.”

“How do you know? I might have turned into a terrible person who breaks hearts as easily as I crack eggs for waffles.”

“Somehow I doubt that.” He stared into her indignant blue eyes. “I guess I’m standing in for Dan right now, okay? Because we both know he’d say the same thing.”

“But he’s my brother.”

It was his turn to frown. “Yeah.”

“And you’re not.” She turned away and busied herself with something in the sink. “Now what can I get you to eat?”

Even Caleb realized she wasn’t going to talk to him about what had just happened, and stopped pushing. He’d keep an eye out in case the guy turned up at the B&B and maybe give him some gentle advice out of Lucy’s hearing that would send the little shit running back home to his momma. He sat down and studied the menu before raising his head.

“Waffles, scrambled eggs, and bacon would be good.”

She flashed him a quick smile. “Coming right up along with your coffee.”

* * *

Lucy’s mind scurried around like a bag of trapped mice as she cooked Caleb his breakfast. Okay, he’d totally gotten hold of the wrong end of the stick about who she was talking to, but he had come to her defense, even if it was in a brotherly way. She glanced over at the rocking chair set near the old fireplace where Colin, her grandma’s cat, was ensconced on a cushion.

He weighed around twenty pounds, had the pointed ears and massive paws of a Maine coon, and the superior attitude to go with them. He’d been spoiled rotten by her grandma and barely bothered to move unless food was being offered. It had taken her six months to persuade him that canned food was an

acceptable substitute for the lovingly hand-cooked fish and chicken he'd become used to. The thought of poaching fish at six in the morning made Lucy turn cold, clammy, and nauseous.

When she'd come into the kitchen earlier, two mice were playing right under Colin's nose while he regarded them with some interest, but with no desire to evict them. Lucy had been gently lecturing him all morning about his shortcomings and Caleb had obviously heard the last of her warnings and totally misunderstood what had gone down.

Why she hadn't immediately corrected him was another matter entirely. For a moment, when he'd spoken up for her, she'd thought he was finally beginning to see her as a person of interest. But no, he was merely doing big brother duty, which wasn't what she wanted at all.

She concentrated on her cooking, keeping up a flow of bright remarks, which Caleb, who had reclaimed his charged phone, responded to with the occasional grunt. As she put the warm plate in front of him, he finally looked up.

"What's that groaning noise?"

She listened along with him. "Snow on the branches?"

"More than that." He picked up his fork. "Do you run on a generator, or are you connected to the town grid?"

"We have both."

"Sensible." He chewed slowly. "Then maybe it's your water heater?"

"I had that replaced three months ago."

"Boiler?"

Lucy paused to consider the sounds. "Maybe."

"I'll take a look at it after I'm done eating."

"You will?"

He frowned. "I grew up on a ranch. I'm still good with my hands."

“Really?” Lucy opened her eyes wide and sighed. “I *love* a man who’s practically inclined.”

His gaze dropped to her mouth and lingered there before he abruptly looked away.

“Do you think you’ll ever come back to run your place?” Lucy asked hastily.

He shrugged. “Dad’s never indicated he cared either way. In fact, whenever I ask him how things are going, he tells me not to worry my head about it, like I’m five.”

“Maybe he finds it hard to let go of being the boss,” Lucy suggested. “My gran was like that. It’s one of the reasons none of her own kids stayed on here to manage this place.”

“He doesn’t think I’m capable,” Caleb said bluntly. “He’s never forgiven me for going away to college.”

“That was sixteen years ago.”

He shrugged. “He made up his mind that I was gone, and nothing I’ve said or done since has changed his opinion.”

Lucy bit her lip as she considered him, and he raised an eyebrow.

“What?”

“Sounds like you need to sit down and talk it out.”

“Like my dad believes in any of that touchy-feely stuff. If my mom couldn’t persuade him to—” He stopped talking. “Anyway, he’s a lost cause.”

“And I think you’re wrong. Every time he comes to town and your name comes up, he brightens up. He’s so proud of you.”

Caleb leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms, an all-too-familiar obstinate look on his face. “Funny how he never says it to me.”

“Do you ever tell him you’re proud of him, too?”

“Hell no!” Caleb was scowling now. “He’d probably catch on fire with embarrassment if I said anything like that, and run

for the hills.”

“Have you ever tried?”

“My mom tried. She wore herself out loving that man, and forgiving him, and—” He stood up. “Thanks for breakfast. I’m going to take a stroll down Main Street to get some fresh air. I’ll look at the boiler on my way back in.”

He picked up his coat and hat she’d left airing by the fire, stepped into his boots, nodded brusquely, and went out the back door, leaving Lucy feeling more confused than ever. Something was obviously up between him and his father. With his mom gone, was there any way of repairing the damage? Lucy wasn’t sure, but if she could wish for one thing for Caleb while he was home for the holidays it would be that. And that he saw her in a new light, of course, but that was totally selfish.

To her surprise he came back quickly and popped his head in through the door.

“The wind’s whipping up, it’s clouding over again and there’s another storm coming through. Where’s the key to your outhouse?”

“You mean where I keep the boiler and all that other important stuff?” Lucy asked.

“Yup.” He held out his gloved hand and she set the key in it. “Thanks.”

“Tool kit is out there, too,” she added. “Just in case you need anything.”

Even from the kitchen she could hear the banging, thuds, and occasional curse word as Caleb worked his magic. She’d been upstairs and tidied his room, which he’d left in an acceptable state. He’d even attempted to make his bed. She’d replenished his shampoo and shower gel and brought in clean towels before dusting and vacuuming.

Now she was sitting at the kitchen table wrestling with the November accounts. She tried to ignore her worries about what the snowstorms had done to her December, which was usually one of her best months as visitors and family returned

to Quincy to enjoy the holidays. She'd had nothing but a series of cancellations as the local roads and airports closed, cutting them off from civilization.

Caleb came in carrying the toolbox and stamped his feet on the mat.

"I tightened up everything I could see on the boiler and the hot water tank. Let's hope that helps."

"Thank you." Lucy leapt to her feet and poured him some coffee. "My handyman hasn't been able to get up here for weeks, so nothing's been fixed."

He gave her a considering look. "You should learn how to do that stuff for yourself."

"You're right." She held his gaze. "Thanks for the reminder that I can't rely on anyone else when living out here."

He frowned. "That's not exactly what I meant."

"It's true though, isn't it? I mean we all need to be self-reliant. The myth of neighbors helping neighbors is long gone."

"Now you sound like my dad complaining about the good old days."

Knowing how Caleb felt about his father, Lucy didn't take his remark well. "You started it."

"I just suggested you should know how to fix your own damn house," Caleb said evenly. "That's all."

"And I agreed with you." For some reason Lucy was in an argumentative frame of mind. "If only I had the time between running this 'damn house' all by myself to take a few classes or something."

"You don't have any staff?"

"Not at present."

Caleb frowned. "Your gran had at least two people working with her."

"And I can't afford to do that."

He let out his breath as he set the toolbox by the door. “Things are that bad?”

She pointed at her accounts book. “The weather’s been against me this year. We’ve had massive snowstorms and wildfires, which stops people coming up here.”

“Understandably.” He nodded.

“Hopefully things will perk up next year,” Lucy said brightly. She didn’t want him thinking she was a complete loser. She wanted his positive attention, not his sympathy. “I’ve got enough capital in reserve to see me through at least another season.”

“That’s not much.” Caleb was back to frowning again.

“And it’s not your problem,” Lucy said firmly. “Can I get you some coffee? Or are you planning on calling Mike down at the shop?”

* * *

Caleb knew when he was being given the brush-off, but he wasn’t quite done. He pointed at the table.

“I could take a look for you.”

She stiffened like an outraged cat. “No, thanks.”

“That bad, is it?”

“Yes, and as I said, it’s got nothing to do with you.” She met his gaze. “Weren’t you just telling me I had to learn to cope on my own?”

He opened his mouth to argue because, hell, he was kind of enjoying seeing her all riled up, and then thought better of it. He held up his hands in a placatory gesture. “Backing off.”

“Thank you.” She walked over to the stove to get him some coffee. She was wearing jeans today and a pink sweater with some kind of lacy collar. Her hair was in pigtails that should’ve made her look about six, but somehow made her look hot.

Caleb blinked as his gaze fell to the nicely rounded curves of her ass. She was his best friend’s annoying little sister. He

wasn't planning on being anywhere near Quincy for the rest of his life, and he wasn't generally into super-positive people who kept smiling through their worries. Okay, so he might tend to go too hard the other way, and only see the problems, but he'd been raised by a man who never saw the good in anything, and that had kind of stuck.

He took his phone out of his pocket and thumbed through the numbers. There was no reply from his father, but there were six messages from his team, which he pretended he hadn't seen. He'd told them not to bother him unless it was an emergency, but they seemed incapable of functioning without him being around. Once that would've made him feel needed, but now it was something of an irritant, and it was all his own fault.

His phone rang and he answered it without thinking.

"Hey, Caleb. I sent you the three options we're considering. Which one do you want us to try first?"

He let out a breath. "Vin. I'm on vacation. How about you solve that for yourselves?"

There was a long silence. "But what if we choose wrong and you get mad?"

"I won't."

"But you like to be involved in every single decision."

There was a rising note of panic in Vin's voice.

"And maybe I need to learn to be more hands-off so that I can enjoy my leave," Caleb said. "I picked you guys and I trust you, okay? If the first option doesn't work, go on to the second, wash and repeat, and send me a report when you're done."

There was an even longer pause—so long in fact that Caleb began to wonder if his deputy had passed out.

"Vin? Are you still there?"

"Yeah, I'm just ... trying to assimilate this new information."

Caleb winced. “As I said, I trust you, okay? And don’t work right through the holidays. Make sure everyone on the team takes time off.”

“Okay.” Vin paused. “Are you sure you’re feeling all right?”

Caleb frowned. “I’m good, thanks.”

“Then I’ll get back to work and try not to bother you again.”

“Thanks.” Mindful of the incoming storm, Caleb plugged his phone into the socket to recharge and turned to find Lucy studying him intently.

“I guess I’m something of a control freak.” He shrugged. “I guess.” She handed him the freshly brewed coffee.

“I’m trying not to be that person anymore.”

“Sometimes it’s hard to accept help, isn’t it?” She sighed and looked back at the table. “Maybe I should learn that lesson myself and ask you to take a look at the books.”

* * *

At first, Lucy wasn’t sure what woke her up, but she sat up in bed and reached for the lamp switch. Nothing happened and she fumbled with it again, clicking it back and forth uselessly in increasing panic. Outside the wind was howling like a banshee and buffeting the walls of the house like a living thing.

She got out of bed and ran toward the door, bumping her knee against the end of her bed, and the rocking chair, before she reached her goal. The only light came from the blink of the smoke detector in the ceiling. She hammered on Caleb’s door and went in without waiting for an answer.

“The power’s out.”

He sat up, a vaguely darker shape in the overall gloom of the room and she headed toward him.

“It’s okay.” He sounded hoarse. “No need to panic.”

She grabbed hold of his hand like a lifeline.

“Hey, you’re shaking.”

His night vision was obviously much better than hers because the next minute he'd picked her up, tucked her in beside him, and put his arm around her shoulders.

She leaned in against his warm bare skin. "I hate the dark."

"Yeah?" He hugged her even closer. "The backup generator should kick in any moment now."

She shivered and placed a tentative hand on his chest. "It should've happened immediately. There must be something wrong."

"I'll take a look at it in a minute."

"I don't want you risking your life out there," Lucy warned him.

His low chuckle resonated in his chest. "I'm not that stupid. I'm happy to wait it out until morning." He paused. "Seeing as there's no heating, why don't you stay here with me?"

"In your bed?"

"You're already in it," Caleb reminded her as he smoothed her hair like she was a cat. "It's way easier to stay here than leave and get cold and afraid again."

"I don't want to be by myself," Lucy confessed. "I get really ... panicky when it's dark and I feel like I'm trapped."

Caleb's hand stilled in her hair. "Wait—this doesn't have anything to do with me, does it?"

"No, this one was all Dan. He locked me in the closet under the stairs, went outside to play, and forgot about me for hours."

"Shit." Caleb dropped a kiss on her head. "That's terrible."

"To be fair he was really upset when he realized what he'd done, but I've never stopped getting stressed about small, dark spaces," Lucy admitted.

"I'm not surprised."

Lucy rubbed her cheek against Caleb's chest hair and wondered how his beard would feel against her skin. She'd

only just realized he was completely naked under the covers whereas she was covered neck to toe in a flannel nightdress.

“How about we lie down again?” Caleb suggested. “It’s still dark. We can sleep through till it’s light, and then get up, and assess the damage.”

“Okay.”

He eased them both lower on the pillows, keeping his arm around her. She fitted perfectly against his side, her slightly bent knee close to the jut of his hip, and her hand palm down on his chest over his steadily beating heart.

“Is this all right, or do you want me to let you go?”

“No!” She instinctively dug her fingers into his skin, and he winced. “Sorry!”

“Not a problem.” He sounded even more hoarse. “I forget that even sweet little kittens have claws.”

She smiled against his skin and breathed in a whole lungful of essence of Caleb Erickson, which made her feel quite giddy. Between her fear of the dark and her fascination with Caleb she wasn’t sure how she was expected to sleep. The man of her dreams didn’t appear to have the same problem. He gradually relaxed beside her, his breathing slowing, his grip on her shoulder easing as he fell asleep again.

Lucy sighed and closed her eyes. She’d imagined being this close to Caleb many times. She hadn’t anticipated he’d be so unaware of her that she’d bore him back to sleep. Maybe it was time to admit that he felt nothing for her except friendship and stop her foolish obsession with him.

* * *

Caleb woke up to the very pleasurable sensation of someone stroking his skin. He kept his eyes closed as he tried to remember where he was. He wasn’t exactly what you might call a lady’s man, having something of a reputation as a grump, so a woman in his bed wasn’t usual. He cautiously inhaled and caught the scent of Christmas, which didn’t narrow it down much.

His eyes snapped open, and he looked down at Lucy's blond hair. Her cheek rested over his heart, and one hand covered his chest. Her nightdress had ridden up around her waist and her thigh was nestled comfortably across his groin. She was humming in her sleep, her fingernails lightly scratching his chest hair like he was a prized pet. He flexed his fingers and realized his hand was cupping her naked ass.

He reminded himself that she was his best friend's little sister, and that she had no idea that she'd curled herself around him in her sleep. It made no difference to his dick, which was enjoying the attention way too much.

"Mmm ..." Lucy murmured as she rocked against him. "Nice."

He didn't have the nerve to ask her what exactly she was referring to. Perhaps if he kept still, she'd wake up, roll away from him, and be none the wiser about his intentions. Because, man, he had some very specific things he'd like to be doing with her right now, like kissing his way down her throat, waking her up from the inside with his nice, hard dick ... and, where the hell had that thought come from?

Her hand slid lower, and she shifted position, easing her knee down so that she could—Caleb inhaled sharply. Sweet loving jeebus—Lucy Smith had her fingers wrapped around his shaft. His dick responded with great enthusiasm as she gently squeezed him. His hips almost came off the bed, but he tried to stay still as she gave him the most unexpected and erotic hand job of his life.

He breathed through his teeth and tried not to moan as her fingers slid through wetness and warmth, spreading it over his shaft, easing her task. She kissed his chest, her teeth settling on his nipple to torment him even more.

"Uh ..." Caleb groaned, his hand coming to rest on her shoulder. "That's ..."

Her fingers stopped moving. A moment later she raised her head and stared at him, her gaze horror stricken.

"Oh my God! I thought I was having a really good dream!"

He considered her for a pulsating second. “Then keep dreaming, okay?” he growled, as he drew her down to kiss her properly. “Don’t you dare stop.”

He explored her mouth with an urgency that surprised him, his fingers framing her face as he coaxed her into kissing him back. Her instant response made him forget everything except the tight clasp of her hand on his dick and the sweet, hot taste of her tongue.

“Let me ...” He curved his long fingers around her ass and found her wet and waiting for his touch. “Damn ...”

He thrust into her; his thumb pressed against her tight bud in the same rhythm she was using on him. When she came almost immediately, he felt like he’d won an award, and instantly followed suit, his hips jerking forward as he came over her still working fingers.

He lay back against the pillows, holding on to her, and let the waves of satisfaction roll over him. It was still dark enough not to be able to see her expression that clearly. He wasn’t exactly sure what he was going to say when all he wanted to know was if they could do it again and move on to more.

Eventually she whispered his name. “Caleb?”

“Hmm?”

“Do I need to apologize?”

“Hell, no.”

She went quiet long enough for him to almost fall back asleep.

“Are you sure?”

He opened one eye and kissed the top of her head. “It’s all good.”

The pause this time was even longer.

“Then, do you think we could do it again sometime?”

He came up on one elbow so that he could look at her beautiful face. “How about now? And this time I want to be inside you when you come.”

Still holding Caleb's gaze, Lucy reached out her hand and opened the drawer of the bedside cabinet. "There are condoms right here."

"Nice to see you're prepared for every eventuality." Caleb scooped up a handful and set them on the top of the cabinet. "Now, where were we?"

* * *

Lucy swallowed hard as Caleb reared over her, his expression intent, and stripped off her nightdress. He was such a big guy that he made her feel very soft and feminine. He eased her thighs apart and knelt between them. She moaned as he kissed his way down over her stomach and rubbed his bearded chin against her most sensitive flesh, making her squirm.

"Nice," he murmured, as he used his fingers and his tongue to bring her to a shuddering climax. "*Very nice.*"

She grabbed for his shoulders as he straightened up and put on a condom. She wanted to see his face in the moonlight when he thrust inside her—to see if the reality was even better than her most lurid fantasies.

He leaned in and gently kissed her. "You want me?"

"Oh, yes please," she said shakily. "Very much."

His rare smile was a thing of beauty as he carefully pressed forward. She tried not to gasp at the size of him and tilted her hips to accept him even more deeply. He took his time, rocking back and forth until he was fully seated inside her.

At some point, Lucy forgot to look into his eyes because she was far too involved in the physical act of making love. If it was a dream—and her only chance of ever getting this close to Caleb—she'd give it everything she had. She held him in her arms as he shuddered through his climax and eased himself down to lie beside her, his chest still heaving.

"That was ... awesome."

Lucy smiled and cuddled up against his side. "Exactly."

He sighed, put his arm around her, and instantly fell asleep. She was okay with that because it meant they didn't need to have any awkward conversations about what had just happened between them. Knowing Caleb, any communication might be short, to the point, and not necessarily in her favor.

Lucy slowly opened her eyes. She couldn't bear to wake up and see the dawning realization on his face that he'd had sex with his best friend's little sister. What if he started to apologize? She waited a few moments to make sure he was truly asleep and then slipped out of the bed. She needed some space to make sure she was ready to deal with any reaction he might have in the cold light of day.

Chapter Three

Caleb woke up slowly and rolled onto his side expecting to see Lucy stretched out beside him. But the bed was empty and the sheets on her side were cold. Caleb frowned and sat up, his gaze moving to the window, where cracks of light showed through the drapes. He had no idea what time it was because the electricity was still off, and he'd left his cell phone in the kitchen.

Where had she gone? He'd expected her to stay with him, although he guessed he hadn't put that thought into words before he'd fallen asleep. Maybe she'd assumed he wouldn't want her to hang around? Caleb groaned and flopped back onto the pillows. Maybe she was regretting what had happened and gone AWOL? Or, even worse, something bad had happened in the night while he was snoring away, and he'd completely missed it.

He got up, ran into the bathroom, and stepped into the shower before he realized the water was only lukewarm. He ran out almost as fast as he'd gone in and towed himself dry before dressing in his warmest clothes. The kitchen was warm because the old gas range was humming away. There was no power and no noise from the generator, which was worrying.

"Lucy?" He called her name, but she didn't appear. The only creature around was the big old cat who barely bothered to raise his head before falling back to sleep again. Caleb put on his outdoor gear and opened the back door, almost recoiling from the ferocity of the gusting wind and the slap of ice-cold air. He turned his collar up and stomped through the snow to the rear of the property where the old outhouse held the mechanical machinery that ran the B&B.

He opened the door to find Lucy crouched in front of the generator as she read something off her cell phone.

"Hey," he said. She jumped about a foot in the air as he kneeled beside her. "What are you trying to do?"

She pointed at the small yellow unit in front of her. "This is the backup for the backup generator. It's powerful enough to

run the freezers, a few lights, and my chargers. I think it's out of gas. I can't get it to work."

Caleb glanced around the shed. "Most people keep a five-gallon tank of fuel on hand in case that happens." He stood up. "I'll take a look around."

She stayed where she was and ran through a list of safety checks she'd obviously gotten from the internet or her handyman.

"I found the tank." He held it up and shook it. "It's empty."

"Dammit!" Lucy bit her lip.

"We can get gas," Caleb reminded her.

"From where, exactly? Everything is shut down. If the whole town's power is out, the pumps at the gas station won't be working either."

"True." Caleb frowned.

"Then we're screwed. And when I say we, I mean me. If you call your uncle Chip, I'm sure he'll come and get you."

Chip was the foreman out at the ranch and was considered family. Caleb had known him all his life. He was pretty sure Lucy was right and that Chip would come and pick him up, no questions asked. He glanced over at her bowed head and made a few quick decisions.

"I know where I can get the gas."

She still wouldn't look at him.

"From my truck. I'll siphon it out." He pointed at the far wall. "There's a tube there that would work, and I can use the empty tank."

He didn't wait to see if Lucy agreed with him. He grabbed the tank and the tubing and took off down the road. It was harder to find his truck than he'd anticipated, as it had disappeared under an anonymous bank of snow. After investigating all the possible lumps and bumps, he managed to get to the fuel tank and start the process of decanting the gasoline.

Once he'd got things going, the transfer went smoothly, apart from the fact that he was standing in the middle of a snowstorm freezing his nuts off. By the time he staggered back to the B&B he was shaking so hard his teeth were chattering.

Lucy looked up as he came into the outhouse.

“Oh, my goodness! You're freezing! Go into the house and warm up!”

He crouched down by the generator. “Got ... to ... get this working first.”

“I can do that.” She gave him an ungentle shove. “Go inside!”

“Not happening. Do you have a funnel?”

“Yes, it's here.”

“Hold it steady, then.” He carefully poured the gasoline into the tank and screwed on the cap. “Let's see if it fires up.”

The sudden noise was loud in the confined space, but still gratifying. Caleb checked the power cables were properly attached. He helped Lucy roll them out into the house where a central set of power sockets had already been configured to cover the important outlets. At least his teeth had stopped chattering, but he was still grateful when she offered him a mug of coffee from the old tin pot on the gas stove.

“Thanks.”

The sound of the refrigeration units powering up broke the unaccustomed silence. Caleb took a good long slug of coffee and studied his companion properly for the first time since he'd got out of bed. She was rushing around the kitchen, feeding the cat, and chatting about toasting bread or something. If he hadn't have known better, he would've thought she'd never been in his bed the previous night or that they'd had sex.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yes! I'm great!” Her attempt at a smile wobbled. “I mean I can't run my business, the main generator that was supposed

to be fixed isn't, and I can't even remember to fill up a five-gallon gas tank, but at least I'm alive!"

He set his mug down, walked over, and drew her into his arms. For a second, she went stiff and then she gulped in a huge breath and leaned her forehead against his chest.

"I'm sorry. I guess I'm just a bit overwhelmed ... with everything."

He kissed the top of her head and just held her. As someone who came up with complex solutions for a living, not giving her a plan of action and telling her how to execute it was hard. He'd never been good at emotional things. The only person he'd ever confided in had been his mother, and even that had stopped because she always told his dad everything he'd said.

For a moment, he desperately wished she was still alive so that he could say sorry for cutting her off—for not telling her how he felt because he didn't want another lecture from his father. In her mind she'd been trying to bridge the gap between them in the only way she knew how. He hadn't appreciated how hard that must have been until she was gone, and now, he and his dad had nothing to say to each other at all.

"You should go to your dad." Lucy said.

"Maybe," Caleb said. "I'll give Chip a call and see whether it's possible."

She eased out of his arms and immediately rushed toward the hall. "I need to check the light on the landing is working. It's the only one connected to the small generator upstairs."

His fingers curled into his palms as he immediately missed her presence. He wasn't sure if she was just too busy reacting to the current crisis to have a conversation about what had happened between them, or if she was determined to pretend that nothing had happened at all. He wasn't okay with either of those scenarios, but as long as she was trying to save her beloved B&B, he wasn't going to make a big deal out of it.

His gaze went to the open door.

And what was he going to say to her anyway? He wasn't coming back to Quincy, she wasn't moving to Seattle anytime

soon, so how could they make a relationship work? She deserved better than that—better than him. She was a good and decent person. He checked his cell, which had retained some charge, and found Chip's number. There was something he could do to help, but whether she'd go along with it or not, he couldn't yet say.

* * *

Lucy went into Caleb's bedroom and stopped dead as images of the night she'd spent in his arms rushed through her. The bed looked like they'd been in a fight, which made her blush. He'd been an amazing lover, even better than her imaginings, and she'd never forget him.

She drew the drapes and pulled up the blinds to let in what little sunlight there was, changed the linens on the bed, and refreshed the bathroom. If Caleb took her advice and called Chip, she'd almost be glad to see him go because she'd had her one perfect night and that should be enough.

“Hey.”

She turned to find him observing her from the doorway. He'd been like that as a child, always quietly watching, letting others take the lead even if the initial suggestion had been his. But Stanford had changed him into a more forthright version of himself, who took control and didn't suffer fools gladly. “I called Chip.”

“Oh, good!” Her stomach plummeted even as she offered him a bright smile. “Can he get here and pick you up?”

“Yeah.”

“That's great. Do you need a hand with your bags?”

His frown returned. “You really want to get rid of me?”

She went to walk past him with the bundle of damp towels in her arms, but he stayed in the doorway, and gently caught hold of her elbow.

“Lucy ...”

She had to look up at him, and the genuine concern in his gaze made her unable to look away.

“I *want* you to be safe and warm, Caleb. That’s not going to happen at the B&B until I can get someone to fix the generator,” she said simply.

“What about you?”

She shrugged. “I’ll manage. I’m like the captain on the *Titanic*.”

“Ready to go down with a sinking ship.” He shook his head. “Not happening. Either you come with me, or I stay here.” He gazed at her expectantly. “What’s it to be?”

“I can’t just ... turn up like that!”

“Sure, you can. I bet you know Dad better than I do these days.”

“But he hasn’t invited me! And what about the B&B? Who’s going to look after everything if I’m not here and unexpected guests turn up?”

“One, Dad will be delighted to see you, so he doesn’t have to talk to me. Two, the B&B will do fine on the secondary generator. Three, no one will be turning up in this weather when the roads down to the freeway are completely blocked.”

“You turned up,” she pointed out.

“I’m special.”

“But—”

He talked over her. “If you don’t want to go, I’ll stay here. I can be way more useful to you than to Dad right now, and I bet he’d agree.”

“I need to put these towels in the laundry.”

He stepped aside. “Go ahead. Let me know what you’ve decided by the time Chip gets here, okay?”

Lucy never responded well to deadlines, and Caleb’s ultimatum didn’t make her very happy. She stuffed the towels in the laundry basket and considered her options. Unfortunately, Caleb was right about the likelihood of guests turning up being zero. If there weren’t any guests, then there was no need for Lucy to stay at the B&B.

She went to call out to Caleb, who was packing in his room.

“What about Colin?”

“Who’s Colin?” he shouted back.

“The cat.”

“Cats are pretty good at taking care of themselves, you know.”

She thought of something else. “And what about all the prep for Christmas I’ve done?”

“You can bring the food with us if you like. I bet Dad didn’t get much in. He always left that to Mom.”

He appeared in the doorway, his bag on his shoulder. “I need to go out to my truck. I’ll be back in five. Start packing.”

“I’m still not sure if I’m—”

He disappeared down the stairs and the front door opened and closed.

“Coming,” Lucy muttered, and glared at the closed door. She let out a frustrated breath. She’d had her one night with the man of her dreams. Should she leave it at that? There were so many things that could go wrong if she tried to make any more of it, and Caleb wasn’t sticking around anyway.

But she wanted to do it all again ... She looked up toward the attic space her grandma had converted into an apartment for the owner, and went up the stairs. Maybe if she helped Caleb and his father get on better, he’d be more likely to come back and see her, too.

She packed a small suitcase and lugged it down the two flights of stairs to the entrance hall. Caleb came in the door with another bag over his shoulder.

“Snow’s easing off.” He took off his beanie and set it on the reception desk, his gaze moving to her bag. “Glad to see you’re coming with me.” He gestured behind him. “I spoke to the Rosbergs next door. Denise said she had a spare key to this place and would be more than happy to look after Colin. Brian

said he'd keep an eye on the generator, and if the repair guy turns up, he'll let him in and update you."

"You did all that?" Lucy asked.

"Yeah." He frowned at her. "What about it?"

"It's just ... I'm not used to having anyone to take care of stuff for me anymore. It's kind of nice." She smiled at him. "Thank you."

He looked disconcerted. "It's no big deal."

"It is to me."

He turned on his heel and headed for the kitchen. "Let's check everything out before we leave. I don't want any loose connections or further power outages. Brian has spare gas for the generator if it needs it, but he reckons the power will be back on by tomorrow."

Caleb was obviously as uncomfortable being thanked as she was accepting help. She followed him down the hallway.

"I need to pack up the food. It shouldn't take long."

"You go ahead while I check out the power situation."

She was just finishing up when she heard the honk of a truck horn. An ancient Ford truck pulled up at the side of the house and an equally ancient cowboy got out. No one knew exactly how old Chip was because according to legend he'd arrived in Quincy about the same time as the redwood trees. His complexion was as rugged and brown as tree bark, and he'd lost one of his front teeth in a brawl way back when. He knocked on the back door and she went to let him in.

"Miss Lucy." He touched the brim of his hat to her. "I hear you've been putting up with young Caleb."

"His truck broke down, so he's been staying here, yes."

He stomped into the kitchen. His spurs that were stuck good and tight on his boots rang against the tiles. He looked around. "Seems wrong without your grandma here somehow."

"Tell me about it." Lucy sighed. "I miss her so much."

Caleb came in. “Chip. It’s good to see you.”

“Right back at ya, youngster.” Chip winked at Caleb. “Your dad’s been fretting for days waiting for you to turn up.”

Lucy sighed as Caleb’s expression shifted to his usual skeptical frown.

“I didn’t get that impression. He didn’t even call me back.” He looked over at Lucy. “Are you good to go? I’ll start loading the truck.”

After Caleb took the bags out, Chip met her gaze across the kitchen table.

“Those two are as stubborn as mules.” he said. “Sometimes I just want to knock their heads together.”

“Caleb thinks his father doesn’t want him at the ranch,” Lucy said.

“And Isaiah thinks Caleb doesn’t want to be there.”

“Maybe we should lock them in a room together and leave them there until they work it out?” Lucy suggested.

Chip chuckled. “I’m game if you are.” He nodded at the countertop. “Don’t forget your phone. We’ve got power up at the ranch.”

“Thank God for that.” Caleb came back into the kitchen. “Now, if we can just load up this Christmas baking, I think we’ll be good to go.”

Lucy carefully locked the back door and took a long look at the house her grandmother had bequeathed to her. It looked almost magical with its snow-covered roof and dripping icicles. How terrible would it be if she lost the business less than a year after inheriting it? Her grandma would be turning in her grave and coming back to haunt her, and her parents would be vindicated that she wasn’t smart enough to run anything. She looked up as her cousin Bernie, who ran the coffee shop, came running over the street.

“Are you okay? I had to throw out all my dairy as the refrigerator shorted out, but other than replacing that I’m good to reopen.”

“The generator’s failed.” Lucy hugged her cousin. “I’m waiting on the repair guy, but as you might imagine he’s quite busy right now. I’m going with Caleb to his dad’s place for the night. I’ll be back tomorrow.”

“Caleb Erickson?” Bernie asked.

“Yup.”

“Your all-time favorite crush?”

Lucy looked around to see how close Caleb was to them. “Ssh. He doesn’t need to know that.”

“Lucy, everyone in town knows how hard you crushed on him.”

“Except Caleb.”

Bernie paused. “True. He wasn’t one of those guys who thought they were God’s gift to womankind. He was pretty clueless.”

“And let’s make sure he remains that way,” Lucy said firmly. “Which he will—if you don’t blurt it out right in front of him, okay?”

Bernie grinned at her. “You still like him, don’t you?”

Lucy didn’t say anything and pretended to be checking the time.

“You do.” Bernie nudged her arm. “Then why don’t you do something about it?”

Lucy wasn’t going to mention she already had, because Bernie’s head would probably explode.

“I’m only going with him because there’s no heating at the B&B.”

“Like you couldn’t come home with me.” Bernie gave her a gentle push. “Lover boy’s looking for you. Have a good time and don’t forget to ask for what you really want for Christmas.”

Caleb was holding the door of the truck open for her. “You look flushed.”

“I’m fine, thanks.” She gestured at the box of food. “I’ll keep an eye on this lot on the way, but tell Chip not to drive too fast.”

“He drives like a tortoise,” Caleb said gloomily. “We’ll probably get there around midnight.”

“Now, now.” Chip got in. “No need to rush. Better to get there in one piece, I say.”

“And I agree,” Lucy chimed in. “Caleb thinks he’s still in Seattle.”

“I wish,” Caleb muttered as he shut the passenger door and put on his seat belt.

Lucy’s smile disappeared as Chip backed carefully out of the driveway. Caleb was back into doom-and-gloom mode. She had a horrible suspicion that things would get worse the closer they got to the ranch and his father. Her optimism of helping to bring them together died in the clear light of day. She’d never succeeded in getting her own parents to understand her choice to return to Quincy, so how she’d thought she could help the Ericksons was a mystery.

“Hey.” She looked up to see Caleb had turned in his seat to study her. “It’ll be okay. The B&B will still be standing when you get back.”

“Thanks, that wasn’t what I was worrying about but now I’ll add it to my list.”

His smile was unexpected and warmed her soul. “You’ve got this, Lucy Smith.”

She smiled back at him. “I absolutely do not, but I appreciate the vote of confidence.”

He nodded and turned back to stare out of the window as Chip settled into a steady pace Lucy estimated at five miles an hour. She didn’t care how long the trip took as long as they arrived safely. She got to stare at the back of Caleb’s head and indulge in her foolish fantasies. She was fairly certain that when they got to the ranch, reality was going to come crashing back, and she’d better be prepared to deal with whatever awaited her, for Caleb’s sake.

Chapter Four

After Chip opened the main gate up to the ranch, which he proudly announced was now solar powered, Caleb leaned closer to the window to take in every inch of the property his family had owned for generations. He couldn't see much thanks to the snow, but everything looked to be in good shape. It didn't surprise him. His father was a hard taskmaster and expected nothing less than perfection from his family and his employees.

Lucy's reaction to his efforts to sort out her worries had made him want to hold on to her even more. Maybe she was beginning to realize that the other loser on the phone who didn't take care of her wasn't worth keeping around. Not that he'd been thinking about her being involved with any other guy when he'd been making love with her. That had just felt *right*.

Caleb didn't realize he was holding his breath until they drew up in front of the rambling ranch house with the old red barn set at a right angle to it. The white picket fencing had been replaced with more durable metal and wire, but overall, the place looked the same as it had when he was a kid. There was no sign of his dad, which didn't surprise him. He wasn't one to stand on ceremony and was probably out working.

"Let's take your bags around the back," Chip said. "I'll go and see if Isaiah's in the barn."

"Thanks for the ride!" Lucy said from behind Caleb.

He'd almost forgotten she was here. What had he been thinking, dragging her into what might turn out to be a war zone?

He picked up the bags, leaving her with the food, and followed Chip around to the mudroom at the side of the house. He wiped his feet and waited to hear his mom's voice welcoming him home before he remembered she wasn't there anymore. The kitchen looked cold and uninviting without her at the center of it. He tried to imagine how it felt for his dad, living with that loss every day, and couldn't.

“I always loved this kitchen,” Lucy said as she set her boxes on the table. She touched Caleb’s arm. “Are you okay?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Because this is the first time you’ve been here since your mom’s funeral.” She hesitated. “I know how hard it can be to realize that someone is not coming back.”

Yeah, she got it, but it didn’t mean he had to like it. Some stupid, foolish part of him had hoped it had all been a mistake—that she’d still be there.

“I know she’s dead, Lucy.” He turned back to the door. “I’ll go and get the rest of the stuff. You stay here in the warm.”

When he returned, Chip had the coffee going and was having a playful chat with Lucy about something her gran had once done or said to him. He liked seeing her in his mother’s kitchen. She made him want to smile.

“Caleb.”

His father appeared at the interior door; his expression as hard to read as ever. He was almost as tall as Caleb but was leaner and had the light coloring of his Scandinavian ancestors, whereas Caleb favored his Scottish mother.

“Dad.” Caleb nodded at Lucy. “I hope you don’t mind me bringing a guest with me.”

“Not at all.” His dad turned to Lucy. “I was sorry to hear about your grandmother’s passing. She was a hardworking woman.”

“Thank you,” Lucy said. “I miss her very much. I guess you’ll understand that seeing as you lost your Annie recently, too.”

For a moment, his dad’s face crumpled and then he blinked hard. “I’m getting along without her.”

Caleb opened his mouth and then shut it again. He’d just arrived, and Lucy needed somewhere to stay the night. If he got into everything with his dad right now, they’d be ordered off the premises before they’d even unpacked their bags.

“How are things on the ranch?” Caleb asked.

“Same as ever.” His dad helped himself to coffee and looked at Chip. “Haven’t you got work to do?”

Chip raised his eyebrows. “Cool your jets. I’m just visiting with Miss Lucy and Caleb. I’ll be done when I’ve finished my coffee.”

“Good.” Isaiah nodded at Lucy. “Make yourself at home. I’ll be back for dinner around six. There’s a beef casserole in the oven.”

He walked past Caleb and out into the yard, leaving Lucy and Chip staring after him.

“He’ll warm up,” Chip said. “He’s pleased you’re here.”

“Hard to tell when he barely spoke a dozen words to me,” Caleb said. He picked up Lucy’s suitcase. “I’ll show you where the bathroom is, and you can get settled.”

* * *

Lucy followed Caleb down the shadowed hallway, her heart hurting for him. She was occasionally at odds with her parents, but they would never have treated her as coldly as Isaiah had treated Caleb. Despite their frustrations and divisions, they all loved each other, and sometimes that was enough to get them through the hard parts. They passed the family room, where a recently cut pine tree sat forlornly in a tub beside the wood-burning stove. There were two boxes of decorations and a jumble of lights on the coffee table. Caleb noticed her looking.

“Mom used to do all that stuff. I guess Dad hasn’t gotten around to it.”

“I could help if it wouldn’t give offense?” Lucy offered.

“He probably wouldn’t even notice, so knock yourself out.” Caleb opened a door to the right. “Bathroom’s through here. Dad has his own in the master bedroom, so don’t worry about him knocking on the door.”

He went through into the room opposite. “This is my old bedroom and there’s a guest room to the right of the bathroom.”

Lucy took a deep breath. “Can I stay with you?” She immediately went to qualify her question. “I mean, if that’s okay, but if your dad wouldn’t approve, it’s his house, and—”

“I’d like that,” Caleb said simply. “And I don’t care what he thinks.”

She looked up at him. “I know this is hard for you, Caleb.”

“You have no idea.” He let out a frustrated breath. “How am I supposed to communicate with someone who barely bothers to acknowledge my existence?”

“Meet him on his own terms and in his own environment?”

His brows came together. “Meaning what, exactly?”

“My dad always says that he gets the best out of Dan when they work alongside each other rather than him sitting behind his desk asking questions Dan doesn’t want to answer.”

“You think I should get out there and help?”

She shrugged. “If you want to try and reach him it can’t do any harm, can it?”

“I *want* closure,” he said strongly. “I want to walk away from him knowing I did everything I could, and that he understands that.”

“Then get out to that barn and make yourself useful,” Lucy said. “And I’ll sort out the food and the Christmas decorations.”

He leaned in and kissed her gently on the mouth.

“You’re full of good advice.”

“Dan would say I’m bossy.”

“And I’m not Dan.” He kissed her again. “I’ll see if I can find my old work clothes and get out there.”

“I bet everything’s exactly where you left it.”

He smiled for the first time. “Probably.”

She left him to investigate and went back into the kitchen to work out where everything was. The huge casserole was cooking gently in the oven and about ten potatoes sat on the

shelf above the pot, baking away, as well. There was a large refrigerator and freezer that made it easy to store all the Christmas goodies she'd brought with her. As she worked, she kept coming across little reminders of Caleb's mother—her handwritten recipes, the labels on the spice jars in the pantry, a card from Caleb she'd kept on the pinboard.

Lucy left everything exactly where she found it. After putting a bag of cookie dough on the table to defrost, she went through to the family room and stared at the newly cut pine tree. It smelled divine but looked a little sad without lights and tinsel. When she'd set up the three Christmas trees at the B&B, she'd been reminded of her grandma so much she'd cried. She could understand why Caleb's father hadn't wanted to do the tree himself, but the place needed something to show it was Christmas, and the tree was already cut down, and just standing there looking sad ...

It took her a while to untangle the lights and test them to see if they were working. They were the old-fashioned multicolored ones she secretly still loved. She placed them on the tree first, just as her grandma had taught her, and opened the box containing the ornaments. There was the usual selection of battered but beloved family treasures. She even recognized the things Caleb had made in school because she'd made the same ones six years later with the same teachers.

There was a battered angel to go on the top, but Lucy wasn't quite tall enough to get it up without a chair. She considered the grimy face and dress and took the doll through to her bathroom, where she gently cleaned the porcelain and sponge-washed the patches on the white skirts. The rich smell of the casserole drifted through from the kitchen, and she checked the time. She'd half been expecting Caleb to come straight back. He'd been out there for at least two hours, which had to be promising.

Didn't it?

* * *

"What do you want?" Caleb's dad looked up as he approached.

“Thought I could lend a hand.” Caleb tried to sound both helpful and upbeat as he checked out the inside of the barn. It was still as clean as a barn could be, with nothing out of place except for the occasional bird’s nest in the rafters his dad grudgingly allowed to stay.

“Doing what, exactly?” Isaiah asked. “Nothing complicated to fix around here.”

Caleb slowly let out his breath. “I’m sure there are stalls to muck out, manure to shift, or livestock to deal with?”

“Stalls need turning out.” His dad handed him a shovel. “You can start at the other end. Wheelbarrow’s just outside.”

Caleb put on his work gloves and walked down to the opposite end of the barn. He got the wheelbarrow, checked the occupant of the first stall, and went on in.

“Hey, Snowy. Long time, no see. How’s it going?”

By the time he’d raked out the third stall he’d forgotten about the cold and was working up a sweat. Chip and his dad worked right along with him, exchanging the occasional word but otherwise keeping to themselves.

Caleb stopped near his dad. “Do the horses need feeding?”

“Not yet.”

He nodded and went back to his task. The motions were so familiar that he soon got into the rhythm and was almost surprised when his father finally spoke again.

“Time to get washed up for dinner.” He turned to Chip. “You’re joining us, right?”

“Couldn’t keep me away,” Chip joked. “I saw those cookies Miss Lucy’s been baking. If they’re anywhere near as good as her grandmother’s we’re in for a treat!”

Caleb gathered up the tools and wheelbarrow and hosed everything down before replacing it in the feed room while his dad stood silently by. He shut the door and turned to face him.

“Anything else I can do before we go in?”

“Not right now.” His dad whistled to his dogs. “I could do with some help later tonight.”

“Okay.” Caleb walked past him and headed for the house.

“Thanks, son.”

Caleb didn't stop walking or acknowledge his father's comment. As far as he was concerned, that grudging attempt to converse rated around a zero. The weird thing was—he didn't care. Being in that space with his father had been remarkably soothing and familiar. He'd almost enjoyed it. Weird how different the chores he'd endlessly complained about as a teen now seemed far more important ...

He pushed open the door to the mudroom and inhaled a lungful of Christmas. Lucy was in the kitchen making gingerbread cookies. Her hair was in a messy bun on top of her head, and one of his mom's old aprons covered her clothing. He paused to appreciate her. She had a touch of the Christmas fairy to go along with her sunny personality and she really did brighten his day.

Caleb frowned. What the hell was wrong with him? Enjoying working in the barn and smiling foolishly at his best friend's annoying little sister ...

“What's up?” she asked, her spatula held in one hand like a wand.

“Nothing. It smells good in here.”

“That's the casserole. It's nothing to do with me.”

“Yeah, it is.” He kept walking. “I'd kiss you, but I'm covered in horse shit.”

“Eew.” She wrinkled her nose and warded him off with her spatula. “Go and take a shower.”

“Already on it.” He winked and moved on through, his steps slowing as he neared his bedroom. When had he started winking? His team in Seattle wouldn't recognize him right now. He was the hard-driving boss, the man who made them work twenty-four-seven, without remorse.

And he was tired of being that person. Of constantly outperforming himself. He let himself into the bathroom and regarded the Spider-Man shower curtain his mom had bought for him when he was fifteen. The plumbing was better now and the water hot and plentiful, even if he did have to stand in the bath and bend his head down about a foot to get it under the spray.

He only noticed Lucy must have put shower gel and shampoo in the wire basket when he recognized the scent from the B&B. Despite her claims to be ditzy she was nothing of the sort. Now that he thought about it, her parents had always been a little dismissive of her achievements. Her decision to take over her grandma's business obviously hadn't pleased them. He soaped his hair, rinsed it off, and stepped out onto the rag rug his mom had made.

He wrapped himself in a towel and went back into his bedroom to change. He could hear the water running in his dad's part of the house, which meant dinner wouldn't be long.

"Oh!" Lucy came in and hurriedly shut the door behind her. "I didn't realize you were out of the shower."

Her gaze lowered to his bare chest and stayed at the towel knotted on his hips. "You look ... nice."

"Nice?" He took a step toward her. "Like, how nice?"

"Like if I didn't have cookies in the oven right now and your father wasn't expecting us for dinner, I'd be unwrapping you like an early Christmas present." She licked her lips, which did all kinds of things to his anatomy.

"How long until the timer goes off?" Caleb asked hoarsely, forgetting he wasn't supposed to be totally into her.

"Five minutes."

He sighed. "That's definitely not long enough."

She came toward him, went up on tiptoe, and kissed him very slowly. "This will have to sustain me through dinner."

He patted her ass. "I'll make it up to you, I promise."

She blew him a kiss and headed back for the door. “Dinner’s nearly ready, so come on out when you’re dressed.”

* * *

Lucy made her way back to the kitchen, her face still flushed from the amazing sight of Caleb in the flesh. She hadn’t seen much of him in the dark of the previous night and he was truly spectacular. Years of working on a ranch had honed his physique and he’d obviously kept up his fitness levels. She was proud of herself for not outright drooling, falling to her knees, ripping off the towel and kissing his—

“Evening.”

She jumped as Isaiah Erickson came out of the pantry carrying the salt and pepper. He set them on the table and turned to look at her.

“Hi!” she said brightly. “Thanks so much for letting me stay with you until the generator gets fixed.”

He nodded and gestured toward the family room. “Did you decorate the tree?”

“Yes, I hope that’s okay?” She regarded him anxiously. His poker face made Caleb’s look like an amateur.

“It’s fine.” He paused. “It’s nice to see the lights up.”

“It definitely makes things more Christmassy,” Lucy agreed. Her timer went off. “I’ll just get these cookies out of the oven and then we can start dinner.”

He sniffed the air. “Gingerbread?”

“Yup.” She smiled at him. “I remember Caleb always liked it.”

“He must have got that from me. Annie wasn’t keen on it, but she made them for me anyway.”

Lucy set the cookies to cool, and took out the baked potatoes and casserole dish. “Caleb is like you in many ways. You both have a great work ethic.”

“Well, we’re both stubborn. I’ll give you that.” He made sure she had something to place the dish on at the table. “I’ll

find a spoon.”

The back door opened, bringing in a blast of frigid air, and Chip came in rubbing his hands.

“Something smells good.”

“It’s me.” Caleb arrived from the opposite direction. “I just showered.”

Chip chuckled. “Bet you haven’t smelled like that for a while, son.”

“Nope, but mud and manure wash off much easier than the city stink.” He’d put a brown sweater on over a shirt and wore jeans. His hair was still spiky and wet. Seeing him next to his father made it easier for Lucy to see the likeness between them.

“What can I do to help?” Caleb asked.

“There’s beer and iced tea in the refrigerator if anyone wants it,” Isaiah said. “And get the butter and sour cream for the baked potatoes.”

“Will do.”

It didn’t take long before they were all sitting around the table with plates full of food. Lucy took the seat next to Caleb. Chip sat opposite her, and Isaiah was at right angles to his son. The empty chair where Ann had sat was a reminder of the family’s loss.

For a while they all just ate. Lucy hadn’t realized how hungry she was. They’d basically skipped lunch, and she’d used up a lot of calories during the previous twenty-four hours.

“I see you finally got your tree up, Isaiah,” Chip said cheerfully.

“Nothing to do with me.” Isaiah took a sip of beer.

“It looks fantastic,” Caleb said. “Thanks for putting in all that effort, Lucy.”

Isaiah cleared his throat. “There’s no need to get all defensive, son. I already told her I was okay with it.”

Lucy glanced at Caleb, who was also drinking beer and maybe should have gone for the tea.

“It didn’t take me long.” Lucy tried to lighten the atmosphere. “And I just love the holidays. I have three trees up at the B&B.”

“Shame you had to close down right at peak holiday season,” Isaiah commented. “I don’t remember your grandma ever having to do that.”

“The roads up here are closed, and there’s no way any of her guests are getting here in the worst storm in living memory,” Caleb said evenly. “It’s hardly her fault.”

“I didn’t say it was, son. I was just making an observation.” Isaiah’s frown was so like Caleb’s it almost took Lucy’s breath away. “And how about you stop butting in and let the girl speak for herself?”

“She’s not a girl, Dad.”

Under the cover of the table, Lucy placed her hand on Caleb’s muscled thigh and squeezed hard. “He knows I can stand up for myself, Mr. Erickson.” Lucy smiled. “We established that when I dropped my book bag on his head when I was nine.”

“He was always complaining about you tagging along with him and Dan. I guess he changed his mind about that.” He paused and Lucy tensed. “You two an item now?”

“We’re just good friends,” Lucy said hastily.

“Good enough to share a bed but not to court?” Isaiah’s gaze bored into Caleb. “Is that how I brought you up to treat women, son?”

“After the way you treated Mom, you don’t get to comment.” Caleb scowled right back. “Lucy and I understand each other and that’s good enough for me.”

Isaiah frowned. “I treated her just fine. Annie was very happy with me.”

“Because she’s a much better person than you will ever be,” Caleb said softly. “She put up with a lot of shit.”

“From you as well. How do you think she felt when you upped and left at eighteen and never came home again?”

Lucy and Chip exchanged an apprehensive glance across the table.

“I think she understood why I left.”

“Because you thought you were better than us? That this place wasn’t good enough anymore?”

Caleb frowned. “I *never* felt like that. I didn’t come back because you made me so unwelcome, with your constant digs about me destroying family tradition, of me not caring about my birthright, about how selfish I was to want something different for myself.”

Isaiah shook his head. “That’s bullshit.”

“That’s the truth and you just don’t like it.” Caleb sat forward. “You made me feel like I would *never* be good enough to run this place. That even if I gave up on all my dreams and came back, I’d still never hack it because I wasn’t *you*, Dad. And I’d never ever measure up.”

Caleb abruptly stood up. “This is pointless.” He nodded at Lucy. “Thanks for dinner. I need to make a couple of calls. There’s a VC who wants to invest in my company I need to talk to. I’ll be back to help clear up, okay?”

He walked out and Lucy heard the bedroom door slam down the hallway.

Isaiah crossed his arms over his chest. “I see he hasn’t changed one bit.”

Chip sighed. “Neither have you, my old friend.”

“He doesn’t listen! He just goes off on me.”

Lucy took a deep breath. “I think he was trying to tell you he doesn’t feel welcome in his own home, Mr. Erickson. He sounded pretty hurt to me.”

“Hurt?” Isaiah snorted. “He’s just mad that I’m not willing to listen to his excuses for not being home for his mother more.”

“He’s right though,” Chip said slowly. “You never say a nice thing about him to his face. Why would he want to come home to listen to that?”

“I don’t want him getting a big head or thinking he’s special or something.”

“But he *is* special. He built his own tech company from scratch and made a success of it. Maybe that’s not what you wanted him to do, Mr. Erickson, but he did it, and maybe he’s hurt that you can’t even be proud of him for that,” Lucy suggested.

Isaiah scowled. “And what’s a VC anyway? Why is that more important than taking the time to listen to his own father?”

“Perhaps you should ask him yourself, Isaiah,” Chip said pointedly. “Show an interest.”

“Like he does in the ranch?”

Chip snorted. “You shut him down whenever he tries to ask. You did it earlier.”

“I ...” Isaiah stopped talking. Chip departed. Lucy cleared the plates and stacked them in the sink while Caleb’s father stared into space and occasionally sipped his coffee.

Eventually, Lucy approached him. He looked at her like he’d never seen her before.

“Annie did all the important talking with Caleb.”

Lucy tried to think how to frame what she wanted to say. “But she’s not here anymore. I guess you’re finding it hard to communicate with Caleb.”

“You’ve got that right.” He grimaced. “I’m not one to reach out to people.”

“Neither is he.” She paused. “But he’s your only son. Don’t you think Annie would want you to make every effort to make sure Caleb feels loved?”

In other circumstances, Isaiah’s horrified expression would have made her laugh, but she really wanted to help Caleb.

“I don’t do that mushy, emotional stuff.”

“But if you don’t reach out to him,” Lucy said slowly, “and his mother is no longer here to bring him home, you might never see him again. Is that what you want?”

His expression turned to stone, and he rose to his feet.

“I’ve got to get on. Thanks for the cookies.”

He disappeared in the direction of the barn. Lucy balled up the damp tea towel and threw it at the door. The Erickson men were two of a kind, walking away when things got too hard for them. Her original idea of locking them both in a room and leaving them there until they worked it out was more and more appealing.

She retrieved the tea towel and tossed it in the laundry basket. And now she’d have to tell Caleb she’d pissed his father off even more ... She was beginning to have a lot of sympathy with the absent Annie.

Chapter Five

Caleb ended the second call and pressed his fingers into his skull as he was hit by a raging headache. The venture capitalist was enthusiastic. He was talking about a major investment with the possibility of an IPO in eighteen months. Caleb groaned. Could he stay sane for that long? Did he even want his company to go public?

Lucy came in, her expression wary. “Is everything okay, Caleb?”

He looked at her and considered what to say. She sighed. “Man, you Ericksons are tough nuts to crack. I can see where you get it from now that I’ve talked to your father.” She half turned back to the door. “I need to get the angel on the tree. I’ll leave you to it.”

“Hold up.”

She looked inquiringly over her shoulder at him.

“One, you’re not tall enough to get the angel up there without my help, and two, I’m trying to think what I want to say to you.”

She smiled. “Then, how about we accomplish the first thing while you work on the second?”

“Sounds good to me.” He rose to his feet and went to take her hand. “My mom got that angel from her Scottish granny. If you look under her skirts, she’s got tartan stockings.”

“I noticed.” She squeezed his fingers. “I cleaned her up a little.”

“Mom used to do all that stuff. Last Christmas I guess she was too exhausted to do much.” He grimaced. “I wish I’d spent more than two days here with her.”

“You’re an entrepreneur. I’m sure she understood that.” Lucy picked up the doll and fluffed out her net and satin skirts.

“I used that as an excuse not to stay.” Caleb held her gaze. “With good communication networks there’s no reason why I

couldn't have worked from here. I just couldn't bear seeing her face when Dad and I got into it."

He set his hands around Lucy's waist and lifted her effortlessly above his head.

"High enough for you?"

"Absolutely." It took Lucy a few moments to work out how to fix the angel onto the tree and make sure she was straight. "All done."

Caleb lowered her very slowly, making sure her body slid right over his. He kept hold of her when she reached the ground and looked into her blue eyes.

"Thanks for doing this."

"The tree?" She raised her eyebrows. "You must have realized by now that I just love the holidays."

"Everything," Caleb said simply. "You just being here is making it hurt less."

Her expression softened and she cupped his bearded chin. "I'm glad to help. I know how hard it is to lose someone you love."

He nodded and drew her back along the hall to his bedroom. He checked that there was no sign of his father and shut the door behind him.

"Sit down."

She went and sat on the bed, her hands in her lap, and looked up at him expectantly.

"I have a software company. I started it right out of college, and I've been growing the business ever since."

"I know." Lucy nodded. "My parents constantly held you up as an example of how a small-town person could go onto greater things if they really made an effort."

Caleb winced. "Sorry about that."

"They did the same to Dan." She half smiled. "Didn't really work with either of us."

“The thing is—in the last year the business has grown fast, and I’ve been trying to micromanage everything.”

Lucy pointed at herself. “This is my shocked face.”

“I’ve been working seven days a week, pushing my team to exhaustion, and when Mom died, I ...” He paused. “I just kept going because it was easier than dealing with her loss, you know?”

Lucy nodded, her blue gaze full of sympathy.

He sat on the chair opposite her. “And now we have the opportunity to expand the company even further, take more investor money, and aim to go public in eighteen months.”

“That sounds ... amazing.”

“It is,” Caleb said. “But it’s not going to be easy.”

“You’ll get it done,” Lucy said. “You’re smart, capable, and so good at what you do that you can’t fail. I believe in you.”

Her smile was so full of her belief in him that he almost couldn’t stand it. If he went ahead and committed himself to eighteen months of hell, he’d probably never have the time to see her or his father. Did that bother her, or had she already given up on him ever hanging around?

“If I go that route, it gives me a reason not to come back here,” Caleb said carefully.

“I ... kind of assumed that was a given, anyway.” She looked down at her hands. “I’ve loved being with you, Caleb, but I do understand that it’s temporary.” She finally looked up. “And I don’t regret it at all.”

He nodded. “Me neither.”

“Then, we’re good, right?” She rose to her feet with a bright smile. “I just remembered I forgot to turn the oven off after I took out the cookies.”

She practically ran out of the room, leaving Caleb with a sense that something wasn’t right. He started after her, his stocking feet making no sound on the wood flooring and

abruptly stopped when he reached the kitchen. There was no sign of Lucy and the oven had been off for a while.

He was just about to head to the back door when he heard a stifled sniff from the pantry. The door was ajar, but he didn't need to go in to realize Lucy was crying. The sound hit him hard in the gut. Was she crying over him? He didn't deserve that. He turned around and went quietly back to his bedroom. She didn't need to know he'd overheard her. But he hated seeing his sunny-natured friend upset.

Friend? Who was he trying to kid? It was *killing* him. For some reason she loved and believed in him and, like everything else in his life, he was incapable of reciprocating because he was an unemotional jerk.

Just like his dad ... He sat on the bed and took a deep shuddering breath, his gaze straying to the darkness outside. There were no lights on the hillside in front of him. The silence was a living, breathing thing, quite unlike the city he'd reluctantly learned to call home. He'd never told his parents how hard it had been to get used to the noise and the constant flow of people. He'd never told them much at all. He'd been too worried his dad would demand he stop wasting his money and return home, or that his mom would be disappointed in him.

He'd kept everything inside and focused on being exceptional, so that no one would ever say he hadn't made the best of every opportunity he'd been offered. And what had it got him? Money, most of which he'd plowed straight back into his company, an enviable work ethic that was slowly eating away at his soul, and a team who loved and feared him in equal measures.

The door opened and Lucy came back in, her eyes suspiciously red.

"Sorry about that. I was just checking the weather reports. It looks like there's more snow on the way."

"I had a text from the Rosbergs." Caleb played his part because what else could he do? "Everything's fine at the B&B

except Colin has basically moved into their house and is refusing to budge from in front of the fire.”

She laughed, and something inside him solidified into a certainty, making everything else irrelevant.

“I told Dad I’d do the last check of the barn.” Caleb rose to his feet. “It won’t take long.”

She hesitated. “I might take a bath and then go to bed, if that’s okay?”

He kissed the top of her head. “Do whatever makes you happy.”

“I’ve been doing that ever since you arrived, Caleb Erickson.”

It was his turn to chuckle as he headed for the door. “Don’t fall asleep too fast, okay?”

“I’ll try not to.”

He walked through the silent kitchen to the mudroom and put on his boots, fleece-lined jacket, and dented old Stetson. Five minutes after arriving at Stanford he’d ditched his hat and cowboy boots because he couldn’t deal with the jokes. Everything still fit him fine. It was like returning to his old self—to the boy who’d changed into something else entirely and lost something indefinable along the way.

He let himself out and stood on the porch, staring up at the ink-black night sky and the brightness of the stars. It was too cold to stand around for long. He walked down the well-salted path to the barn, flicked on the lights, and started checking in on the horses.

“Evening, son.”

He almost had heart failure when his father appeared from the feed store.

“Did you think I’d forget to come out here?” Caleb asked.

“Nope, you’ve always been a man of his word.” His dad paused. “I came out here to think.”

“It’s a good place to do that,” Caleb agreed. “I’ve had a bit of thinking to do myself this year.”

“About your work?”

“Yeah, about that and other things.” Caleb glanced at his father, whose face remained in the shadows. “I’ve always loved it out here at night.”

“You used to shimmy down that overflow pipe and scare your mother half to death, disappearing into the night,” Isaiah said. “I told her you’d be fine, and I was always right.”

“You knew about that?”

Isaiah snorted. “You were about as quiet as a baby elephant on that roof, son. Hard to miss.”

“Why didn’t you stop me?”

“Why would I? I knew you’d be safe on your own land, and that you were smart enough to make it back.”

“So why didn’t you assume the same thing when I went to Stanford?”

Isaiah was quiet for a long while. “I guess because I didn’t understand why you wanted to leave.”

“I didn’t want to leave. You seemed to have the ranch running perfectly, and you weren’t interested in me getting involved in that. I guess at eighteen I thought you didn’t need me, and you didn’t think I was good enough.”

“I guess I screwed up, then.”

Caleb blinked at his dad. “Say that again?”

Isaiah shrugged. “I didn’t think you had anything to tell me when you were eighteen, and I let you know it.” He hesitated. “I felt like I wasn’t good enough for you anymore. I wasn’t educated like your new friends, and I wasn’t interested in changing that.”

“You made me feel ... unnecessary,” Caleb said slowly. “That you didn’t care whether I came back or not because the ranch was all yours and had nothing to do with me.”

“And you did nothing to change my opinion of you, either.”

Caleb considered that home truth. “I went out of my way to make sure you knew I didn’t need you, *or* the ranch to be successful.”

“Yeah.”

“What a pair of stubborn fools. If Mom was here, she’d be calling us both out.” Caleb took a deep breath and faced his father. I’m sorry, Dad.”

Isaiah slowly nodded. “I’m sorry, too, son.”

Caleb took an unsteady step forward and his dad held up his finger.

“Now, don’t you start with all that emotional touchy-feely bullshit.”

“Oh, shut up.” Caleb wrapped his arms around his dad and gave him a bear hug and a noogie for good measure. “Take it like a man.”

* * *

Lucy took a long bath, which gave her an excuse for the puffiness of her face, and put herself to bed. She loved the peacefulness of the ranch and the way she could almost taste the velvety darkness pressing in around her. Not that she felt very peaceful right now. Caleb was on target to bigger and better things than she’d ever accomplish, and he deserved every one of them. If anyone had told her a month previously that she’d get to spend the holidays with Caleb Erickson and make love with her dream crush, she wouldn’t have believed them. She should be grateful for having her wish come true rather than complaining that it would have to end. The thing with most dreams was that they never lived up to reality, whereas Caleb had been even better in the flesh than she could ever have imagined. She should be satisfied.

But she wanted more. Lucy opened her eyes. *Why should* she have to settle for smiling and waving goodbye? One thing she’d learned after defying her parents and taking on the B&B despite their doubts was that she was stronger than she looked. Sometimes she fussed over things and apologized too much,

but she'd survived the worst summer and winter on record for the B&B, and she was still standing. *And* she'd taken the opportunity to live her dream with Caleb.

The door creaked open, and she heard the rustle of Caleb removing his clothing.

"You still awake?" he whispered.

"Kind of." Lucy reminded herself that she was a strong, independent woman who took what she wanted.

He climbed into bed and took up almost all the room, his arm coming around her shoulders as naturally as if they slept together every night. She nestled close to his side, her cheek over his steadily beating heart.

"I talked to Dad."

"How did it go?"

"Well, I ended up giving him a hug. I don't think he'll ever forgive me for that, but the rest of it? I think we're coming to an understanding."

"That's wonderful." Lucy smiled against his skin. He smelled like a cowboy again, which she kind of loved. "Chip and I told him a few home truths after you left the table."

"Then I guess that's something else I have to thank you for."

He came up on one elbow and looked at her, his expression hard to read. "Can I kiss you?"

"In your father's house?" Lucy went for full horror and outrage. "What kind of a girl do you think I am?"

"My kind?" He kissed her very thoroughly until she had no choice but to reciprocate. "The most annoying best friend's little sister and hanger-on ever, kind?"

She nipped his lip and he growled as his hands roamed over her body. He swiftly removed her nightgown and settled himself between her thighs. She sighed as he kissed his way down her stomach, his bearded chin making her hum with pleasure as his tongue circled her most sensitive flesh. She raised her hips as he palmed her butt and pressed her closer to

his talented mouth and plunging fingers. She came in a sudden rush, gripping his shoulder hard as she trembled and gasped his name.

“Nice,” he murmured. “That’s my girl.” He took possession of her hand and guided it to his hard shaft. “Make me feel good, Lucy.”

She was happy to oblige, her fingers sliding over his heated flesh as he rocked into the tightness of her grip.

“Where’s ... the condom?” Caleb groaned. “Don’t tell me I left them in the bathroom.”

“There’s one in my bag, on the nightstand,” Lucy said. “I can get it.”

“Nope, I’m on it.” Caleb was already on the move.

“It’s in the zip-up pocket on the left-hand side,” Lucy added as he started dumping her stuff out on the vanity.

“Got it.” He climbed back into bed and remained crouching over her as he ripped open the packet, his expression intent.

Lucy sighed as he slowly eased inside her, his gaze never leaving hers until he was fully seated. He framed her face with his hands and kissed her.

“Thank you for everything,” he said softly. “I mean it.”

She kissed him back with everything she couldn’t say and threw herself into making love with him as if it was for the very last time—because it was—and she wasn’t going to allow herself to regret a thing.

* * *

Caleb woke up early, kissed a sleeping Lucy, and snuck out of bed. He’d always loved mornings on the ranch, and he was determined to enjoy this one. He dressed in his warmest clothes and went through to the kitchen where the lingering scent of coffee meant his dad was already up and at it. He put on his boots and coat and went outside. The razor-sharp chill in the air made him catch his breath and stop to stare at the glistening white hills and ranks of hidden pine trees that climbed up the slopes.

He took out his cell and checked the time. It was probably too early to call, so he sent a text.

Hey, need to talk to you urgently about this investor thing.

Aware that he might be taking a small step toward a big crisis, he put his cell away, and walked over to the barn where his dad, Chip, and a guy he didn't know, called Angelo, were busy mucking out the stalls. He didn't bother to chat, picked up a shovel, and got stuck in.

Chip winked when their paths crossed, and his dad merely grunted like his presence was already accepted and not worth commenting on. It felt good to test his strength and stamina on real work rather than going to the gym. As Chip finished feeding the horses, Caleb let them out into the paddock behind the barn, where the snow had been cleared to allow them to roam more easily.

"Not sure they should be out in this," his dad commented as Caleb secured the gate. "Might get them back in if it starts to snow again."

"What you need is a heated field," Caleb said.

"Sounds expensive."

"It is, but it might be worth considering for the future."

"What future?" His dad wouldn't look at him. "If you don't take this place on, who am I going to leave it to?"

Before Caleb could answer him, Angelo came up to ask something, and his dad walked away. His cell buzzed. It took him a few minutes to dig it out of his pocket and look at the screen.

Call me at midday.Thanks.

Caleb checked the time. That meant he had six hours to talk to Lucy and maybe talk himself out of making a terrible mistake.

Chapter Six

“Morning, sleepyhead.”

Lucy opened one eye to see Caleb with a mug of coffee at the door. “I hope that’s for me?”

“Seeing as I’ve been up for two hours working in the barn, then yes.” He placed it on the bedside table and sat beside her. It wasn’t until he whistled that she remembered she was naked and grabbed a handful of the sheet to hold to her breasts.

“Don’t hide on my account. It’s not as if I haven’t seen it all before.”

And now she was blushing like a teenager. She took a sip of coffee and sighed with bliss.

“Thanks, I needed that. What’s the weather doing?”

“So far, so good, today. But there’s a storm due in late tonight. I called Denise and everything’s okay at the B&B.”

“Is the generator fixed?”

“The repair guy left a message saying the earliest he can get to you is December twenty-sixth.”

“That’s not good.”

“You could stay at the ranch over Christmas,” Caleb suggested. “I mean you’re already here, and we’re glad to have you.”

“I’m not sure that would be a good idea.” Lucy stared down at her mug.

“Why not?”

Darn it, she’d forgotten Caleb had no problem being all direct and confrontational. Didn’t he understand that she was trying to walk away before she embarrassed them both and begged him to stay?

“I feel like I should be at the B&B,” Lucy said carefully. “I mean, what if someone turns up unexpectedly and there’s no one there?”

His brows drew together. “Denise will explain the generator’s down and find them somewhere else to stay?”

“She wouldn’t have that kind of information.”

He studied her while she avoided his gaze and sipped her coffee.

“What’s wrong?” he asked gently.

“Nothing!” She gulped too much coffee and it almost went up her nose. “You and your dad have a lot to talk about. You don’t need me hanging around so you have to be polite and talk to me instead.”

He stayed quiet for a while before finally speaking.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

“Have you ever”—he hesitated—“thought about moving back to Seattle?”

She set the mug back on the bedside table so firmly coffee slopped over the side. “I told you how hard it was to get away from my parents and take on the B&B. Do you think I’d stroll back there, tell them I’d made a mistake, and ask them to let me come back?”

“I guess not.”

She pushed the covers down and got out of bed. If he was about to mention that *he* lived in Seattle, she was going to either scream or weep. “Excuse me, I need to shower.”

“Does that guy you spoke to on the phone live around here?”

“What guy?”

“The one you told to clean up his act.”

“Do you really think I’d sleep with you if I was involved with someone else?” Lucy was half ashamed at using Colin the cat as an excuse to get out of a difficult situation, and half relieved to have an excuse at all.

Caleb shoved a hand through his hair. “Jeez, maybe I should stop talking. Everything I say is making things worse.”

“Yes, it is.” She raised her chin. “Now, please excuse me.”

He grimaced. “Okay. I told Dad I’d help with unloading the hay. I’ll see you back here for lunch.” He got out of her way, his expression thoughtful, which wasn’t reassuring at all.

Lucy had a shower, got dressed and packed her bag. She went into the kitchen and found Chip with his hand in the tin of gingerbread she’d made the previous day.

“Caught me.” He chuckled. “I just can’t resist this stuff.”

“I’ll make you a batch of your very own if you’ll drive me back to the B&B right now.”

Chip frowned. “You and Caleb fighting or something?”

“Not at all. I just need to get back for the generator repair guy. I already told Caleb.” Lucy slipped the lie into the middle of the sentence and hoped Chip wouldn’t notice. “I’ll call if I need to come back.”

“Okay, then.” Chip nodded. “I’ll just get my keys.”

Ten minutes later they were exiting the ranch at the county gate, and she was trying not to cry, which was stupid because she’d been given everything she’d ever dreamed about. Caleb was going back to Seattle with his relationship with his father on a way better footing, and his business was about to expand, and probably make him filthy rich. If anyone had asked her what she wanted for him for Christmas, then all the items on her list had been checked off.

“What time is the guy coming to do the repair?” Chip asked. “If it won’t take long, I could hang around town and take you back out to the ranch.”

“I have no idea,” Lucy said quickly. This was why she tried not to lie. Everything got way too complicated. “That’s very kind of you, but it could be hours.”

“Okey dokey, then.” He whistled a tune as they turned onto the county road, which was in a much better state than it had been the day before. Lucy kept up a bright stream of chatter as

they made their way into town. Chip was easy company and he seemed to have accepted her choice to leave without too many questions.

He pulled up in the driveway of the B&B and smiled at Lucy. "Home sweet home!"

She looked out at the white painted Victorian with its wide porch and stained-glass panels in the front door and nodded, her throat tight. Even if times were hard, she'd keep going to save her grandmother's legacy and make new memories for herself.

"Thank you, Chip." She got out of the truck while he retrieved her bag from the back seat. "I'll get baking those cookies as soon as the generator is back on."

"No worries." Chip winked at her. "Now, hurry on back. Caleb will be missing you."

She managed to keep smiling as she disabled the alarm and let herself back into the house. To her relief, the secondary generator was doing its job as the freezers were still working, the kitchen light was on, and the woodstove was throwing out heat. Lucy set the kettle on the range and sat at the table as her thoughts went in circles. Had she made the correct decision to leave? If Caleb had come right out and asked her to move to Seattle with him, what would she have done? She loved him. She always had, and the thought of being with him was precious.

She hoped he wouldn't ask her to make that choice, and leaving before he did still made sense. They'd both gained something from their time together and she wished him nothing but the best. She plugged her phone into the charger and turned it off just in case he tried to call her. She had plenty of extra sweaters in her closet, so she wouldn't be cold. Right now, she just wanted to curl up, maybe cry a little, and then take a long nap. Everything would look better after that ... it always did.

* * *

Caleb looked up as Chip's truck rolled to a stop in front of the barn and the man himself got out.

"Where've you been?"

Chip raised an eyebrow. "Just dropping Miss Lucy back at the B&B to wait for the repair guy."

"What?"

"She said she'd told you."

"That the guy had rescheduled?"

"Nope, that she was leaving." Chip scratched his head. "Oh, good lord. Don't tell me you didn't know."

"I—" Caleb got out his phone. There was nothing from Lucy to confirm what Chip had just said, which meant she'd left him. His heart sank to his boots. "Dammit!"

"Something wrong, young fella?"

"Yeah, but it's all my fault." Inwardly Caleb berated himself as he typed a message to Lucy. By raising the question of moving back to Seattle, he'd scared her enough to make her run. "Are you fighting with Miss Lucy?"

"Nope, I just put my big foot in my mouth as usual," Caleb said grimly. "She got the wrong idea about something I said."

"Wouldn't be the first time an Erickson's done that." Chip nodded. "I mean, look at your father."

"What have I done?" Isaiah came out of the barn and stared at them both. "Why are you standing around like you're at a church meeting in the snow when there's a perfectly good, warm house right there?"

Caleb went into the house. Something smelled good, but there was no sign of Lucy. There was a note addressed to Isaiah on the table. He picked it up and read it out loud.

"Thanks so much for letting me stay until the generator at the B&B was fixed. I left you two batches of cookies in the pantry, and there are pork ribs slow roasting in the oven for dinner."

He looked over at Caleb. “What happened?”

“I screwed up.”

“I can see that. What are you going to do about it?”

Caleb held his dad’s gaze. “I’ve got a call with my board at midday. Can I get back to you after that?”

“Sure,” Isaiah said as he helped himself to a cookie and offered the tin to Chip. “But if you care about her, don’t waste too much time letting her know.”

Caleb went into his bedroom and closed the door. Without Lucy’s presence the space felt cold and empty. She was the heart of him now and without her he was nothing. His cell buzzed and he accepted the call.

“Hey, it’s Chase Morgan. What’s going on?”

Caleb took a deep breath. “I want out.”

“Of what, exactly?”

“Everything.”

“Caleb ... you’re just panicking because you’re in the position most startups dream about.” Chase sounded soothing. “I’ve seen it a hundred times. The new VC wouldn’t have decided to invest in you unless they thought you would succeed—just like me and the rest of the board did when we first met you all those years ago.”

“I don’t want any of it. I want to come home and work with my dad on the ranch.”

There was a long silence. “You mean you want out of *everything*?”

“Yeah.” Caleb’s heart was beating hard enough to burst.

“Okay, Caleb, listen up. Promise me you won’t do anything drastic until I’ve talked to the rest of the board,” Chase said. “There’s a lot to this decision, you know that. I want to make sure we explore every possibility before you walk away with nothing.”

“I wouldn’t have nothing. I’d still inherit an awesome ranch.”

And maybe win the woman of his dreams, but Chase didn’t need to know that.

“I understand.” Chase paused. “But promise you’ll wait until I get back to you. I think you owe me that.”

Aware that if it hadn’t been for Chase and his fellow VC angels, he wouldn’t have gotten his start at all, Caleb agreed. He’d barely ended the call before his cell started ringing again, and he answered it.

“I’m not going to change my mind, Chase.”

“I’ve no idea who the hell Chase is, Caleb, but my name’s Dan, and I’m having some serious thoughts about what you’ve been up to since I left town.”

Caleb sighed. “What do you want, Dan?”

“This is going to sound weird. Mom tried to call Lucy at the B&B, but she’s not answering her phone, so she called Auntie Linda to check in on her, and Linda said Bernie said Lucy had gone to stay with you at the ranch because her power was out, or something.”

“She was here last night.”

“Great. You take good care of her, now,” Dan said. “I’ll tell Mom to stop fussing.”

“Hold up, Lucy went home today.”

“So, the power must be back on.”

“Not that I’ve heard. She said she was waiting on the generator guy to come out, but I don’t think that was true.” Caleb paused. Seeing as he was pissing everyone off today, he might as well include his best friend. “She got mad at me for suggesting she should move to Seattle.”

“Why would she do that?” Dan asked suspiciously.

“Because I’d like her to move in with me.” Caleb braced himself as Dan went very quiet.

“You’re ... sleeping with my baby sister?”

“She’s twenty-eight, Dan.”

“But she’s had the biggest crush on you forever!”

“So everyone keeps telling me.”

“Then why the hell did you suggest she move to Seattle? Have you any idea how our parents would gloat if she came back with her tail between her legs? They’d be all nice and forgiving on the outside, but we’d all know how much they’d enjoy rubbing it in for the rest of her life.”

“She told me that.”

“Then why—”

Caleb interrupted him. “Because I’m an idiot, and I wanted to see if she liked me enough to want to be with me, and I asked the wrong question, *okay?*”

“There’s no need to shout,” Dan said. “I had to hold the phone away from my ear.”

“I screwed up. She left, and now I’m trying to fix things.”

“She’s not going to move to Seattle, dude.”

“I get it.” Caleb took a deep breath. “Is there any way you can get here by Christmas Day?”

“If you pay for a private jet, helicopter, or limo, then sure. I’m at my parents’ house right now.”

“Then ask them to come with you.”

“*Hell* no. You’ll have to talk to Mom about that yourself.”

“Then please get her on the phone,” Caleb said.

He waited as Dan went in search of his mom, his thoughts all over the place.

“Caleb! How lovely to hear from you. Dan says you wanted to ask me something important?”

“It’s a big ask.” Caleb braced himself. “I’m hoping you’ll all come and meet me at the B&B for Christmas. I think Lucy needs our support.”

* * *

Lucy opened the front door to a man in green coveralls with the name badge, NICK, on his front right pocket. He was carrying a clipboard.

“Good afternoon. I’ve come to fix your generator.”

“You have?” Lucy blinked at him. Maybe she was still asleep and dreaming and she’d somehow manifested the very person she’d assured Chip was coming to the B&B that very day. “You’re not the usual guy.”

“I have my official ID here.” He handed it over. “If you want to call my company and confirm I’m a bona fide repairman, here’s the number.”

Lucy studied the card he’d given her. “You came all the way from Humboldt?”

He shrugged. “We definitely get around.”

“Can I see the paperwork?”

“Sure.”

He was looking at her funny now, but she had to make sure things were on the level.

“I didn’t authorize this.” Lucy looked up.

“You’re not Ms. Erickson?”

“Only in my dreams.”

Lucy realized Caleb must have waved his magic wand and made things happen while she was asleep. A deep sense of gratitude flowed over her. She stepped back and held the door open wide.

“Please come in. Would you like something to drink before you start?”

“No, I’ll get on.” He winked at her. “I’m on triple time right now.”

“Oh! Then I’ll show you where the generator is.”

An hour later, the main generator was running again. After giving him some cookies and coffee to see him through the

return journey, Lucy waved Nick off from the front porch. She'd asked for the bill, but he'd told her that was dealt with by the office, and that she'd probably get an invoice after Christmas. She suspected Caleb would be getting it sent to him. How she was going to persuade him to let her pay it was another matter entirely.

She slowly spun around in the well-lit hall, her gaze catching on the lighted Christmas trees, and the glittering tinsel, as she inhaled the scent of the pine candles above the fireplaces. A sense of her grandma's satisfaction swirled around her like a warm blanket, and she smiled like a fool. This was her home. If Caleb couldn't deal with that then he wasn't the man for her. She'd had her dream date with her longtime crush and maybe it was time to move on ...

After she'd sent him a text thanking him for getting the generator repair done. That was only polite. She turned on her phone and then wished she hadn't. There were texts from both her parents, one from Dan, and one from Caleb.

Ignoring her family, she clicked on Caleb's, which he'd obviously sent just as Chip had arrived back at the ranch without her.

Where are you? Is everything okay?

What she loved about Caleb was that, even though she'd walked out on him, rather than continue to text, he'd done something practical to make sure she was safe and warm at the B&B. She began to type.

Thank you for organizing the generator repair guy.

She held her breath as she saw the three dancing bubbles in the corner of the screen indicating he was replying.

You're welcome.

She waited but that appeared to be it.

You remember when you thought I was on my phone talking to some guy who wasn't you?

Nothing.

I was talking to Colin about his lack of mouse hunting skills.

More nothing. Lucy was just about to put her phone down when he replied.

That's funny.

You're not mad?

As you said you wouldn't have slept with me if you'd been seeing another guy.

Lucy smiled foolishly at the screen. Caleb's no-drama approach to life was very refreshing.

I should have told you straight out.

Much more fun to keep me guessing, right?
Gotta go. Stuff to do.

Lucy waited a minute, but he appeared to have followed through and had left the chat. She sighed, feeling vaguely hurt. She had no more reasons to contact him and maybe that was for the best. She'd enjoy her Christmas Day alone at the B&B

while he got to share it with his dad, Chip, and the ranch hands.

Except, now who was being melodramatic? She didn't have to be alone. All she had to do was call her auntie Linda across the street and she'd be set. Spending the day with her cousins seemed a far better alternative to fake pining away like Miss Havisham from that Dickens book. She had family, she had friends, and a real community around her. If that didn't include Caleb Erickson, she'd survive, even if she missed him forever.

Chapter Seven

Lucy woke up to the sun streaming through her open drapes, and stayed where she was to appreciate it. She wasn't due at her aunt's for hours, but she had some baking to do that would use up her morning. She felt a small pang of regret that she wasn't waking up at the ranch in Caleb's arms and immediately tried to think of something else. She was lucky, she was blessed, and she wouldn't allow one man to spoil that for her.

But had she been too hasty? Was there room for compromise? He'd be coming back to see his father more often, and she would always be welcome to visit her parents in Seattle. Could they manage a long-distance relationship? After another night without him beside her she was beginning to wonder whether her future had to be completely Caleb-free.

She stretched out her legs and heard a disgruntled meow from Colin, who had reluctantly returned from next door and attached himself to her side. He wasn't happy with her, which meant he pretended to ignore her even while still hanging around, an attitude Lucy couldn't help but admire and wish she could emulate.

The water in the shower was hot, the heating was clanking away as usual, and when she went down to the kitchen all the electrical equipment was operating perfectly. She paused at the door and noticed there were fresh flowers on the table, which she hadn't put there herself. She approached them with the caution usually reserved for someone discovering an unexploded bomb.

There was no card attached to the festive red ribbon tied around the vase, but she had to wonder if they had something to do with Caleb. Although, he didn't have a key ... She frowned. Had she left a door open last night? She went to check the alarm and found it was turned off. If she'd forgotten to set that, had she also neglected to check the doors? Usually if someone got into your house, they took things rather than leaving flowers.

She fed Colin and turned the oven on to make sure it was up to temperature when she started baking. Not having to rush around and deal with guests was always a pleasure, although she loved chatting to new people and had already turned some chance visitors into regulars. She gazed out of the window at the bright sunshine and hoped that by the New Year the roads through the forest would be open so that she could recoup some of her losses.

Her phone buzzed with a text from her parents wishing her happy holidays. She replied with a GIF of a tree and some additional kisses. Dan sent her a goofy text and she replied in kind, which made her smile and wish he was here. No one from her family had visited since her grandma had died, which meant she hadn't seen them for nine months. Her mom had tried to coax her back to Seattle with the promise of plane tickets, but Lucy had been working flat-out to keep the B&B running without the necessary staff. As she hadn't wanted her parents to know how difficult things really were, she'd just said she couldn't make it, causing hurt feelings and a silence that hadn't been comfortable at all.

She didn't think they wanted her to fail—in fact they would be shocked and hurt at the very suggestion—but they did expect her to screw things up. They always had ... She put on some coffee, made herself some festive oatmeal, and let her thoughts wander to what Caleb might be doing. He hadn't texted her again, but that wasn't surprising. He'd said he was busy, and he was a man of his word. If she did get a chance to see him before he left, maybe she'd float the idea of a long-distance relationship by him and see what he thought.

She might have gotten over her girlish crush on Caleb, but only because she'd fallen in love with the real man he'd become.

A knock on the back door made her jump.

“Hey! Open up!”

She opened the door and revealed her brother Dan grinning at her.

“Surprise!” He hauled her into his arms and hugged her tight. “Looking good, little sis!”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?” Lucy asked as she looked up into his beloved face. “And how did you even get here?”

Dan was already on the move, his gaze taking in the kitchen.

“Nothing much has changed in here. I keep expecting Gran to come around the corner in her apron to find me something to do rather than eat all her cookies.”

“She wasn’t a great believer in idle hands,” Lucy agreed. “I haven’t wanted or needed to change much in here. Everything works just fine.”

Dan continued walking. “Okay if I take the small room at the back of the house?” He yawned. “I think I’ll take a nap. Wake me up for dinner.”

“You can have any room you like. I don’t have guests right now.”

“So I heard.” His voice faded as he headed up the stairs. Lucy followed him out into the hall. “From whom?” He didn’t answer, and she heard the upstairs door close behind him. Had he been talking to their auntie Linda? She was the only person in town who knew exactly what was going on with the power. She had no reason to know Lucy had been trying to keep that information on the down low.

Lucy went back into the kitchen and started making the dough for her dinner rolls. They needed two rises, and if she didn’t get them going right now, they wouldn’t be ready for the celebration. She was also making gingerbread cookies, but they didn’t take long, and she could easily make them while the bread dough was proofing.

She’d just set the dough to rise when the doorbell rang. She washed her hands, wiped them on her already floury apron and walked through to the front entrance hall. Her welcoming smile wavered as her parents came in.

“Lucy, darling.” Her mother, Isla, rushed in and hugged her tight. “We couldn’t bear the thought of you being here all alone on your first Christmas without Gran.”

“When exactly did you decide that?” Lucy inquired as her father came to kiss her cheek. He was a quiet man who was happy to let his wife do most of the socializing and organizing while he continued his studies in molecular biology at the hospital lab. “I mean, it’s lovely to see you, but this is rather short notice. How do you know I can even put you up?”

Her mom laughed and patted her cheek. “Feisty as ever, I see. We heard about the power outage and that you’d had a terrible time with the generator, so we thought a visit was in order.”

“Heard from whom, exactly?”

“Does it matter, pet? We’re here now and we’re just so thrilled to see you!”

“We are.” Her dad winked as Isla started up the stairs. “Can we put our bags in number two? That’s where we always used to stay when your gran was alive.”

“Be my guest,” Lucy said automatically as they tromped up the stairs, leaving her alone again and talking to an empty hall. “What is *happening* here?”

She went back to the kitchen to organize more coffee. She decided to make an early start on the cookies because she didn’t have any to offer her sudden influx of unexpected guests. She had a strong suspicion that it wasn’t Auntie Linda who’d been gossiping, but someone else entirely, and she needed time to work out what she thought about that.

As the oven was already at temperature, she had the first batch of cookies in before her mom reappeared in the kitchen doorway.

“I’m glad to see that you haven’t made many changes.” Isla sat at the table. She’d allowed her naturally blond hair to fade to an elegant silver gray that she wore in a bun on the back of her head. She’d kept her maiden name of Smith and Lucy had

followed suit in honor of her grandmother. “I’ve been dreading coming back here.”

Lucy looked hard at her mother. “You have?”

“I’ve definitely been putting it off. I spent my childhood here just like you did.” She looked around the room. “Some of my memories are quite painful whereas others are pure gold. I guess we all feel like that about the places and people we grew up with.”

“I always got the feeling you didn’t like the place,” Lucy remarked as she checked the cookies weren’t burning.

“Mainly because your gran wanted me to stay here forever and I wanted to see the world. As you might imagine, that caused a lot of friction between us.”

“Seems to be a family tradition.” Lucy got the rest of the dough out of the refrigerator. “You wanted me to settle in Seattle.”

“Which, now that I think about it, was remarkably hypocritical of me, wasn’t it?” Isla half smiled. “I didn’t want this life, so I assumed you wouldn’t want it either. I tried to stop you even trying it, but you did it anyway. I’m proud of you for that.”

“I never got that impression.” Lucy took the cookies out and set them on the cooling rack while she dealt with the remaining dough.

“Which is one of the reasons why I’m here.” Isla took a quick breath. “You’ve made this place a success without any support from us, and that’s ... admirable. I was wrong to try and stop you, and I apologize unreservedly.”

“You’re not dying or anything, are you?” Lucy asked suspiciously.

“Not immediately, if that’s what you’re worrying about.”

“No one paid you to say nice things about me?”

“Why would anyone need to do that?” Isla opened her eyes wide and looked guilty as hell.

“Because Caleb Erickson has some weird ideas sometimes,” Lucy said grimly as she went to look out of the window. “Is he lurking around somewhere because I’d *really* like to talk to him.”

“Caleb? Dan’s friend?”

Lucy turned back to her mom. “You’re almost as terrible a liar as I am.” She walked over and picked up her cell. “I’m going to text him right now.”

“There’s no need, darling,” her mother said quickly. “We’ve been invited up to the ranch for dinner. We’ll see him and his father then.”

“What about Auntie Linda?” Lucy asked. “She’s expecting me.”

“She knows you’re no longer attending,” Isla said airily. “Don’t worry about a thing.”

“But what if I don’t want to go to the Ericksons’?” Lucy knew she probably sounded like a teenager, but she wasn’t onboard with everyone messing with her life. “Perhaps I want to hang out with my cousins.”

Isla’s expression and eloquent sigh reminded Lucy forcibly of being sixteen when she and her mom had started to disagree on everything.

“I’m sure Mr. Erickson would be totally okay with Linda and her family coming to the ranch, too,” Isla finally said. “If it will make you happy, Lucy, I’ll make a phone call and check. Excuse me for just a minute!”

Lucy held up her hand. She wasn’t being fair and this time it wasn’t her mom’s fault.

“It’s fine, really. I just hate surprises. Of course, I’m happy to go. I left half my holiday dinner in their freezers anyway.”

“Then that’s settled.” Isla paused. “As you seem rather upset by all this upheaval, I suppose I should mention that Dan might turn up at any moment.”

“He’s already here.” Lucy pointed upward. “Room ten at the back.”

Isla's chuckle was enough to make Lucy smile back at her.

"Typical." She turned toward the door. "I'll make sure he's ready to leave in an hour and that he's presentable."

"The Ericksons won't mind what he looks like. They consider him part of the family."

"That may well be," Isla said firmly. "But *I* have standards."

* * *

"Sit down, son, you're like a cat in a roomful of rocking chairs," Chip called out to Caleb, who was pacing the kitchen floor. "Dinner's cooking, your father's in a good mood, and the roads are clear right down to town. They'll be here before you know it."

"If Lucy goes along with it," Caleb said. "She didn't sound very happy when she texted me earlier."

"What did she say?" Chip inquired with great interest.

Caleb took out his phone and read the message out loud. "I have a few things to say to you, Caleb Erickson, but they'll keep until I can say them to your face."

"Uh-oh. Sounds like she's got her britches in a knot."

"I dumped her whole family on her on Christmas Day."

"I'm sure she'll be thrilled when she gets over the shock," Chip said comfortably. "She hasn't turned around and sent them all packing."

"Not yet," Caleb muttered. "But I'm not holding my breath."

He spotted a large SUV making its careful way down the drive. "I think they're here."

"I'll give Isaiah a shout while you go out and say hello." Chip was already on the move before Caleb could offer to change places.

He opened the front door, allowing his father's dogs to mill out to investigate the new arrivals. He spotted Dan almost immediately and then saw Lucy. She had her arms wrapped

around her chest and her head was down. She wore a fluffy blue jacket and black velvet pants that fitted her like a glove. He checked to make sure his tongue was still in his mouth and went down the steps to greet the new arrivals.

“What’s up?” Dan gave him a brotherly punch and hugged him hard. “Long time no see, dude. Are you a billionaire yet?”

“Nope, and I’m not going to be,” Caleb replied. “Way too much work.”

Dan grinned and stepped aside so his parents could greet Caleb. Even as he tried his hardest to smile and be polite, Caleb was aware of Lucy hanging back and watching him. Eventually he persuaded them all to go into the house and turned to face her.

“Hey.”

“Hey yourself.” She raised her chin. “You did this, didn’t you?”

He nodded. “I thought you needed to see your family at Christmas.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Because you made me see how important it was to see mine?” He shrugged. “And I guess I didn’t want you to be all alone at Christmas.”

She stared at him for a long time and then slowly came toward him. He wasn’t sure whether to stay or run.

“Thank you.” She wrapped her arms around him. “Thank you for everything.”

He settled her against him and kissed the top of her head. “You deserve all the good things, Lucy. You always have.”

She looked up at him. “Did you know they’re all watching us from the kitchen window?”

“I can’t say I’m surprised.” He held her gaze. “Wanna strip off and make love in the snow?”

“In front of my parents?” She shuddered. “Hell, no. How about we go on inside, smile, and say nothing? It will drive

them all insane.”

She started to move, and he caught hold of her hand. “There’s something I need to tell you first.”

“Okay.”

He took a steady breath. “I love you.”

“Oh.” She nodded. “Like, wow, that’s amazing.”

“And I want to be with you.”

A hint of sadness crossed her face. “I won’t move back to Seattle full time, Caleb.”

“I’m not asking you to.”

She bit her lip. “Do you think we could make a go of a long-distance relationship?”

“We might have to for a while, but it won’t be forever.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because I’m coming home for good.”

She went still. “I don’t understand. What about your business and your new investors?”

“I don’t want them if I can’t have you.”

There was a long pause, and he held his breath.

“Are you *insane*?”

Caleb fought a smile at her horrified expression. “That wasn’t quite the response I was hoping for, but what the hell.” He tried to explain. “I think I’ve been verging on a burnout since Mom died. Coming back here, meeting you again, and finally talking things out with Dad made me see things differently. Money’s great, but being with the people you love? That’s the important part. I didn’t realize how precious my time with Mom was until it was gone. I won’t make the same mistake with you.”

Lucy slowly shook her head and stared at him. “That’s the most words I’ve ever heard you speak, Caleb Erickson, and you certainly saved the best till last.” She reclaimed his hand.

“I still think you’re stark staring mad, but I’m going to set that aside while I enjoy the feeling of being loved that much.”

“Sounds good to me.” Caleb followed her into the house, where everyone tried to pretend that they hadn’t been staring out of the window. “How’s dinner doing, Dad?”

“All good.” Isaiah was standing by the oven checking the ham. “About twenty minutes before I’ll start to carve.”

Dan whistled at Caleb. “Hey! Come and talk to me and leave my annoying little sister to get those dinner rolls on.”

Caleb gave Lucy one last amused look before releasing her hand and walking over to where Dan sat with two beers waiting. Even as he talked to his old friend, he was aware of Lucy working alongside his dad and her mom in the kitchen. His relief in saying his piece to her was slightly offset by her lack of a definite response. Although she’d said she loved him, she hadn’t said whether his decision to come home was okay with her or not.

She’d asked if he was insane. Something he’d been asking himself ever since his phone call with his primary VC Chase Morgan. He liked his cofounders and small team, and the thought of abandoning his company was hard. How was he going to tell them that he was leaving everything behind for love, especially when he’d only got to know her in a new light for a few days? Even as he considered how difficult that was going to be, he realized he wasn’t going to change his mind. He wanted Lucy, he wanted to come home, and everything else would have to fall in behind that.

Caleb waited until everyone had eaten their fill before he stood up and cleared his throat.

“I’ve got some news.”

“You’re really a billionaire and you’ve bought the town and you’re turning it into a parking lot?” Dan asked. “Because that would be *wicked*.”

“I’ve decided to come home.”

His dad looked up; his expression suddenly alert. “For good?”

“Yeah, to help you run this place—if you want me, that is.”

Everyone turned to look at Isaiah, who nodded. “Fine by me.” He picked up his mug and sipped his coffee as if Caleb hadn’t just given him exactly what he’d always wanted.

“Good, then.” Caleb looked at Lucy. “And Lucy and I are together now.”

“Like we hadn’t all got that when you forced us all to come up here,” Dan said.

“Forced?” Lucy looked over at her brother. “I thought you’d agreed to come because you wanted to.”

“Of course, we wanted to,” Isla said quickly. “Dan’s just trying to be funny and failing miserably.”

“I mean it would’ve been nice if one of you had come to see me earlier in the year, but I wasn’t exactly putting out the welcome mat.” Lucy met her mother’s gaze. “I couldn’t afford any staff after fire season. I didn’t want any of you to see that I was struggling.”

“I guess it was easier for us to accept all the excuses on both sides than actually do anything about it.” Isla sighed. “I think we all owe Caleb a big debt of thanks for getting us together again.”

“Hear, hear.” Chip held up his glass and gestured at the Erickson men. “And thanks to Miss Lucy for persuading these two knuckleheads to open up to each other as well.”

Lucy burst out laughing. “I’m not sure which of them looks more revolted by that idea.”

Caleb quickly rearranged his features into a positive smile. “It’s all good.”

“Says the grouch.” Dan was as irrepressible as ever. He patted Lucy’s hand. “And I was just joking. I’m really glad you and Caleb are getting it on.”

“Eew.” Lucy shuddered. “Stop that right now.”

“I have to go back to Seattle to sort out some stuff, but I’m aiming to be back here in the New Year,” Caleb said.

“Good. I won’t need to hire an extra hand for spring calving,” his dad said. “How about we put some more coffee on and open a few presents?”

As everyone started to move away from the table, Caleb’s phone buzzed with a text from Chase.

Okay if I come and visit you tomorrow? I think this meeting needs to be face to face.

Caleb frowned as he typed his reply. I’m not in Seattle.

Neither am I. I’m home on the ranch just like you are. 😊 I’ll come to you. I have the address. Expect me around ten.

Sure.

Caleb stared at the blinking cursor but there was nothing else to see. He had no idea what Chase was going to propose, but he owed him the courtesy of listening to him.

“Everything okay?” Lucy asked.

“I think so. Chase Morgan, who’s on my board of directors, is coming to see me tomorrow.”

“That doesn’t sound great.”

“He’s a good guy. He just wants to make sure I know what I’m doing.”

“He’s not the only one.” She put her hand on his arm. “I don’t want to be responsible for you turning your back on something you love.”

“You’re not.”

“I want you to be happy.”

“I am.”

She rolled her eyes. “I guess you used up your daily allocation of words earlier.”

“I know what I want.” He touched her cheek. “It’s standing right here in front of me.”

She held his gaze and lowered her voice. “Caleb, when you say things like that, all I can think about is stripping you naked, and getting you into my bed.”

“Which is why I know you’re the right woman for me because no one else would ever think that.” He put his arm around her shoulders. “Let’s go and do the presents. I can’t wait to see what your auntie Linda has knitted for everybody.”

“Me neither.” She looked up, her blue eyes bright. “I do love you, Caleb.”

“Good.” He started walking as a deep sense of satisfaction welled within him. “I’ve always loved you,” she said. “You know that!”

“Maybe I did.” He smiled down at her. “But it’s still nice to have my suspicions confirmed.”

Chapter Eight

Lucy woke up the next morning wrapped in Caleb's arms at the ranch. Her parents and Dan had gone back the previous evening to take care of the B&B. Isla had reassured her that if anyone did turn up needing somewhere to stay then she knew how to handle it. Lucy had promised to return for lunch—something she was already looking forward to because for once in her life her parents were happy with her and mad at Dan.

She'd wanted to stay with Caleb to support him through his upcoming meeting with Chase Morgan, the VC who currently owned thirty percent of his company. She'd done a bit of surreptitious research while Caleb was out working in the barn and found nothing bad. Chase even commuted between his offices in Silicon Valley and his family ranch near Bridgeport. If anyone might understand where Caleb was coming from, it was Chase.

She whiled away the hours while Caleb and his dad were working by reorganizing the kitchen pantry and writing Isaiah a shopping list for the next time he went down to one of the bigger towns.

Caleb came in about fifteen minutes before Chase was expected, dropped a kiss on the top of her head, and headed for the shower.

"Won't be long. Dad's staying in the barn—keep Chase sweet if he turns up before I'm done."

"Will do." Lucy was good at being charming. She'd learned at her grandma's knee.

At 9:55 there was a tap on the side door. Lucy went to open it and revealed a relaxed-looking cowboy complete with Stetson, boots, and Wranglers. "Hi, I'm Chase Morgan. I think Caleb is expecting me."

"Oh." She looked him up and down. "I was expecting you to be wearing a suit."

He grinned at her. "Not when I'm on vacation."

“I’m Lucy Smith. Caleb’s”—she paused to think of a suitable word—“significant other.”

“You live here?”

“I live in town. I run the B&B.”

“Nice.” He wiped his feet on the mat, came in, and glanced approvingly around the kitchen. “Looks just like home—except with fewer kids running around.”

“Caleb should be here any second. He was just taking a shower.”

“Glad to hear it, if he’s been out working.”

Lucy couldn’t help but like Chase Morgan. He was way less threatening than she’d imagined. Caleb came in and reached out his hand to Chase.

“Good to see you. Thanks for coming all this way.”

“It felt like the right thing to do,” Chase said.

“I’ll bring you guys some coffee,” Lucy offered. “You can take it through to the family room and talk.”

“Thanks.” Caleb nodded. “And bring three mugs. I want you to know what’s going on, too, Lucy.”

She was glad he’d included her. If he hadn’t, she would’ve been loitering in the hallway unashamedly eavesdropping. She set the coffee mugs and a plate of cookies on a tray and took them through. Chase was sitting by the fire and Caleb was standing by the window looking tense. After putting the tray beside Chase, she went over to Caleb and squeezed his hand. “You’ve got this.”

“I wish.” He took a seat opposite Chase and Lucy sat beside him. “I haven’t changed my mind. I don’t want to live in Seattle. I want to be here with my family.”

Chase looked at Lucy. “And now I understand why.”

“I can’t run my company from here because it’s too hands-on, which means I have to get out.”

“Got it.” Chase took a sip of coffee. “Here’s how I see your options. You shut everything down, fire your employees, and walk out with nothing, which after all your work seems way too harsh.”

“Agreed.”

“Or you sell your business to Melco, the company that’s been dying to acquire you for years.”

“I could do that, but my reasons for not doing so before still stand.”

“Yeah, but this isn’t just about you, Caleb. It’s about your intellectual property, your patents, and finding a place where everyone you employ, including your cofounders, get to continue being paid for developing your ideas.”

“But Melco wants me to stay on full-time for three years and split the payout accordingly.”

Chase shrugged. “That’s negotiable.”

“Not to me.” Caleb grimaced. “If that’s the deal, I might as well take on the extra investment and go public myself in eighteen months. And I don’t want to do *that* because I’m close to burnout.”

“You’d get a shitload of money from them,” Chase observed.

“But with massive strings attached.”

“Okay.” Chase took another longer slug of coffee. “How about this scenario? We buy you out, put in a new CEO, and keep the company running.”

Caleb sat up straight. “You, as in your VC fund?”

“Yeah, we already own thirty-one percent. We buy your fifty-one percent, making us the majority shareholders and pay you everything upfront. If anyone else wants to cash out, we’ll work with them as well. Then we’ll invest massively in the business and take it through to IPO.”

“What’s the catch?” Caleb asked.

“You’d have to agree to a six-month handover process and be involved in choosing your successor.”

“And what else?”

“Nothing, if you don’t want to be involved, but you might find you want to keep at least a finger in the pie.”

“That’s not possible from here.”

“Caleb ... I commute between Morgan Valley and Silicon Valley all the time,” Chase said. “I co-own my family ranch and manage to run my business. If that’s something you want, it certainly is doable.”

Lucy glanced at Caleb and crossed her fingers. She’d had a whole lot of wishes granted this Christmas, but she was hoping for another one.

“You trust me not to mess this up, don’t you?” Chase asked.

“Yeah.” Caleb frowned. “Absolutely.”

“If you want to leave free and clear, we can do that. If you want to retain stock and some say in the business even if you’re no longer the CEO, we can do that, too.” Chase rose to his feet. “Take your time. Think things through, talk to Lucy and your family, and get back to me with any questions you have, okay?”

He smiled at Lucy. “You make great coffee.”

“You should taste my cookies before you go. I made Christmas snickerdoodles this morning.” She pointed at the plate.

“Yeah? My kids would love those.”

“I’ll get you a to-go bag.” Lucy went ahead of him into the kitchen and hurriedly wrapped some up while Chase finished up with Caleb. “Here you are.” She presented him with the bag. “And here’s one for the road.”

“Thanks.” Chase took a bite. “That’s so good I doubt these little beauties will make it back to the ranch.”

He winked at Caleb, who was still looking stunned, tipped his Stetson to Lucy, and went down the porch steps to his

rental car. With one last wave, he departed, leaving Caleb and Lucy staring after him.

“Are you okay?” Lucy asked.

“Yeah.”

“It’s a lot.” Lucy went back in and closed the door behind Caleb. “Do you want to talk about it?”

He rubbed his hand over the back of his neck. “I wasn’t expecting Chase to make that offer.”

“He obviously thinks very highly of you and your company.”

“He always has.” Caleb went to sit on the couch. “I’d absolutely trust him to do the right thing by me and everyone on my team. The question is, do I want to be involved on the sidelines after being in charge for over ten years?”

Lucy came to sit beside him. “I suppose that depends on whether you feel they still need you.”

“They *think* they need me because I’ve always been that kind of boss.” He sighed. “That wasn’t healthy for me or for them. Sometimes I wish I’d stayed a tech nerd and let someone else become the CEO. It’s a lot of pressure.”

“Maybe you could strike a deal that gave you the option to be involved in the development side only?” Lucy suggested.

“I suppose I could.” Caleb lapsed into silence. “But right now? The thought of doing any of it fills me with dread.”

“Then maybe you need a clean break.” Lucy paused. “You’ll even get some money out of it.”

“Yeah, around fifty.”

“Fifty what, exactly?” Lucy asked cautiously.

“Million.” He looked at her. “Don’t freak out on me, a lot of it will be tied to stock and other things, depending on the deal I make.”

Lucy just blinked until he took her hand and kissed it.

“Just forget I mentioned that part, okay. And don’t say a word to my dad.”

She shook her head, her brain doing cartwheels. She knew it was Caleb’s money, but as someone who’d never had more than ten thousand dollars in the bank, that many millions was mind-blowing.

She fluttered her eyelashes at him. “Did I mention just how much I love you, Caleb?”

“You’re funny.” He actually cracked a smile before he stood up. “I need to get back to work. I think better when I’m doing something.”

“Don’t we all,” Lucy murmured.

“I’m leaning toward taking Chase’s offer to become the majority shareholder,” Caleb said. “The piece I’m struggling with is whether to make a completely clean break or not.”

“Maybe ask Chase if you can put the deal to your team? See what they think? They might prefer you to be around for a while, even with a new CEO.” “That’s a great idea.” He nodded and strode toward the door. “I’ll check in with him right now.”

She watched him leave and went back to the kitchen, where she ate one of her own cookies and contemplated what to have for lunch. She’d barely managed to finish the thought before Caleb came back in.

“What’s up?” Lucy inquired through a mouthful of crumbs.

He came around the island and took hold of her by the shoulders.

“I forgot to say something. Whatever happens, I still want to be with you. That’s all I care about. The rest of it is just background noise to how you make me feel, and how much I want us to be together. He positively glared at her. “I love you. Just remember that, okay?”

“And forget about all those millions?” She went up on tiptoe and kissed him gently on the mouth. “I’ve loved you all my life. I loved the boy you were and the man you’ve become.

Nothing will change that, so you have nothing to worry about.”

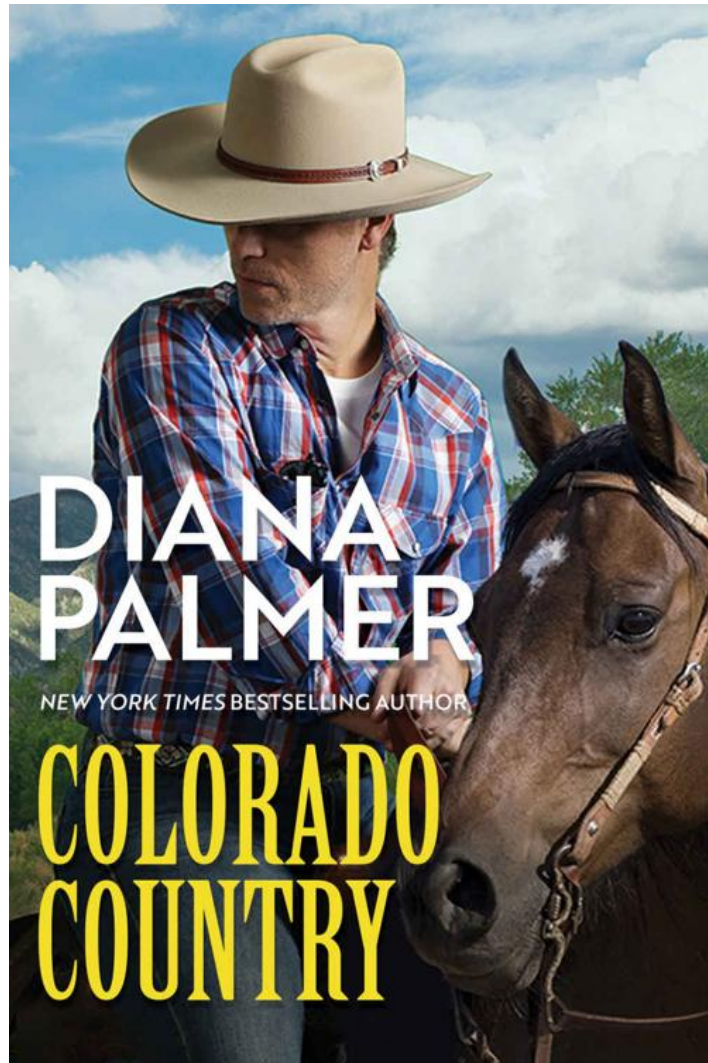
He kissed her hard and she returned the favor until he picked her up and slung her over his shoulder.

“What are you doing?” Lucy squeaked.

“Taking you to bed before Dad comes in for lunch.” He strode down the hallway, one hand caressing her butt. “I told you I do my best thinking when I’m busy.”

She shrieked as he tossed her into the middle of the bed, locked the door, and then joined her. She forgot she was supposed to be joining her family for lunch and that Isaiah and Chip were in the kitchen, and gave her cowboy plenty to keep him occupied while he worked out what he was going to do next in his life.

It was the best Christmas ever, hands down, and she had a feeling that the years to come were going to be even better.



Turn the page for a sneak peek at *Colorado Country* by
Diana Palmer!

Chapter 1

Meadow Dawson just stared at the slim, older cowboy who was standing on her front porch with his hat held against his chest. His name was Ted. He was her father's ranch foreman. And he was speaking Greek, she decided, or perhaps some form of archaic language that she couldn't understand.

"The culls," he persisted. "Mr. Jake wanted us to go ahead and ship them out to that rancher we bought the replacement heifers from."

She blinked. She knew three stances that she could use to shoot a .40 caliber Glock from. She was experienced in interrogation techniques. She'd once participated in a drug raid with other agents from the St. Louis, Missouri, office where she'd been stationed during her brief tenure with the FBI as a special agent.

Sadly, none of those experiences had taught her what a cull was, or what to do with it. She pushed back her long, golden blond hair, and her pale green eyes narrowed on his elderly face.

She blinked. "Are culls some form of wildlife?" she asked blankly.

The cowboy doubled up laughing.

She grimaced. Her father and mother had divorced when she was six. She'd gone to live with her mother in Greenwood, Mississippi, while her father stayed here on this enormous Colorado ranch, just outside Glenwood Springs. Later, she'd spent some holidays with her dad, but only after she was in her senior year of high school and she could out-argue her bitter mother, who hated her ex-husband. What she remembered about cattle was that they were loud and dusty. She really hadn't paid much attention to the cattle on the ranch or her father's infrequent references to ranching problems. She hadn't been there often enough to learn the ropes.

"I worked for the FBI," she said with faint belligerence. "I don't know anything about cattle."

He straightened up. “Sorry, ma’am,” he said, still fighting laughter. “Culls are cows that didn’t drop calves this spring. Nonproductive cattle are removed from the herd, or culled. We sell them either as beef or surrogate mothers for purebred cattle.”

She nodded and tried to look intelligent. “I see.” She hesitated. “So we’re punishing poor female cattle for not being able to have calves repeatedly over a period of years.”

The cowboy’s face hardened. “Ma’am, can I give you some friendly advice about ranch management?”

She shrugged. “Okay.”

“I think you’d be doing yourself a favor if you sold this ranch,” he said bluntly. “It’s hard to make a living at ranching, even if you’ve done it for years. It would be a sin and a shame to let all your father’s hard work go to pot. Begging your pardon, ma’am,” he added respectfully. “Dal Blake was friends with your father, and he owns the biggest ranch around Raven Springs. Might be worthwhile to talk to him.”

Meadow managed a smile through homicidal rage. “Dariell Blake and I don’t speak,” she informed him.

“Ma’am?” The cowboy sounded surprised.

“He told my father that I’d turned into a manly woman who probably didn’t even have ...” She bit down hard on the word she couldn’t bring herself to voice. “Anyway,” she added tersely, “he can keep his outdated opinions to himself.”

The cowboy grimaced. “Sorry.”

“Not your fault,” she said, and managed a smile. “Thanks for the advice, though. I think I’ll go online and watch a few YouTube videos on cattle management. I might call one of those men, or women, for advice.”

The cowboy opened his mouth to speak, thought about how scarce jobs were, and closed it again. “Whatever you say, ma’am.” He put his hat back on. “I’ll just get back to work. It’s, uh, okay to ship out the culls?”

“Of course it’s all right,” she said, frowning. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

“You said it oppressed the cows ...”

She rolled her eyes. “I was kidding!”

“Oh.” Ted brightened a little. He tilted his hat respectfully and went away.

Meadow went back into the house and felt empty. She and her father had been close. He loved his ranch and his daughter. Getting to know her as an adult had been great fun for both of them. Her mother had kept the tension going as long as she lived. She never would believe that Meadow could love her and her ex-husband equally. But Meadow did. They were both wonderful people. They just couldn’t live together without arguing.

She ran her fingers over the back of the cane-bottomed rocking chair where her father always sat, near the big stone fireplace. It was November, and Colorado was cold. Heavy snow was already falling. Meadow remembered Colorado winters from her childhood, before her parents divorced. It was going to be difficult to manage payroll, much less all the little added extras she’d need, like food and electricity ...

She shook herself mentally. She’d manage, somehow. And she’d do it without Dariell Blake’s help. She could only imagine the smug, self-righteous expression that would come into those chiseled features if she asked him to teach her cattle ranching. She’d rather starve. Well, not really.

She considered her options, and there weren’t many. Her father owned this ranch outright. He owed for farm equipment, like combines to harvest grain crops and tractors to help with planting. He owed for feed and branding supplies and things like that. But the land was hers now, free and clear. There was a lot of land. It was worth millions.

She could have sold it and started over. But he’d made her promise not to. He’d known her very well by then. She never made a promise she didn’t keep. Her own sense of ethics

locked her into a position she hated. She didn't know anything about ranching!

Her father mentioned Dariell, whom everyone locally called Dal, all the time. Fine young man, he commented. Full of pepper, good disposition, loves animals.

The loving animals part was becoming a problem. She had a beautiful white Siberian husky, a rescue, with just a hint of red-tipped fur in her ears and tail. She was named Snow, and Meadow had fought the authorities to keep her in her small apartment. She was immaculate, and Meadow brushed her and bathed her faithfully. Finally the apartment manager had given in, reluctantly, after Meadow offered a sizeable deposit for the apartment, which was close to her work. She made friends with a lab tech in the next-door apartment, who kept Snow when Meadow had to travel for work. It was a nice arrangement, except that the lab tech really liked Meadow, who didn't return the admiration. While kind and sweet, the tech did absolutely nothing for Meadow physically or emotionally.

She wondered sometimes if she was really cold. Men were nice. She dated. She'd even indulged in light petting with one of them. But she didn't feel the sense of need that made women marry and settle and have kids with a man. Most of the ones she'd dated were career oriented and didn't want marriage in the first place. Meadow's mother had been devout. Meadow grew up with deep religious beliefs that were in constant conflict with society's norms.

She kept to herself mostly. She'd loved her job when she started as an investigator for the Bureau. But there had been a minor slipup.

Meadow was clumsy. There was no other way to put it. She had two left feet, and she was always falling down or doing things the wrong way. It was a curse. Her mother had named her Meadow because she was reading a novel at the time and the heroine had that name. The heroine had been gentle and sweet and a credit to the community where she lived, in 1900s Fort Worth, Texas. Meadow, sadly, was nothing like her namesake.

There had been a stakeout. Meadow had been assigned, with another special agent, to keep tabs on a criminal who'd shot a police officer. The officer lived, but the man responsible was facing felony charges, and he ran.

A CI, or Confidential Informant, had told them where the man was likely to be on a Friday night. It was a local club, frequented by people who were out of the mainstream of society.

Meadow had been assigned to watch the back door while the other special agent went through the front of the club and tried to spot him.

Sure enough, the man was there. The other agent was recognized by a patron, who warned the perpetrator. The criminal took off out the back door.

While Meadow was trying to get her gun out of the holster, the fugitive ran into her and they both tumbled onto the ground.

"Clumsy cow!" he exclaimed. He turned her over and pushed her face hard into the asphalt of the parking lot, and then jumped up and ran.

Bruised and bleeding, Meadow managed to get to her feet and pull her service revolver. "FBI! Stop or I'll shoot!"

"You couldn't hit a barn from the inside!" came the sarcastic reply from the running man.

"I'll show ... you!" As she spoke, she stepped back onto a big rock, her feet went out from under her, and the gun discharged right into the windshield of the SUV she and the special agent arrived in.

The criminal was long gone by the time Meadow was recovering from the fall.

"Did you get him?" the other agent panted as he joined her. He frowned. "What the hell happened to you?"

"He fell over me and pushed my face into the asphalt," she muttered, feeling the blood on her nose. "I ordered him to halt and tried to fire when I tripped over a rock ..."

The other agent's face told a story that he was too kind to voice.

She swallowed, hard. "Sorry about the windshield," she added.

He glanced at the Bureau SUV and shook his head. "Maybe we could tell them it was a vulture. You know, they sometimes fly into car windshields."

"No," she replied grimly. "It's always better to tell them the truth. Even when it's painful."

"Guess you're right." He grimaced. "Sorry."

"Hey. We all have talents. I think mine is to trip over my own feet at any given dangerous moment."

"The SAC is going to be upset," he remarked.

"I don't doubt it," she replied.

* * *

In fact, the Special Agent in Charge was eloquent about her failure to secure the fugitive. He also wondered aloud, rhetorically, how any firearms instructor ever got drunk enough to pass her in the academy. She kept quiet, figuring that anything she said would only make matters worse.

He didn't take her badge. He did, however, assign her as an aide to another agent who was redoing files in the basement of the building. It was clerical work, for which she wasn't even trained. And from that point, her career as an FBI agent started going drastically downhill.

She'd always had problems with balance. She thought that her training would help her compensate for it, but she'd been wrong. She seemed to be a complete failure as an FBI agent. Her superior obviously thought so.

He did give her a second chance, months later. He sent her to interrogate a man who'd confessed to kidnapping an underage girl for immoral purposes. Meadow's questions, which she'd formulated beforehand, irritated him to the point of physical violence. He'd attacked Meadow, who was totally unprepared for what amounted to a beating. She'd fought, and

screamed, to no avail. It had taken a jailer to extricate the man's hands from her throat. Of course, that added another charge to the bevy he was already facing: assault on a federal officer.

But Meadow reacted very badly to the incident. It had never occurred to her that a perpetrator might attack her physically. She'd learned to shoot a gun, she'd learned self-defense, hand-to-hand, all the ways in the world to protect herself. But when she'd come up against an unarmed but violent criminal, she'd almost been killed. Her training wasn't enough. She'd felt such fear that she couldn't function. That had been the beginning of the end. Both she and the Bureau had decided that she was in the wrong profession. They'd been very nice about it, but she'd lost her job.

And Dal Blake thought she was a manly woman, a real hell-raiser. It was funny. She was the exact opposite. Half the time she couldn't even remember to do up the buttons on her coat right.

She sighed as she thought about Dal. She'd had a crush on him in high school. He was almost ten years older than she was and considered her a child. Her one attempt to catch his eye had ended in disaster ...

* * *

She'd come to visit her father during Christmas holidays—much against her mother's wishes. It was her senior year of high school. She'd graduate in the spring. She knew that she was too young to appeal to a man Dal's age, but she was infatuated with him, fascinated by him.

He came by to see her father often because they were both active members in the local cattlemen's association. So one night when she knew he was coming over, Meadow dressed to the hilt in her Sunday best. It was a low-cut red sheath dress, very Christmassy and festive. It had long sleeves and side slits. It was much too old for Meadow, but her father loved her, so he let her pick it out and he paid for it.

Meadow walked into the room while Dal and her father were talking and sat down in a chair nearby, with a book in her

hands. She tried to look sexy and appealing. She had on too much makeup, but she hadn't noticed that. The magazines all said that makeup emphasized your best features. Meadow didn't have many best features. Her straight nose and bow mouth were sort of appealing, and she had pretty light green eyes. She used masses of eyeliner and mascara and way too much rouge. Her best feature was her long, thick, beautiful blond hair. She wore it down that night.

Her father gave her a pleading look, which she ignored. She smiled at Dal with what she hoped was sophistication.

He gave her a dark-eyed glare.

The expression on his face washed away all her self-confidence. She flushed and pretended to read her book, but she was shaky inside. He didn't look interested. In fact, he looked very repulsed.

When her father went out of the room to get some paperwork he wanted to show to Dal, Meadow forced herself to look at him and smile.

"It's almost Christmas," she began, trying to find a subject for conversation.

He didn't reply. He did get to his feet and come toward her. That flustered her even more. She fumbled with the book and dropped it on the floor.

Dal pulled her up out of the chair and took her by the shoulders firmly. "I'm ten years older than you," he said bluntly. "You're a high school kid. I don't rob cradles and I don't appreciate attempts to seduce me in your father's living room. Got that?"

Her breath caught. "I never ... !" she stammered.

His chiseled mouth curled expressively as he looked down into her shocked face. "You're painted up like a carnival fortune-teller. Too much makeup entirely. Does your mother know you wear clothes like that and come on to men?" he added icily. "I thought she was religious."

"She ... is," Meadow stammered, and felt her age. Too young. She was too young. Her eyes fell away from his. "So

am I. I'm sorry.”

“You should be,” he returned. His strong fingers contracted on her shoulders. “When do you leave for home?”

“Next Friday,” she managed to say. She was dying inside. She'd never been so embarrassed in her life.

“Good. You get on the plane and don't come back. Your father has enough problems without trying to keep you out of trouble. And next time I come over here, I don't want to find you setting up shop in the living room, like a spider hunting flies.”

“You're a very big fly,” she blurted out, and flushed some more.

His lip curled. “You're out of your league, kid.” He let go of her shoulders and moved her away from him, as if she had something contagious. His eyes went to the low-cut neckline. “If you went out on the street like that, in Raven Springs, you'd get offers.”

She frowned. “Offers?”

“Prostitutes mostly do get offers,” he said with distaste.

Tears threatened, but she pulled herself up to her maximum height, far short of his, and glared up at him. “I am not a prostitute!”

“Sorry. Prostitute in training?” he added thoughtfully.

She wanted to hit him. She'd never wanted anything so much. In fact, she raised her hand to slap that arrogant look off his face.

He caught her arm and pushed her hand away.

Even then, at that young age, her balance hadn't been what it should be. Her father had a big, elegant stove in the living room to heat the house. It used coal instead of wood, and it was very efficient behind its tight glass casing. There was a coal bin right next to it.

Meadow lost her balance and went down right into the coal bin. Coal spilled out onto the wood floor and all over her. Now

there were black splotches all over her pretty red dress, not to mention her face and hair and hands.

She sat up in the middle of the mess, and angry tears ran down her soot-covered cheeks as she glared at Dal.

He was laughing so hard that he was almost doubled over.

“That’s right, laugh,” she muttered. “Santa’s going to stop by here on his way to your house to get enough coal to fill up your stocking, Darriell Blake!”

He laughed even harder.

Her father came back into the room with a file folder in one hand, stopped, did a double take, and stared at his daughter, sitting on the floor in a pile of coal.

“What the hell happened to you?” he burst out.

“He happened to me!” she cried, pointing at Dal Blake. “He said I looked like a streetwalker!”

“You’re the one in the tight red dress, honey.” Dal chuckled. “I just made an observation.”

“Your mother would have a fit if she saw you in that dress,” her father said heavily. “I should never have let you talk me into buying it.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter anymore, it’s ruined!” She got to her feet, swiping at tears in her eyes. “I’m going to bed!”

“Might as well,” Dal remarked, shoving his hands into his jeans pockets and looking at her with an arrogant smile. “Go flirt with men your own age, kid.”

She looked to her father for aid, but he just stared at her and sighed.

She scrambled to her feet, displacing more coal. “I’ll get this swept up before I go to bed,” she said.

“I’ll do that. Get yourself cleaned up, Meda,” her father said gently, using his pet name for her. “Go on.”

She left the room muttering. She didn’t even look at Dal Blake.

* * *

That had been several years ago, before she worked in law enforcement in Missouri and finally hooked up with the FBI. Now she was without a job, running a ranch about which she knew absolutely nothing, and whole families who depended on the ranch for a living were depending on her. The responsibility was tremendous.

She honestly didn't know what she was going to do. She did watch a couple of YouTube videos, but they were less than helpful. Most of them were self-portraits of small ranchers and their methods of dealing with livestock. It was interesting, but they assumed that their audience knew something about ranching. Meadow didn't.

She started to call the local cattlemen's association for help, until someone told her who the president of the chapter was. Dal Blake. Why hadn't she guessed?

While she was drowning in self-doubt, there was a knock on the front door. She opened it to find a handsome man, dark-eyed, with thick blond hair, standing on her porch. He was wearing a sheriff's uniform, complete with badge.

"Miss Dawson?" he said politely.

She smiled. "Yes?"

"I'm Sheriff Jeff Ralston."

"Nice to meet you," she said. She shook hands with him. She liked his handshake. It was firm without being aggressive.

"Nice to meet you, too," he replied. He shifted his weight.

She realized that it was snowing again and he must be freezing. "Won't you come in?" she said as an afterthought, moving back.

"Thanks," he replied. He smiled. "Getting colder out here."

She laughed. "I don't mind snow."

"You will when you're losing cattle to it," he said with a sigh as he followed her into the small kitchen, where she motioned him into a chair.

“I don’t know much about cattle,” she confessed. “Coffee?”

“I’d love a cup,” he said heavily. “I had to get out of bed before daylight and check out a robbery at a local home. Someone came in through the window and took off with a valuable antique lamp.”

She frowned. “Just the lamp?”

He nodded. “Odd robbery, that. Usually the perps carry off anything they can get their hands on.”

“I know.” She smiled sheepishly. “I was with the FBI for two years.”

“I heard about that. In fact,” he added while she started coffee brewing, “that’s why I’m here.”

“You need help with the robbery investigation?” she asked, pulling two mugs out of the cabinet.

“I need help, period,” he replied. “My investigator just quit to go live in California with his new wife. She’s from there. Left me shorthanded. We’re on a tight budget, like most small law enforcement agencies. I only have the one investigator. Had, that is.” He eyed her. “I thought you might be interested in the job,” he added with a warm smile.

She almost dropped the mugs. “Me?”

“Yes. Your father said you had experience in law enforcement before you went with the Bureau and that you were noted for your investigative abilities.”

“Noted wasn’t quite the word they used,” she said, remembering the rage her boss had unleashed when she blew the interrogation of a witness. That also brought back memories of the brutality the man had used against her in the physical attack. To be fair to her boss, he didn’t know the prisoner had attacked her until after he’d read her the riot act. He’d apologized handsomely, but the damage was already done.

“Well, the FBI has its own way of doing things. So do I.” He accepted the hot mug of coffee with a smile. “Thanks. I live on black coffee.”

“So do I.” She laughed, sitting down at the table with him to put cream and sugar in her own. She noticed that he took his straight up. He had nice hands. Very masculine and strong-looking. No wedding band. No telltale ring where one had been, either. She guessed that he’d never been married, but it was too personal a question to ask a relative stranger.

“I need an investigator and you’re out of work. What do you say?”

She thought about the possibilities. She smiled. Here it was, like fate, a chance to prove to the world that she could be a good investigator. It was like the answer to a prayer.

She grinned. “I’ll take it, and thank you.”

He let out the breath he’d been holding. “No. Thank *you*. I can’t handle the load alone. When can you start?”

“It’s Friday. How about first thing Monday morning?” she asked.

“That would be fine. I’ll put you on the day shift to begin. You’ll need to report to my office by seven a.m. Too early?”

“Oh, no. I’m usually in bed by eight and up by five in the morning.”

His eyebrows raised.

“It’s my dog,” she sighed. “She sleeps on the bed with me, and she wakes up at five. She wants to eat and play. So I can’t go back to sleep or she’ll eat the carpet.”

He laughed. “What breed is she?”

“She’s a white Siberian husky with red highlights. Beautiful.”

“Where is she?”

She caught her breath as she realized that she’d let Snow out to go to the bathroom an hour earlier, and she hadn’t scratched at the door. “Oh, dear,” she muttered as she realized where the dog was likely to be.

Along with that thought came a very angry knock at the back door, near where she was sitting with the sheriff.

Apprehensively, she got up and opened the door. And there he was. Dal Blake, with Snow on a makeshift lead. He wasn't smiling.

"Your dog invited herself to breakfast. Again. She came right into my damned house through the dog door!"

She knew that Dal didn't have a dog anymore. His old Labrador had died a few weeks ago, her foreman had told her, and the man had mourned the old dog. He'd had it for almost fourteen years, he'd added.

"I'm sorry," Meadow said with a grimace. "Snow. Bad girl!" she muttered.

The husky with her laughing blue eyes came bounding over to her mistress and started licking her.

"Stop that." Meadow laughed, fending her off. "How about a treat, Snow?"

She went to get one from the cupboard.

"Hey, Jeff," Dal greeted the other man, shaking hands as Jeff got to his feet.

"How's it going?" Jeff asked Dal.

"Slow," came the reply. "We're renovating the calving sheds. It's slow work in this weather."

"Tell me about it," Jeff said. "We had two fences go down. Cows broke through and started down the highway."

"Maybe there was a dress sale," Dal said, tongue-in-cheek as he watched a flustered Meadow give a chewy treat to her dog.

"I'd love to see a cow wearing a dress," she muttered.

"Would you?" Dal replied. "One of your men thinks that's your ultimate aim, to put cows in school and teach them to read."

"Which man?" she asked, her eyes flashing fire at him.

"Oh, no, I'm not telling," Dal returned. "You get on some boots and jeans and go find out for yourself. If you can ride a

horse, that is.”

That brought back another sad memory. She’d gone riding on one of her father’s feistier horses, confident that she could control it. She was in her second year of college, bristling with confidence as she breezed through her core curriculum.

She thought she could handle the horse. But it sensed her fear of heights and speed and took her on a racing tour up the side of a small mountain and down again so quickly that Meadow lost her balance and ended up face first in a snowbank.

To add to her humiliation—because the stupid horse went running back to the barn, probably laughing all the way—Dal Blake was helping move cattle on his own ranch, and he saw the whole thing.

He came trotting up just as she was wiping the last of the snow from her face and parka. “You know, Spirit isn’t a great choice of horses for an inexperienced rider.”

“My father told me that,” she muttered.

“Pity you didn’t listen. And lucky that you ended up in a snowbank instead of down a ravine,” he said solemnly. “If you can’t control a horse, don’t ride him.”

“Thanks for the helpful advice,” she returned icily.

“City tenderfoot,” he mused. “I’m amazed that you haven’t killed yourself already. I hear your father had to put a rail on the back steps after you fell down them.”

She flushed. “I tripped over his cat.”

“You could benefit from some martial arts training.”

“I’ve already had that,” she said. “I work for my local police department.”

“As what?” he asked politely.

“As a patrol officer!” she shot back.

“Well,” he remarked, turning his horse, “if you drive a car like you ride a horse, you’re going to end badly one day.”

“I can drive!” she shot after him. “I drive all the time!”

“God help other motorists.”

“You ... you ... you ... !” She gathered steam with each repetition of the word until she was almost screaming, and still she couldn’t think of an insult bad enough to throw at him. It wouldn’t have done any good. He kept riding. He didn’t even look back.

* * *

She snapped back to the present. “Yes, I can ride a horse!” she shot at Dal Blake. “Just because I fell off once ...”

“You fell off several times. This is mountainous country. If you go riding, carry a cell phone and make sure it’s charged,” he said seriously.

“I’d salaam, but I haven’t had my second cup of coffee yet,” she drawled, alluding to an old custom of subjects salaaming royalty.

“You heard me.”

“You don’t give orders to me in my own house,” she returned hotly.

Jeff cleared his throat.

They both looked at him.

“I have to get back to work,” he said as he pushed his chair back in. “Thanks for the coffee, Meadow. I’ll expect you early Monday morning.”

“Expect her?” Dal asked.

“She’s coming to work for me as my new investigator,” Jeff said with a bland smile.

Dal’s dark eyes narrowed. He saw through the man, whom he’d known since grammar school. Jeff was a good sheriff, but he wanted to add to his ranch. He owned property that adjoined Meadow’s. So did Dal. That acreage had abundant water, and right now water was the most important asset any rancher had. Meadow was obviously out of her depth trying to run a ranch. Her best bet was to sell it, so Jeff was getting in

on the ground floor by offering her a job that would keep her close to him.

He saw all that, but he just smiled. “Good luck,” he told Jeff, with a dry glance at a fuming Meadow. “You’ll need it.”

“She’ll do fine,” Jeff said confidently.

Dal just smiled.

Meadow remembered that smile from years past. She’d had so many accidents when she was visiting her father. Dal was always somewhere nearby when they happened.

He didn’t like Meadow. He’d made his distaste for her apparent on every possible occasion. There had been a Christmas party thrown by the local cattlemen’s association when Meadow first started college. She’d come to spend Christmas with her father, and when he asked her to go to the party with him, she agreed.

She knew Dal would be there. So she wore an outrageous dress, even more revealing than the one he’d been so disparaging about when she was a senior in high school.

Sadly, the dress caught the wrong pair of eyes. A local cattleman who’d had five drinks too many had propositioned Meadow by the punch bowl. His reaction to her dress had flustered her and she tripped over her high-heeled shoes and knocked the punch bowl over.

The linen tablecloth was soaked. So was poor Meadow, in her outrageous dress. Dal Blake had laughed until his face turned red. So had most other people. Meadow had asked her father to drive her home. It was the last Christmas party she ever attended in Raven Springs.

But just before the punch incident, there had been another. Dal had been caught with her under the mistletoe ...

She shook herself mentally and glared at Dal.