



Cowboy Single Dad Crush

for
Christmas

*"Can't stop falling
for you..."*



JO GRAFFORD
BESTSELLING CHRISTIAN ROMANCE

**COWBOY SINGLE DAD CRUSH
FOR CHRISTMAS**

A Very Country Christmas Wish #5

JO GRAFFORD



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CHAPTER 1: UNEXPECTED ANNOUNCEMENT

SHANE

Army Ranger Shane Jackson had spent his fair share of time in the principal's office back in junior high and high school. Not once, though, had he been called to the pastor's office at church.

Nope. This was an entirely new experience for him. Pastor Gilman had asked to meet with him at eight o'clock sharp, exactly one hour before the start of the Sunday morning service.

He peered into the cracked mirror over the sink in his master bathroom, wondering what the middle-aged minister wanted to speak to him about. A jagged version of himself stared back.

His brown hair was sleep-tousled, and his eyes still reflected the carnage of war. Eight years of serving in the Rangers had left its mark on him in more ways than one. Another souvenir was the faint, pinkish scar high on his left cheekbone from a bullet he'd dodged in the nick of time. Shadowy stubble ran down his jaw, across his chin, and over his upper lip. Since it was only one day's worth of overgrowth, it didn't look too scruffy.

Maybe I should wait another day to shave.

He was pretty sure he'd be taking his life into his hands if he attempted to do so in front of the broken mirror. He was hoping to have it replaced by tomorrow. It was on his ever growing to-do list.

Just about everything inside the old cabin he'd inherited from his grandfather was on the list. After taking possession of the cabin yesterday, he'd quickly come to the conclusion that it would be easier to schedule a full demolition and build a brand new cabin. However, the place held too many memories for him — mostly good ones — to take the easy way out. For this reason, he was going to renovate it the old-fashioned way, one board and nail at a time.

At the speed I'm moving these days, I should be able to wrap up this project before I turn eighty.

Snorting in self-disgust, he reached for the cane he'd left leaning against the wall and turned away from the mirror. He pushed the black aluminum cane out in front of him and dragged his right leg forward, hating how much effort he had to put into each step he took.

He felt a lot older than his twenty-six years. He certainly looked older with the way he had to hobble around. His right leg hadn't worked right since the RPG blast that had taken out half his squad in Afghanistan the previous summer. He was lucky to be alive. Or so the doctors kept telling him.

He didn't feel lucky. Most of the time, he just felt guilty that he was one of the few soldiers who'd survived the explosion. He didn't deserve it any more than the five guys who'd perished, leaving behind five widows and nine children.

Yet here I am.

After eight years of being gone, he was back in his hometown of Pinetop, Arizona. It was a festive little community deep in the White Mountains where Christmas was celebrated year round.

Ho, ho, ho...not!

He couldn't have felt less like celebrating. Unfortunately, tomorrow was the first day of December. In Pinetop, it was the day that marked the official start of the Christmas season. There would be a parade in honor of the momentous occasion, followed by a tree lighting ceremony in Town Square at nightfall. He didn't plan on attending either event.

He buttoned on a white shirt and tugged a sweater over his head. Its spruce green color was strictly a coincidence, certainly not an attempt to look holiday festive. It was merely a quick grab from the top of his suitcase. His faded jeans dressed down the look a little, and he was tickled to death that he'd managed to pull on his cowboy boots two days in a row.

Yesterday had been the first time in months he'd attempted to wear any footwear other than the disgusting-looking

therapeutic sneakers the surgeons had prescribed him. There was no avoiding the post-operative telescoping knee brace he wore over his jeans, though. It was strapped to his leg in four places — two above the knee and two below the knee. Without the locking hinge mechanism on either side of his knee cap, he wouldn't have been able to stand, much less walk. Only because he'd lost so much weight over the past few months did the lower part of his knee brace fit inside his right boot.

I'm a bag of bones. A literal walking skeleton.

Leaving his shirt untucked helped hide his gauntness. He had plans to bulk up again, just as soon as the moving company delivered his weight bench and workout gear. Now that he had the keys to his cabin in hand, he'd call them in the morning to get on their schedule. He had no idea if they'd be able to deliver his household goods before Christmas or if he'd have to wait until January. In the meantime, his workouts would consist of whatever he could find to lift or curl in his grandfather's cabin. If nothing else, there was plenty of firewood stacked on the front porch.

Dragging his bum knee into the bedroom, he grimaced at the unmade bed. After a moment of deliberation, he settled for loosely pulling the quilt over the pillows. Though he preferred to roll into a made-up bed each evening, simple tasks like making the bed were too much trouble right now. He snatched his red ski jacket off the bench at the foot of the bed and shrugged into it. Zipping it up, he scowled at the unmade bed.

I can't live like this.

Maybe he'd been in the military for too long, but he couldn't stand leaving things untidy. Gritting his teeth against the discomfort it caused, he took the time to make the bed properly. When he was finished, his knee was killing him. However, the sense of accomplishment that swept over him was worth it. He was an Army Ranger, for crying out loud, albeit a medically retired one. No way was he going to let one queen-sized iron bed get the best of him.

The irony of the situation wasn't lost on him, though. He felt a little foolish as he grabbed his Stetson from the bedpost,

clapped it on his head, and finally hobbled from the room. Six months ago, he'd been tracking enemy combatants through the desert. Nowadays, he was simply fighting to stay on his feet.

He hobbled across the messy living room, careful to pick his way around a basket of old newspapers. An overturned lamp was hanging half off the rickety coffee table, and there was dust and cobwebs everywhere. After church, he planned to start cleaning the place. Yesterday, he'd located a broom and a vacuum in the pantry, of all places. Hopefully, the vacuum still worked. If not, he'd be adding yet another item to his Santa-sized shopping list.

From the scurrying sounds in the kitchen cabinets last night, he was pretty sure he was sharing the cabin with a mouse. For that reason, he made no attempt to approach the coffee maker on the countertop. Since most churches served coffee, he was counting on the First Church of Pinetop being no exception.

He headed for the garage and made his way to his truck. Thankfully, there were no stairs to maneuver down. Since his grandfather had spent the last decade of his life in a wheelchair, there was a short ramp leading to the ground.

He mashed the button on the remote control attached to his keychain. The garage door rolled upward, letting in a blast of icy mountain air. It was a brutal reminder that he'd left his gloves in the house. Fortunately, he had a heated steering wheel in his brand spanking new silver Dodge Ram.

The truck was a retirement gift to himself, one that had cost nearly a full year's worth of his salary. After saving most of his income for the past eight years, though, he'd easily been able to afford it. A lot of guys his age were in debt up to their eyeballs, but he'd been raised by the world's biggest penny pincher. Thanks to Edward Jay Jackson, Shane paid for every purchase he made — up front and in full. If he couldn't afford something, he did without it until he could. No exceptions.

Opening the driver's door, he tossed his cane onto the floor mat below the passenger seat and used the grab bar to pull himself inside. Dropping behind the wheel, he slammed the

door shut and started the motor, feeling like he'd run a marathon. The life of an invalid was certainly no cake walk.

His cabin was high enough in the mountains that the snow plows didn't make it this far. Fortunately, the all-weather tires on his pickup tracked nicely in the fresh layer of snow covering the long gravel driveway. They also tracked just fine on the winding road leading down the mountain toward the heart of Pinetop.

The normally busy Main Street was empty except for a few trucks rolling slowly past the empty shops and boutiques. Most businesses in town were closed on Sunday mornings. The only two exceptions were the gas station and the First Church of Pinetop.

He glanced at his watch as he pulled into the church parking lot. It was still ten minutes until his appointment with Jonah Gilman. An olive Jeep Wagoneer with brown wooden side panels was parked in the pastor's reserved spot. A plain silver sedan was parked in the handicapped spot next to it. Since it bore rental plates from Phoenix, he could only assume it was someone visiting from out of town.

As he parked on the other side of the old Jeep Wagoneer, his heart thumped in anticipation of seeing the minister's daughter again before or after the morning service. He knew he didn't stand a chance with Carol Gilman, but there was no law against having a crush on her. He'd been crushing on her for as long as he could remember — so long that it had become a part of who he was.

Though they'd attended school together, they hadn't hung out with the same friends. And after they'd graduated, he'd enlisted in the Army while she'd headed off to college.

At some point during the eight years he'd been gone from Pinetop, she'd transferred to a seminary, earned a degree in divinity, and returned to serve as their children's pastor. In conclusion, she was still too good for him and always would be. Dreaming about her was as far as he'd ever get with her. That, and maybe seeing her at church once in a while.

In the past, he hadn't been a regular church goer. However, his days as a heathen had abruptly ended after one of the hospital chaplains had invited him to a chapel service during his lengthy stint at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio. He'd enjoyed it enough to keep going, and he planned to continue doing so now that he was back in Pinetop.

This morning, in fact. After his appointment with Pastor Gilman, he intended to remain for the Sunday morning service.

It took twice as long as it should have for him to leap to the ground on his left foot, reach back into the cab for his cane, and hobble his way to the church entrance. The door on the right was unlocked, so he let himself inside the building.

He took one step over the threshold, and the ankle of his boot became entangled in something strewn across the walkway. The unexpected impediment made his cane go flying. He pitched forward after it.

"Oh, no!" Carol Gilman's alarmed cry filled his ears.

At first, all Shane could see was a blur of movement. Then her arms slammed around his middle. She hung on for dear life, tottering precariously with him for a moment. By some miracle, he managed to regain his footing.

Out of sheer survival instinct, his hands closed around her upper arms. The moment he was back on his feet, however, he gentled his hold on her, hoping he hadn't bruised her.

"You okay?" His voice came out gruff with embarrassment. This was a far cry from all his fantasies about how he hoped to coax her into his arms someday.

"I was about to ask you the same thing," she muttered into the front of his coat, where her face was buried. "I'm so sorry," she declared breathlessly as she raised her head.

I'm not.

His gaze was drawn to her smudged lip gloss. He suddenly longed to plant a kiss on her and smudge off the rest of it. However, she wasn't his to kiss. Forcing his thoughts to safer territory, he gave her a quick hug of gratitude for preventing

his tumble to the floor. And immediately realized his mistake. Having her slender frame plastered against the front of him felt good — too good. Her sweetness and flowery scent enveloped him, doing crazy things to his head. It took a few seconds for his better judgment to kick back in. Even when it did, it was with the greatest reluctance that he dropped his arms and let her go.

“Thanks. I, uh...” he gestured at the massive garland draped across the floor of the vestibule, “didn’t see it.” *Obviously*. Feeling like an idiot for stating something she’d probably already figured out for herself, he bent over to retrieve his cane.

“I’m so sorry,” she said again. “It was a really bad spot to leave a garland. I...” She shoved a handful of blonde hair from her eyes as she leaned into his path.

Though he saw what was coming, it was one of those things that happened too quickly for a person to stop — at least for a crippled soldier to stop.

He and Carol bumped heads with a resounding crack of bone against bone.

Her yelp of pain as she slid to the floor tore at his heart. He took a knee beside her, terrified that he’d knocked her unconscious.

“Carol?” He reached worriedly for her hand. “If you can hear me, please say something.”

The shoulders beneath her creamy sweater started to shake as her hand crept into his.

His chest constricted at the realization she was weeping. He gripped her fingers tighter. “Where does it hurt?” The moment he asked the question, he realized how dumb he sounded. They’d just smacked noggins like two football players who weren’t wearing helmets.

Her shoulders shook harder as her head came up. “The only damage is to my pride.”

He caught sight of her flushed, contorted features and realized she was laughing, not crying like he’d originally

feared.

A peal of merriment bubbled out of her. “I bet you’re wishing you were back in your foxhole about now. It’s probably safer there.”

It wasn’t, but he knew what she meant. More than anything, he was glad she was okay.

Her smile slipped as she watched his expression. “Sorry. That sounded better in my head. You can go ahead and add insensitivity to my long list of mistakes this morning.”

“I know what you meant,” he said quickly. “It’s cool. We’re cool.”

It was a difficult maneuver, but he balanced his weight on his left foot and used his cane for leverage to help Carol to her feet. That’s when it dawned on him why she’d lost her balance so easily. Beneath her Christmas red slacks, she was wearing a pair of matching stiletto pumps.

“He’s the real culprit.” Hoping to inject a note of lightness back into the situation, he waved his cane at the mangled garland on the floor between them.

Carol looked where he was pointing, and another breathy chuckle escaped her. “True. He’s been nothing but trouble all morning.” She waved helplessly at a set of empty hooks mounted over the double doors. “Despite the extra inches these shoes give me, I still can’t reach that spot above the door where he belongs.” Her chuckle dissolved into a sigh. “And to make matters worse, someone borrowed the step ladder and didn’t put it back, so...” She bent to pick up the garland, looping it a few times around her wrist. “I’ll just have to find a safer spot to store this fella until—”

“I can help.” Shane reached for the end that was dangling from her wrist.

“Oh, I think I’ve bothered you enough for one morning.” She glanced sheepishly across the vestibule toward the glassed-in reception area where the church secretary worked Monday through Friday. “Isn’t my dad expecting you for an appointment?”

“Yep.” Shane was already draping one end of the garland over the doors. He angled his head at her, beckoning her to step closer with the rest of it.

She silently complied, and together they finished hanging it.

She cocked her head critically as she surveyed it. “It needs to be shifted a little to the left, I think.”

He made the adjustment.

“Perfect.” She clapped her hands. “Just to be clear, no one else needs to know exactly how much trouble went into hanging it.”

“They won’t hear it from me.” He winked at her. “I think we make a good team, head bumps and all.” The garland over the door didn’t look half bad.

“But only if you keep the disastrous part of our encounter between the two of us,” she reminded with a smile.

“You have my word, Pastor Gilman.” Hating to end their encounter, he mimed zipping his mouth closed as he backed toward her father’s office. The door was propped open.

As he hobbled into view of the man’s desk, he could see the minister seated behind it. His dark hair was sprinkled with a few strands of gray. A much older woman with fuzzy white curls was seated in one of the two upholstered chairs in front of him. A small boy was squatted on the floor at her feet, pushing a toy truck around one of her chair legs.

Pastor Gilman stood to wave Shane into the room. “There you are! It’s good to see you again, Shane.” He leaned across his desk to hold out a hand as Shane approached it.

They shook hands

“Coffee?” He waved Shane into the seat beside the white-haired woman.

“Yes, please, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“Not at all. My wife keeps me well-stocked with supplies.” The pastor turned to the credenza behind him and placed a

cardboard cup beneath a sleek silver coffee dispenser. “How do you like yours?”

“Black.” While the sound of trickling coffee filled the room, Shane took a seat. He nodded politely at the woman beside him.

She stared back, unsmiling. The censures in her silvery gaze as she raked him from head to toe reminded him that he’d yet to remove his Stetson.

He reached for it, only to discover it was missing. He ran his hand through his hair, realizing that his collision with Carol must have sent it flying across the vestibule.

A gentle knock made him swivel his head toward the door.

Carol stood there, clutching his hat between her hands. “You dropped something, soldier.” Her laughing gaze met and held his as she glided across the room to hand it to him.

“Thanks.” He rested the hat on one knee and watched as she crouched down to address the little boy playing on the floor.

“Hi. I’m Carol. What’s your name?”

“Luke.” The dark-eyed kid shot her a curious look, then quickly lowered his head over his truck again.

Though Shane only got a quick look at the boy’s face, it struck him as oddly familiar, though he didn’t know why.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Luke.” Instead of crowding him or holding out a hand, she stood. “I’m the children’s pastor here. You’re more than welcome to join us this morning in the kids’ sanctuary. It’s on the east side of the building.” She gestured vaguely. “We always have a great time with music, activities, and...oh, yeah.” She stopped and pressed a finger to her cheek, as if just then remembering something. “We have a very special guest coming to pay us a visit this morning. You’ll have to show up to find out who it is, though.”

By now, she had Luke’s full attention. He reached out to pat the elderly woman’s knee. “Can I go, Grandma?”

Pleeeeeeease!”

So, she was his grandmother. Shane glanced between the two of them, not seeing any resemblance.

“That all depends on how our meeting goes.” She spoke in a firm, no-nonsense voice.

Looking supremely dejected, the boy dropped his head over his truck again. The fact that he didn’t put up a fuss told Shane that he was no stranger to disappointment.

He and Carol traded an empathetic look that made him wonder if she was thinking the same thing.

Clearing his throat, Pastor Jonah Gilman turned around with Shane’s coffee in hand. He’d placed a black lid on top of the cup and stuck a coffee straw through the hole in it. “One black coffee, as requested.”

“Thank you, sir.” Shane accepted it, more than ready for the shot of caffeine he was about to receive.

“Shall we get started?” Over Shane’s head, Jonah Gilman nodded at his daughter.

Carol left the room, quietly shutting the door behind her.

“Shane, this is Patty Fuller.” The senior pastor waved a hand at his other guest. “Mrs. Fuller, this is Shane Jackson. It sounds like you two may already know each other.”

Nope. Should I? As Shane stared blankly at the elderly woman to his right, the first tendril of alarm curled through his chest.

“So, you don’t know each other?” Pastor Gilman cleared his throat again as he took a seat behind his desk. “Pardon me for saying this, but isn’t it a little odd that Shane would be included in the will of someone he never met?”

Will. What will? Shane’s spidey senses went on full tingle.

“He and I have never met before today.” Mrs. Fuller’s voice was clipped. “From what I understand, it was a chance encounter with my daughter. I wasn’t present.”

As Shane continued to stare in puzzlement at her, she added bitterly, “Panama City. Spring Break. Five years ago. According to Heather, you were between deployments, about to head back overseas the next morning.”

Heather? Shane wracked his brain, trying to remember any woman he knew by the name of Heather. Five years was a long time ago to remember a single encounter, especially one during which he probably hadn’t been sober. He wasn’t proud of his drinking days. He was simply glad they were behind him.

“By encounter, I’m referring to an evening that had lasting consequences,” Mrs. Fuller shot a warning look at the little boy at her feet. “At least, for my daughter it did.”

Shane sat up straighter in his chair at the accusation ringing in her voice. “By lasting consequences, I can only assume you mean....?”

“A son, Mr. Jackson. You have a son.”

A son! Shane’s heart skipped a few beats.

“Excuse me!” Pastor Gilman shot out of his chair. “If I may interject.” He rounded on the woman, hands on the waistband of his suit trousers. “Mrs. Fuller, you contacted the church, asking me to arrange a meeting with this young man to discuss the contents of a will.”

She shot to her feet, mirroring his movements and jutting her plump chin at him. “And that’s exactly what I’ve done. Heather’s dying request was that I track down the father of her son. If Mr. Jackson isn’t interested in accepting responsibility for this precious boy, then I’ll have no choice but to contact Family Services—”

“I’ll do it.” Shane stood to face the two of them. His brain was spinning with shock over the bombshell the woman had just dropped on him. However, he was a soldier — a guy trained to run toward danger, not from it. In this case, he was running toward a small boy who needed a parent. He and his brother had been orphaned at young ages, themselves, so he

knew a thing or two about family custodianship. If it weren't for their grandfather, they'd have ended up in foster care.

No doubt, most guys in his shoes would be demanding a paternity test right now, but there was no way he was going to stand around dickering over a blood test while his kid landed in state care. Luke looked like a miniature version of him. That was all the proof he needed at the moment.

"I'll accept full responsibility for him." Shane exchanged a long look with the kid, whose head was tipped warily up at him. No wonder he looked so familiar!

He's mine!

For the life of him, he still had no memory of hooking up with a woman by the name of Heather Fuller. His inability to remember her filled him with no small amount of shame as he continued to gaze down at the little boy.

I have a son.

Shane tossed his hat onto his chair and slowly took a knee beside the boy. He propped both hands on top of his cane. "Hi, Luke. I'm your dad." The words felt strange coming from his mouth.

I'm a dad.

Someone could've produced a feather and knocked him clean over with it.

"I know." Luke picked up his toy truck and stood with it clutched against his blue and red striped shirt. "Grandma showed me your picture on the airplane." He frowned suddenly. "When's my mom coming home?"

The air left Shane's lungs in a huff of surprise that no one had informed the kid that his mother wasn't ever coming home again.

"He's only four." Mrs. Fuller's voice took on a defensive note. "It's hard to explain stuff like that to a preschooler. Wait until you try." She rummaged through a faded black tote bag strapped over her shoulder and removed a thick sheaf of papers. "Here." She held them out to him. "It's Heather's will,

Luke's birth certificate and social security card, and some other stuff about his shots and what have you."

Shane mechanically accepted the paperwork for his second "inheritance" in the space of forty-eight hours. Two days ago, he'd been alone in the world, homeless, and jobless. Now he had a cabin with a mouse scurrying around it, plus a son to raise. That checked two out of three boxes.

It was one heck of a welcome home!



CHAPTER 2: BROKEN PIECES

CAROL

Carol's cell phone vibrated with an incoming call. She jogged across the stage in the front of the kids' sanctuary to snatch it from the short red table she'd left it on. To her surprise, her father's name flashed across the screen. She hastily accepted his call and raised the phone to her ear.

"What's going on, Dad?" A glance at the clock on the wall revealed that the morning service would start in less than twenty minutes. Normally, he'd be out in the main sanctuary by now, greeting members. He would be expected on the platform soon.

"I don't know how to say this." He sounded so harried that she gripped the phone tighter.

"Is everything okay?"

"No. Not really. Just wanted you to know that Luke and his father are on their way to the kids' check-in area. Just act like everything is normal, even though it's not."

She experienced a jolt of excitement at the realization that the dark-haired little boy was getting his wish to join them after all. "Did you say he's with his father? I thought he was with an older woman." She'd naturally presumed it was his grandmother.

"Yes, I said father. As it turns out, Shane is the kid's dad. He didn't know it until this morning. Just found out during our meeting." Her father's voice grew even more harried.

"Oh, my goodness!" Feeling faint, Carol raised a hand to her forehead. It was still throbbing from her earlier collision with Shane. She felt like a lumpy bruise was rising beneath her fingertips, one that would probably turn a rainbow of colors by morning.

"Like I said, just roll with it. I only called to give you a heads up. Didn't want you getting caught broadside like I was."

“I, um...” She was shocked, of course, and a little appalled. In the next moment, however, her sympathies stirred on Shane’s behalf. She couldn’t imagine what it must have felt like to find out, without warning, that he was a parent. “How did Shane take the news?”

Her father gave a bark of mirthless laughter. “Honestly? He looked like he’d gotten hit by another RPG. That said, he took the news like...well, like a soldier.”

Of course, he did.

A thrill of unexpected pride shivered its way through Carol. Shane Jackson came from nothing. He and his older brother had been raised by an invalid grandfather, who’d pretty much allowed them to run wild. According to rumors, the electricity in their cabin had been shut off more times than a person could shake a stick at. In addition to not being much of a disciplinarian, Shane’s grandfather also hadn’t been too faithful about paying his bills. The only thing he’d been one hundred percent dedicated to was his whiskey bottle.

It was a miracle Shane had survived his childhood. It was a whole other kind of miracle that had brought him home following the fateful RPG blast aimed at him and his squad. He’d survived for a reason, apparently to raise a son he didn’t know he had until now.

It was like something straight out of the movies.

“I know what you’re thinking,” her father grumbled.

I sure hope not!

Thankfully, he had no idea that she’d been daydreaming about Shane Jackson’s soulful dark eyes ever since their happenstance reunion last night at the dinner theater. She hadn’t seen him since high school, and wow! What a difference eight years had made in him! He was taller, thinner, and broodier.

“Let me guess.” Her voice was light. “You’re thinking that I’m thinking everything happens for a reason? Which shouldn’t come as too big of a surprise, since you’re the one who taught me that.”

“Just don’t let your sympathies with the situation get too carried away, alright?” There was no mistaking the warning in her father’s voice.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Pretending innocence felt like the safest answer.

“Yes, you do,” he groaned. “Your mother and I have fostered no less than eleven puppies and thirteen kittens over the years. That’s more than enough proof of your entire lack of willpower where strays are concerned.”

“Hmm. Are we talking about animals or children here?” She bit her lip, trying not to laugh.

“We’re talking about one big boy and one little boy,” he growled. “For once, don’t get involved, hon. I’m begging you.”

“Thanks for the warning, dad.”

“I prefer to think of it as fatherly advice.”

“Point taken.” She wasn’t stupid, though. She knew when she was being lectured about something. Or someone, in this case.

“I heard that eye roll.”

“No, you didn’t,” she retorted cheerfully. “Now go preach a sermon that’ll knock the sin right out of the townsfolk.”

“Very funny.”

“I thought so.” She was still chuckling when she hung up the phone.

She glanced up, and there they were — the very people she and her father had been discussing. Shane Heartthrob Jackson and his much shorter heartthrob of a son were standing hand-in-hand in the kids’ check-in line. Now that Carol was seeing them together, their resemblance was undeniable. Luke had the same dark, wavy hair, the same soulful brown eyes, and the same ever-so-slightly stuck-out ears.

When he caught her eye, Luke started waving wildly.

Carol stuck her cell phone in the back pocket of her dress slacks and hurried in his direction. Reaching the check-in table, she nodded in appreciation at the pair of volunteer moms who were typing in contact information and printing out name stickers for each young attendee.

“We’re going to have close to fifty kids this morning,” the nearest woman muttered in undertones to her. She rubbed a hand across her swollen midsection, looking like she was experiencing a cramp. Or a baby kick.

Carol felt a momentary twinge of envy. As far as she was concerned, Shelly Hofstetter had it all — a man who loved her, plus a baby on the way. She tamped down on her envy, reminding herself that Shelly deserved every ounce of happiness that came her way. Not only was she a good person and great help in children’s church, she was also Carol’s dearest friend.

“How wonderful,” she murmured, shooting an appreciative glance around the rapidly filling room.

“If you say so,” the lovely mother-to-be muttered back, giving the hem of her red tunic a yank to straighten it. “I just hope we have enough hands on deck. If the mice start to outnumber the cats by too many, the mice will play harder than ever, if you know what I mean.”

“I do.” Her friend’s comment gave her an idea.

“Hi, Shane! Hi, Luke!” She turned to their newest guests, fluttering a hand at the small boy who was still waving energetically at her. “We’re so glad you could join us this morning.”

Luke lowered his hand to his side. However, he continued to bounce in place as he announced, “My new dad said I could come.” He glanced up at Shane for confirmation.

Shane coughed and seemed to be having a hard time meeting Carol’s gaze. “About that. I, uh...” He shook his head helplessly at her.

She took pity on him and jumped back into the conversation. “Look, I don’t know everything, but my dad

called and gave me the bare essentials.”

His shoulders relaxed a few degrees, but his spine remained ramrod straight. He seemed to be at a loss for words.

“So, here’s the deal.” She glanced around them, ducking her head closer. “We have a lot of kids here today, and we’re running a little shorthanded. So, um, if you’d be willing to stick around…” She allowed her words to hang suggestively between them.

“Me?” Shane pointed at his chest, looking dumbfounded.

“If you’re willing, soldier.” She allowed a hint of a challenge to creep into her voice. “Granted, we’re not dealing with enemy combatants here. We’re dealing with children.”

“Which is far worse, believe me,” Shelly grumbled good-naturedly.

A faint smile spread across Shane’s tanned features, chasing away the strain lines around his eyes. “In that case, sign me up, Pastor.”

“You’re an answer to our prayers.” Carol hovered over Shelly at the check-in table while she printed out sticky name tags for him and Luke. As soon as their stickers were on their shirts, she beckoned them to follow her. “Come on. I’ll show you around.”

She stepped closer to Shane and lowered her voice for his ears alone. “It’s the least I can do after drafting you into service.” His Stetson was missing again, making her wonder if he’d lost it a second time or taken it to his vehicle.

“I’d appreciate that.” His voice and expression were cautious as his gaze searched hers.

She could only imagine what was going through his mind right now. Tamping down on the shiver of awareness his probing gaze stirred, she led them around the room. She took the time to point out the area where the kids would sit during the music and lesson, as well as the snack area in the back where they always congregated afterward. Then she led them to the far side of the room where two four-square games were marked on the floor in brightly colored tape.

One of the kids ran off as they approached the first game. The remaining three children glanced up expectantly at the newcomers. Their gazes drifted past the adults and latched onto Luke.

After a short pause, one of the kids piped up. “Wanna join us?”

Luke tugged his dad’s hand. “Can I play?”

Shane nodded wordlessly and let go of his hand.

“Thanks.” Luke held out the brown plastic truck he’d been holding, which allowed Carol to get a better look at it. It wasn’t just a regular old pickup truck, as she’d previously assumed. It was a tow truck with a cartoon face on its hood. She watched as Shane stuffed the front of it inside the front right pocket of his jeans, leaving the tow bar exposed. Only then did his son dance away to take his place in the empty square.

“Hey!” Carol sidled closer to Shane as they watched Luke join in the fun. “Are you okay?” she inquired softly.

His head swiveled her way, and his dark gaze clashed with hers before sliding away again. “I just found out I’m a dad. Still processing that.”

“That’s understandable.” She hated the uncertainty she heard in his voice. “Listen, I was kidding about the draft. If you’d rather be in big church this morning...” She wasn’t sure if he needed the spiritual pick-me-up that would surely come from listening to her dad’s first Christmas sermon of the year.

“Nah.” He shook his head, staring straight ahead. “It’s probably best if I stay close to Luke for now. At least, until we figure stuff out. Sounds like I’m all he has left.” He frowned suddenly and glanced her way again. “That is, unless you’re having second thoughts about a single dad being in here... around the other kids.”

“Of course not!” Her lips parted at the self-recrimination she heard in his voice. The truth was, she was enormously glad to have him in the room with her. She’d already watched a few rambunctious boys slow their running when they caught sight

of his broad shoulders and unsmiling features. “Why would you say that?”

He shrugged. “I’m sure there’s a whole list of old-timers in town who’d warn you that I’m bad news.” He angled his head at his son. “The proof is kind of in the room.”

It hurt her heart to know that her father was one of the people who probably shared those sentiments. She hoped Shane didn’t connect those dots and come to that conclusion anytime soon.

“The way I see it,” she returned carefully, “is that your selfless service in the military is the reason our old-timers are free to hang on to their sometimes hard-nosed opinions.”

“Eh, they’re not wrong about me.”

She wasn’t entirely sure she agreed with Shane’s assessment of himself. Not the present version of him, at any rate. From what she remembered about the old Shane Jackson, he’d changed since their high school days. A lot. Being a parent was going to change him even more.

Folding her arms, she watched his son laugh uproariously at something another kid said. “In light of full disclosure, if you make a habit of coming back here to help us out in children’s church, you’ll be required to fill out a background check form.”

He grimaced at her. “An hour ago, I would’ve told you I’ve got nothing to hide, but...” He shook his head, chuckling without humor.

“I hear you.” Hoping to change the subject, she murmured, “Luke seems to be acclimating pretty quickly to children’s church.” Extraordinarily so.

“I know, right? Most kids would be acting like a fish out of water, but not him.” He sounded so concerned that her heart went out to him. “As nice as his grandmother seemed, she was in an awfully big hurry to take off.”

“Really? Where to?” Carol glanced over her shoulder toward the doorway where kids were still lined up to enter the room.

“On a shuttle bus to the airport.” He scowled at no one in particular. “She seemed really worried about missing her flight.” He drew a deep breath and slowly let it out. “Either that, or she was afraid I’d change my mind about taking Luke off her hands.”

His hard tone told Carol everything she needed to know. “It’s her loss.” She lifted the headset she’d been wearing draped around her neck and settled it on her head. While she adjusted the earpiece, she felt an uncomfortable tug on her hair. She grimaced, realizing a strand of it must be caught in something.

A look of concern wrinkled Shane’s forehead as he leaned her way. “May I?” He pointed at something behind her headset.

“Sure.” She turned her head gratefully, allowing him better access to whatever it was.

He reached over and plucked the pesky strand of hair loose, immediately ending the piercing tug on her skull. “You’re now free to move about the cabin, Captain Gilman.” His low, rumbly voice resonated deliciously through her.

She grinned at his joke. “Thanks for getting me unstuck, Co-Pilot Jackson.” She rolled her shoulders to loosen them. “Sorry to abandon you so soon, but it’s time for me to head to the platform.”

He gave her a two-fingered salute. “I’ll keep the troops under control while you go and do your thing.”

“If you can pull that off, soldier, you’re hired. Permanently. I mean it.” Though she didn’t know him very well, something in his expression told her that he did, in fact, mean it.

He smirked. “Guess we’d better cross our fingers and hope I pass the background check.”

She shot him a grateful smile before taking off at a jog. Using the controls on the box tucked into her waistband, she turned on her microphone as she hopped onto the platform.

“Good morning, all you Pinetopper kids,” she sang out, spinning to face them. It was her music team’s cue to join her on the platform. Music started playing softly in the background as they jogged onto the stage behind her and took their places. They swayed and clapped silently to the music, waiting for their next cue.

She smiled and wagged a finger at the kids. “In case your parents didn’t tell you on the way to church this morning, it’s the first day of December. In the town of Pinetop, it’s also the first day of another very special season. Would anyone like to guess what that is?” This time, she pointed with both hands at her young audience.

Several kids immediately shouted the word she was looking for. “Christmas!”

“That’s exactly right. Boy, you guys are smart!” She nodded excitedly at them. “I know a lot of you look forward to Christmas every year because of all the toys you get, right? And all the yummy cookies, candy canes, and hot chocolate. Mmm-mmm!” She pretended to tip up a mug of her favorite sweet beverage.

Her antics inspired a few loud yeses.

She spread her hands. “Well, this morning we’re going to talk about how Christmas is about sooooo much more than presents under the tree and yummy cookies and candy. Christmas happens to be Somebody’s birthday. A very, very special Somebody’s birthday. Is it Santa’s birthday?”

The crew in her sound booth quickly flashed a picture of an animated Santa onto the two big screens flanking the platform.

She shook her head at the giggling kids to coax the correct answer out of them.

A few no’s were hollered back. One kid took it a step further and shrieked, “There’s no such thing as Santa!”

“Well, then.” She gave them a wide-eyed look. “Is it the Easter Bunny’s birthday, then?”

Her sound guys changed the picture on the screens to a hopping rabbit.

Another round of giggles ensued, and even more no's were hollered back as the kids got into the swing of things. They loved being included in the weekly introductory kids' church discussions.

“Okay. I'm really confused now.” She slapped both hands down on her hips, nearly dislodging the sound box. Catching it in the nick of time before it fell off her waist band, she clipped it back on. “If Christmas isn't Santa's birthday or the Easter Bunny's birthday, then whose birthday is it?”

Her sound crew did a few on-and-off flashes of the answer she was looking for in five big, chunky cartoonish letters.

“On the count of three, let's all say His name together. One, two, threeeeeee!” She pointed at them.

“Jesus!” The chorus of childish voices was deafening.

Nodding happily at them, she started clapping in time to the music as she danced off the edge of the stage.

The music team took a few steps forward into the spotlight, clapping louder and making more exaggerated movements as they swayed from side to side.

“On your feet,” her lead singer called through the microphone. “Let's sing a song this morning about the very special birthday celebration Pastor Carol just finished telling us about.”

Some of the kids stood in front of their chairs. Other kids rushed forward to stand directly in front of the stage as the room erupted into singing a youthful arrangement of *Oh, Come All Ye Faithful*.



FROM THE MOMENT CAROL STARTED SPEAKING TO THE children, Shane stood riveted. She was a truly amazing

speaker. He backed further into the shadows on the side of the room to lean against the wall and continue watching her.

Since he hadn't enjoyed the privilege of attending church as a child, he couldn't believe how much he'd been missing out on. The feeling sweeping the room was more than just giddy excitement. It was also a feeling of joy. Carol Gilman had succeeded in making church feel like downright fun.

She had a real gift for working with children. The room of wiggling, chattering ragamuffins had quickly transformed into a room of youngsters hanging onto her every word.

By the time the music started, the kids were more than ready to join in the singing. Though the band's introduction was super peppy, he was surprised to hear the singers launch into a good old-fashioned Christmas hymn. Even he knew the words.

After the music fest, Carol returned to the stage, pushing a silver cart loaded down with all sorts of items. She launched into a live demonstration about what it looked like to have the Fruits of the Spirit in their lives. She described them as the real gifts of Christmas. She punctuated the lesson with lots of grape tossing and underhand serves of apples, pears, and peaches to her young audience.

By the time she finished her lesson, Shane was confident that most of the kids gathered there had learned something about love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. They'd probably remember it, too, after leaving the room. In fact, he was pretty sure that he himself would never forget that passage in Galatians after hearing her teach it so colorfully.

He decided on the spot that his son would never again miss another Sunday morning service. As long as neither of them were sick, they'd be the first to arrive at church to hear Carol Gilman's next lesson.

And the one after that.

And the one after that.

A teenage boy hopped on the platform after she finished speaking. He proceeded to take prayer requests.

To Shane's surprise, Luke's hand shot up. "I met my new dad today."

Someone gently bumped shoulders with Shane. "Sounds like both a praise and a prayer request." Carol Gilman's voice rang softly in his ear.

His heart thumped at the realization that she'd deliberately sought him out on the side of the room. "Yeah. The kid's a keeper." Despite the fact that he didn't have the first clue how to be a parent, he was already determined to give Luke the best childhood possible.

Better than what I had, that's for sure.

His grandfather had set a fairly low bar in that area, so there was that.

The lights dimmed for the closing prayer the same way they'd done during the music. This time, there was no flashing laser light show to penetrate the darkness. Just the quiet voice of the teenage boy reciting every prayer request that had been raised by the children standing in front of him.

Instead of closing his eyes, Shane watched, transfixed, as the teen mentioned each prayer request. It appeared that he was doing it by memory, which was pretty impressive. Because Shane's eyes were open, he also noticed the morning sunlight pouring through the stained glass window on the far right side of the room.

If it hadn't been daylight, he might've missed the fact that it was broken. Someone had cleverly patched the splintered area with strips of multi-colored tape. Even so, the window was broken. He wasn't sure what it would cost to replace such a large piece of stained glass, but he imagined it wouldn't be cheap.

Back in high school, he'd taken a couple of shop classes. During the intermediate one, he'd gotten to do some hands-on glass cutting, melting, and blowing. It was a lot of fun — hard, but fun. From time to time, he'd thought about it since then

and imagined it would make a neat hobby. However, only time would tell if being a single parent left any time for hobbies.

“Amen,” the teenage boy said. “If you’re hungry, make your way to the snack line. Don’t forget to listen for your name when it’s called over the loudspeaker. When you hear your name, that means your parents are here, and it’s time to go home! Alright, you’re dismissed.”

A bevy of kids rushed to the snack line. Luke made a beeline for Shane first. Anticipating what he was about to ask, Shane grinned and waved him on to the snack line.

“Thanks, Dad!” With a chortle, he joined the tide of small bodies to go collect his sack of goodies.

“Wow!” He shook his head at Carol. “It gives me emotional whiplash every time he calls me that.”

“I can only imagine.” Her smile was full of empathy. “Having someone call me Mom is one of those someday kinds of things. I don’t know what I would do if my someday started right now.”

He grimaced, unable to think of a better way of putting it. “Yeah. Guess my someday is here.”

She spread her hands. “If there’s something my family can do to help you and Luke, please let us know.”

His eyebrows rose. “Thanks, but I’m pretty sure this is something I’m gonna have to figure out for myself.” His brain was swimming with the number of things he’d have to add to his already long to-do list. For one thing, he needed to call his medical insurance company to get Luke added to it pronto. Then there was the matter of his last name.

He had every intention of turning Luke Fuller into Luke Jackson as soon as possible. Or maybe Luke Fuller Jackson. He wasn’t trying to erase the kid’s past. He only wanted to give him a better future.

“How about we trade phone numbers?” Carol produced her cell phone. “You never know what you might need after you leave church, considering you just got back into town and

all.” She held her finger suspended over her phone. “I’m ready when you’re ready.”

“Oh! Uh...” Realizing she was waiting for him to give her his number, he hurriedly rattled it off.

“Thanks. I’ll shoot you a text right away. That way you have my number, too.” She smiled at him. “Just in case.”

“Really appreciate it.” It was the smoothest way any woman had ever wrangled his phone number out of him. And the sincerest. Since it was Carol, he was confident there was no secret agenda involved. Not that any woman would have designs on his besmirched reputation or crippled leg. He wasn’t exactly a prime catch these days.

It was a dismal thought, but true. To get his mind off of it, he pointed at the broken stained glass window. “What happened up there?”

Carol wrinkled her nose as her gaze followed where he was pointing. “A softball, I’m afraid. It happened a couple of years ago. Beneath the tape, one of the shards of glass is missing altogether.”

“Too bad.” He nodded thoughtfully. “A softball can do all kinds of damage to a window.” He was especially sorry it had broken such an incredible piece of artwork. The stained glass window depicted a scene of Jesus with children gathered around Him. The way His hands were raised, it was clear He was telling them a story.

She waved in the general direction of the window. “There’s a sports field on the other side of the wall where the bigger kids play softball, dodgeball, flag football, you name it.”

“You said it happened a couple of years ago?” He was surprised the window had gone that long without being repaired.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she sighed, “but it’s kind of pointless to fix it since it’s likely to get damaged again. My dad has offered more than once to take it down and replace it

with something that's not glass. I've been dragging my heels on it, though."

"Why's that?" He cast a curious sideways look at her.

"It's hard to put it into words." Her voice grew shy.

His curiosity was piqued. "Try me."

She shrugged offhandedly. "Some people look at it and only see a broken window. To me, though, the brokenness is what makes it beautiful. It tells a story."

He was pretty sure she wasn't talking about the story depicted in the glass itself. "What story?" He kept his voice low since the room kept growing quieter as more and more children were collected by their parents.

"The boy who hit the ball that broke the window made the all-state baseball team that year. Four years later, and he's now playing on a farm team for the Arizona Diamondbacks."

"No kidding?" Shane pushed away from the wall.

"No kidding," she assured, lifting her chin a little. "If serving as a children's pastor has taught me anything, it's that real life is complicated. Hands get dirty. Tears fall. Glass breaks. Instead of counting the cost, I've learned to look for the beauty that inevitably rises from the shattered pieces."

The way she was looking at him made him suspect they weren't still talking about the damaged stained glass window. As much as he appreciated her attempt to make him feel better about the mess he'd made of his life, he'd never been a big fan of broken things. He preferred to stop and fix them.

Maybe after he got his grandfather's cabin fixed up and figured out what he was doing as a single dad, he'd take a stab at repairing the beautiful old window. He already had an idea for how to do it in a way that would make it shatter-proof.

But that was another problem for another day.

Right now, he had a son to get home.

A son!

It gave him a jolt every time he repeated that inside his head. Then again, he'd only been a dad for a couple of hours. It was probably going to take a lot longer than that to get used to the idea.



CHAPTER 3: BEGGING FAVORS

SHANE

As Shane buckled Luke into his booster seat in the back seat of his crew cab, he watched his head droop.

“That game of four-square really tuckered you out, huh?” He plucked a cookie crumb off the front of his faded red coat and flicked it to the ground outside.

For a kid who’d been transplanted from the sunny panhandle of Florida, he’d come unusually well equipped. Shane doubted they even sold winter coats that far south. It was like Luke’s grandmother had raided a resale shop in town or something before dropping him off at the church.

“No.” Luke sounded glum. “I was just wondering why everyone keeps leaving. First my old dad, then Mom, and now Grandma.” His mouth twisted as he worriedly lifted his head to meet Shane’s gaze. “Did I do something wrong?”

“Nope. Not that I know of.” His heart ached for the kid. By *old dad*, he could only assume Luke was referring to Heather Fuller’s boyfriend, or maybe even an ex-husband. Not that it mattered at this point. Shane was leaving it up to his attorney to unearth any details about her life that might still be relevant to raising Luke.

Hoping to comfort the kid, he reminded, “Your grandma said she’d call you when she gets back to Florida. In the meantime, I’m going to take you home and get you settled in.”

His son’s expression brightened. “Where do you live?”

“In a cabin on Bear Mountain.” Shane pointed at the mountain range behind them.

Luke’s eyes grew round. “Is it just called that, or do bears really live there?”

It was a rather insightful question for a four-year-old. Shane was impressed. “Hey, I only arrived there yesterday myself, but I didn’t see a single bear. Pretty sure there’s a mouse living in the kitchen cabinets, though.”

“Cool!” Luke gave a bounce in his seat. “Can we name him?”

Shane snorted. “I was hoping to, er...convince him to live some place else.” As in trapping and permanently eliminating the critter. However, it didn’t seem wise to break the news to Luke just yet.

“Can we get a different pet, then?”

“Maybe. What did you have in mind?” Shane was relieved that Luke didn’t seem too brokenhearted over not being able to keep the mouse.

“A tiger!” Luke didn’t even hesitate.

Not what I was expecting.

His lips twitched at the realization that someone must have taken the kid to a circus. “Hold that thought a second.” He firmly shut the door to the back seat and limped to the driver’s side of the truck. His Stetson and Luke’s suitcase were in the passenger seat. He propped his cane against the right side of the console.

As he took his place behind the wheel, he caught Luke’s gaze in the rear-view mirror. “You hungry?”

“No.” Luke shook his head, giggling. “I ate a bunch of cookies.” He sounded pretty proud of that fact. “Because I’m new, Danny gave me one of his. So did Jill and Mitch and Suzy.” He counted off the names of his new friends on his fingers. “At least, I think her name was Suzy. Mitch called her Suzy Q like the cupcake, but he might’ve been joking.”

“Well, unlike you, I haven’t eaten anything all day.” Unless coffee counted as a meal. Shane nodded at his son in the mirror. “So, you’ll just have to put up with the smell of cheeseburgers and salty French fries in the truck after I go through the drive-through.” There weren’t many stores open on Sunday in Pinetop, not even after church, so they were going to have to settle for fast food today and go grocery shopping tomorrow.

“French fries?” Luke’s eyes widened. “I could probably squeeze in a few fries.”

“Now you’re talking.” Shane started the motor, hoping the fact that he’d talked his son into eating French fries meant he wasn’t a complete failure as a parent. How he’d missed the fact that the kid had gobbled down at least five cookies during children’s church was beyond him. Actually, if he was being honest with himself, he did know the reason. She was five feet, three inches of blonde hair, phenomenal talent, and intelligence, with a heart of pure gold. He’d been distracted by a beautiful woman.

Story of my life, apparently.

As Shane pulled onto Main Street, Luke abruptly straightened in his car seat. “Do you have my tow truck?” He glanced around the back seat in alarm.

Shane removed the brown plastic truck from the cup holder he’d stuck it in and handed it over the seat. “You planning on towing anybody with that thing?”

Luke greedily snatched it up and waved it happily at him. “It’s Mater.” He seemed to think that answered the question.

“It’s who?” Shane shook his head at him in the rear-view mirror.

“Mater from Cars.” Luke sounded surprised that he didn’t already know that. When Shane didn’t immediately answer, he added, “The movie.”

Right. The movie.

“He’s my best friend. Or used to be,” Luke quickly clarified, “before I met Danny, Suzy, Mitch, and Jill.”

“Mater, huh?” It was an odd name for sure. Having a tow truck for a best friend was equally odd. Weren’t there any kids to play with in Florida?

“Yeah. Mater like tuh-mater, but without the tuh.”

“Oh, you mean tomato!” Shane nodded, finally understanding.

“Yep. Tuh-mater,” Luke repeated, making vroom vroom noises in the air.

The next thing Shane knew, his son was carrying on an entire make-believe conversation with the tow truck.

Hoh boy!

As he pulled up to the drive-through menu, he made a mental note to acquire a pet as soon as possible. His kid needed something to talk to besides a plastic toy.

The attendant called a cheery welcome to him and took his order. He ordered two of everything, with one exception. He substituted a bottle of apple juice for the soft drink on Luke's order.

Once their sack of lunch was resting on top of the console, he circled back to their topic from earlier. "So, why do you want a tiger for a pet, Luke?"

His son paused his conversation with the tow truck. "Because they're cool."

Can you be more specific, kid? "Why do you think they're cool?"

"Because they can jump through fire."

Shane caught his eye again in the mirror. "Sounds like you've been to a circus."

"Yes!" Luke sounded happy about that fact. "It was super cool," he bragged.

You certainly like the word cool. Though Shane was amused by his son's favorite adjective, he was determined to broaden his vocabulary a bit. He decided to start small. "Yeah, it sounds pretty epic to me."

"What does epic mean?" Luke leaned his head back against the seat as he waited for an answer.

"It means super cool with an extra serving of awesome sauce on top."

"Epic," Luke repeated, testing out the word. "Epic. Epic. It was epic." A smile split his face as he sat forward. "Going to the circus with Mom was super cool and super epic!"

Now you're talking, kiddo. Shane tensed and waited for Luke to start fretting again about where his mom was, but the fretting never came.

“Look!” He leaned against the window.

At first, Shane thought he was referring to the mountain they were heading up. However, the huffing sounds that ensued from the back seat told him that his son was occupied with something very different from sightseeing. He was blowing hot air on the window to make it fog up. Then he was drawing in it with his gloved finger.

Shane hunkered further down behind the steering wheel, not at all thrilled about the mess he was undoubtedly making on the glass. It was bad enough that he was probably dripping cookie crumbs all over the seat and floor. It was the first time anyone had ridden back there, yet his new truck was going to need to be completely detailed afterward.

“I gotta go to the bathroom,” Luke suddenly exclaimed.

Shane glanced in alarm through the rear-view mirror and discovered his son was hunched forward in his seat with his face contorted in genuine pain.

“Hey, it's alright, buddy. We'll be home in two or three minutes tops.” Shane frowned at the road ahead, wishing he could drive faster. However, the sharply curved lane was covered with a good inch or two of snow. It was best to proceed with caution.

“But I gotta go nooooooow, Dad,” Luke groaned.

Shane was torn between the joy of being called Dad and the fear that his son was about to have an accident on his brand new leather seat. Since they were alone on the road, he made a snap decision. Easing off the gas pedal, he feathered his brakes and brought the truck to a halt right there on the side of the mountain.

Reaching for his cane, he opened the door, hopped to the ground, and hobbled around the truck as fast as he could. Yanking open the back passenger door, he leaned in to unbuckle his son's seatbelt. However, Luke had already done

it on his own. He stood and launched himself into Shane's arms, then shimmied down him like a bear descending a tree trunk.

In no time, his pants were unsnapped and a trickling sound met Shane's ears. Chuckling in resignation, he leaned a hand against the truck bed and waited. And waited. And waited.

"Sheesh, kid," he muttered. "When was the last time you went to the bathroom?"

"I don't know." Luke yanked up his jeans and snapped them in place. "Too long."

Remorse slammed into Shane at the realization that it was his responsibility to make sure his son took regular bathroom breaks. "From now on, we'll visit the men's room before we leave the church." *Or before we go anywhere else.* He wondered if he should set a timer on his watch for every two hours or so until he got in the habit of checking for stuff like that.

"I prolly coulda waited until we got home." The bounce was back in Luke's step as he climbed into the truck. "I forgot I had on a Pull-Up."

Seriously? From what Shane understood about Pull-Ups, they were diapers for bigger kids. He drew a deep breath before asking, "Why do you have on a Pull-Up, Luke?"

Please don't tell me it's because you have accidents all the time.

"Grandma said I had to wear it on the airplane." Luke sounded embarrassed. "I told her I didn't want to." He wrinkled his nose in distaste. "Pull-Ups are for babies."

Shane was relieved to hear that was the only reason. "Tell you what, big guy. I'll agree to no more Pull-Ups if you agree to take a bathroom break every time I say so."

"Deal!" Luke stuck out his gloved hand.

Instead of shaking it, Shane reached up to curl his son's hand into a fist. "Fist bump." He lightly tapped their fists together. "It's kind of like a handshake, but cooler."

Luke quickly tapped his fist against Shane's a second time. "It's epic!"

Agreed.

Feeling like this parenting stuff might not be too tough after all, Shane buckled him back into his booster seat. Then he hobbled to the driver's side of the truck and pulled himself behind the wheel once again.

When they reached the driveway leading to his cabin, he found himself staring more critically at their surroundings than he had upon his arrival in town yesterday. Since he'd grown up here, he hadn't thought much about the scraggly, overgrown landscape. His grandfather hadn't even owned a lawn mower.

It suddenly struck him that the front yard was one big safety hazard. It was littered with fallen tree limbs, knobby stones, and random bits of trash. He parked his truck next to a broken five-gallon bucket and a half-buried blue tarp.

Assuming the trash truck still came on Tuesdays, that gave him two days to get the yard cleaned up. According to the pile of bills stacked on the island in the kitchen, his grandfather had paid for waste disposal services through the end of the year.

Unfortunately, the inside of the cabin wasn't much better than the outside of it.

"Yuck!" Luke took one look at the living room and stopped short.

It wasn't the word Shane would've chosen, but he agreed with it wholeheartedly. He glanced around the room at the threadbare furniture. The arm of the recliner was torn open, and the stuffing was squishing out.

"How about we throw it all away and start over with new stuff, kiddo?" Other than his workout bench and gear, he didn't own much in the way of furniture, since he'd always rented pre-furnished apartments.

Luke glanced, wide-eyed, up at him. "Really?"

“Really.” He curled his upper lip at the furniture. “We should drag all this stuff out to the yard and use it to start a bonfire.”

Luke’s dark eyes grew wide. “Cool!”

Shane raised the bag of lunch he was clutching in one hand. “Lunch first. Then we’ll start clearing out all this junk.” It was going to be fun carrying all this stuff outside while dragging a bum knee behind him, but as the old saying went — no pain, no gain.



CAROL PEERED WORRIEDLY THROUGH THE WINDSHIELD OF HER Jeep. Never before had she seen such a large curl of smoke rising on Bear Mountain. She pulled to the side of the road and reached for her cell phone to dial Shane.

“Hey.” He sounded cautious when he picked up. “Is everything okay?”

“You tell me.” She glanced anxiously through her windshield again. “There’s a lot of smoke billowing off your mountain.”

“Wasn’t aware you were on the fire brigade.” He didn’t sound the least bit alarmed about the smoke.

“Just assure me that you and Luke are alright.”

“We are. We have a bonfire going.”

“Oh, wow! Don’t be surprised if you get a call from the fire department. They’re not used to seeing many signs of life up your way.”

“Already got the call. I assured them everything was cool up here. Luke’s word, not mine. He thinks everything is cool.”

She smiled. “He’s a pretty cool kid.”

“I know. That’s why I’m working so hard to earn a few cool dad points here.”

“Let me guess.” She shot a look of dismay at the bag of groceries sitting in her passenger seat. “You’re roasting hot dogs and s’mores?”

“I wish! But no. It’s just a fire.”

“Have you guys eaten lunch yet?” She eyed the bag of groceries, hoping she’d picked out the right stuff for them.

“Yep. We went through the drive-through and nabbed us some greasy burgers and salty fries. Probably not the most stellar parenting on my part, but...”

“Yeah, that’s not even slightly nutritious,” she agreed with a chuckle. “But I might be able to help out with that.”

“It’s too late to pray over it, pastor. We already ate it.” His voice was teasing.

“It’s never too late to pray over stuff,” she countered, “but I actually had something else in mind. Something that requires a personal delivery. Hope it’s okay that I’m on my way to your place.” Pressing her speakerphone button, she left her phone laying on the dashboard as she pulled back onto the road.

“No, I don’t mind, but fair warning. My grandfather’s cabin is a wreck.”

She bit her lower lip, wondering if the place was in any shape for a small child. However, she held her tongue. Shane was doing the best he could. He didn’t need her criticism.

As she rolled into view of his cabin, she gasped. “I’m here,” she announced faintly. “I’m, uh...going to hang up now.” Without waiting for a response, she disconnected the line and stared aghast at the scene unfolding before her.

This was no ordinary bonfire. She could see the outline of chairs and a sofa jutting from the massive pile of burning rubbish. Pulling nose-to-nose with Shane’s truck, she killed the motor and sat there staring for a few seconds longer.

A face appeared on the other side of her window, making her jolt.

It was Shane. He opened her door for her and held out a hand to assist her to the ground.

She wrapped her scarf tighter around her neck before accepting his assistance. “Why are you burning furniture?” As soon as her feet hit the ground, she craned to see around him. Relief flooded her to note that his son was standing a good ten or twelve feet back from the fire.

He snorted. “Because most of it wasn’t worth salvaging. When I said the cabin was a wreck, I meant it. A few hours ago, it didn’t feel like that big of a deal. Now that I have a kid to raise, it’s a very big deal.”

She sucked in a breath. “So, what’s the plan, soldier?” She grimaced at the fire. “Other than torching all your furniture.”

“Not just the furniture.” He shook his head. “Luke and I voted to shovel out the entire cabin and start over with new stuff.”

“How’d you manage to get it out here?” The moment she asked the question, she wanted to bite her tongue off.

“You mean with this cane?” Shane thumped it on the ground for emphasis.

“Well...yes.” She shook her head helplessly at him and Luke.

“I helped.” The kid proudly swung his arm back to deliver a resounding high-five to his dad.

“Before you accuse me of breaking all the child labor laws,” Shane lifted his arm up and down a few times while Luke dangled from it, “it’s simple physics.” He angled his head at the porch steps. “We put most of it on a rug and slid it across the floor. Then we used two boards as a ramp to roll it down the steps.”

“Very clever.”

“And necessary, given my condition.” His mouth twisted wryly.

She sincerely wished she hadn’t brought it up, but since she had... “What are you going to sleep on tonight?” She scanned the front porch, which was crammed full of the stuff he and his son had dragged from the various rooms inside.

He shrugged. “My grandpa’s bed is in halfway decent shape. I found some clean linens to throw on it last night. There’s also a nice storage chest in the living room that we can picnic off of for a few days. Luke and I have already picked out some new furniture online. His bedroom set will arrive on Friday. Everything except the slide.”

A slide? “Did you say slide?”

“Yep.” He beckoned for her to follow him up the porch steps. “It’ll make more sense if we show you.” He gave a sharp whistle that made her jump. “Yo! Luke! Inside, buddy. We need to give this lovely lady the grand tour.”

With a chortle of excitement, Luke came barreling their way. “Pastor Carol! What are you doing here?” He eyed her Jeep with fascination.

“I came to see you.” She reached inside her vehicle to pull out the bag of groceries. “And to bring you this.” She waved the bag at the two of them.

“Food?” Before she realized what he was doing, Shane had plucked the bag from her arms.

Peeking inside it, he gave a low, appreciative whistle. “You’re an absolute goddess!”

“What’s a goddess, Dad?” Luke peered worriedly up at her, as if whatever it was might be contagious.

“It means she’s a really cool pastor, kiddo.”

“Like an epic one?”

“A totally epic one,” Shane agreed, winking at her. As they moved toward the porch together, he confided in a low voice, “I’m working to expand his vocabulary.”

By calling me a goddess? She nodded nervously, hoping for all their sakes it wasn’t something Luke repeated at church. In her experience, preschoolers had a way of bringing up stuff at the most inconvenient times.

She must have been moving too slowly for Luke’s taste, because he suddenly reached for her hand and tugged her up the rest of the steps.

“Come on! I wanna show you my room first.” He led her indoors and paused inside the empty living room. “There!” He pointed upward.

She followed the arm of his faded red coat to the loft railing above them. “You’re going to live in the loft?” She eyed the wall ladder leading to it, fearful he might break a leg if he fell from it.

“Soon.” Luke’s face fell. “Dad said I had to wait until he got the new stairs built.” His expression brightened. “And the slide.” There was a tinge of awe in his voice.

“The stairs will go here.” Shane, who’d been putting groceries in the fridge, limped to the side of the room. He gestured with both hands, including the one clutching his cane, to indicate that the stairs would run alongside the wall to her right.

She could easily picture them, along with the storage shelves or closet that would fit beneath the stairs. “Have you contacted a builder yet?” For a guy who’d just moved back into town, he sure was moving quickly through his punch list.

“You’re looking at him.” Shane spread his hands.

“You mean you’re going to build the stairs yourself?” She hoped she’d heard wrong.

“Yep. Two years of shop class, so I know what I’m doing. Not to mention I’m between jobs, so I have the time. I’ll have to invest in a saw and some other tools, of course. And the lumber.”

“And the slide,” Luke reminded, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

With a smirk, Shane gestured again at the nonexistent stairwell. “I’m thinking we should put the slide right beside the stairs.” He gave her a sheepish, sideways look. “Just as soon as I find a place that sells two-story slides.”

His words made a sudden idea pop inside her head. “Have you tried the junkyard?”

“Nope.” He gave her a searching look. “Why would I do that?”

“Because they remodeled the downtown water park last summer. I’m not sure what they did with all the old plastic slides, but my bet is they ended up at the junkyard.”

Shane stalked in her direction, pounding his cane against the wood flooring with a little more gusto than usual. The glint in his eyes made her legs tremble. “You should leave, Pastor Gilman. Now.” His voice was low and husky.

“Why?” The wise thing to do would be to immediately end their visit, as requested. Instead, she flicked an anxious glance at Luke, who’d dropped to all fours on the floor. He was rolling his toy truck around the chest, making acceleration and deceleration noises.

“Because you brought us food, then solved our slide acquisition problem. You’re at real risk of being kissed silly right now.”

Her heart did a few dizzy flips before her better judgment kicked into gear. “There might be another way you can show your appreciation, Mr. Jackson.” She stepped out of his path right before he reached her. Moving to Luke’s side, she squatted down. “I just found out that one of our wise men is moving out of town. That means I’m going to have to recruit another boy for our Christmas pageant.”

Luke stopped rolling his tow truck around. He rocked back on his heels, eyeing her with interest. “What’s a Christmas pageant?”

“A play.” She searched for the right words to describe it to a four-year-old. “You get to dress up in a costume and get on the platform in kids’ church.”

“I like to dress up,” Luke declared. “My mom bought me a Batman cape.” His face fell. “I don’t know where it’s at.”

“I’ll get you another Batman cape,” Shane promised, limping their way. “So what do you think about dressing up and being in Pastor Carol’s Christmas pageant?”

“Sure.” Luke spread his hands. “She makes good cookies.”

“Oh, I didn’t bake the cookies you had this morning, sweetie.” She suddenly wished she had, though.

“That’s okay.” He grinned at her. “They were still good. I ate six of them.”

“Six!” Shane glowered mockingly down at his son, making him giggle. “I thought you said you only ate five.”

Luke’s boyish features grew cagey. “I can’t remember.”

“Wise answer.” Shane’s expression grew wry as he caught Carol’s gaze. “Not that five makes me a better parent.”

She’d been trying to keep a straight face, in case he decided to reprimand his son for his excessive cookie consumption. However, she finally gave up the fight and burst out laughing. “Is that a yes, Mr. Jackson?”

“As close to one as you’re going to get, I’m afraid.” He angled his head at Luke, who had already gone back to playing with his truck.

“He’s hired,” she said quickly. “I’ll pay him in cookies, and they’ll be homemade next time. Promise!”

The admiring male glint was back in Shane’s eyes, lending her an uncharacteristic level of boldness. “And if you’re as handy with a hammer as you made yourself sound earlier, I could really use some help building the backdrop.”

He wagged his eyebrows at her. “If I didn’t know any better, Pastor Gilman, I might think you were angling to keep me around.”

She rose to her feet and locked gazes with him for a breathless moment. Before she could say anything, a burst of movement caught her attention from the corner of her eye. “What’s that?” She whipped her head toward the small gray creature scurrying in her direction.

Her heart leaped into her mouth as she pointed. “It’s a m-m-mouse!”

“I got it!” Luke sprang into action. He produced an empty one-gallon ice cream container out of thin air and brought it

down over the furry critter, trapping him beneath it. Then he turned around and sat on it, giggling.

“Oh, my goodness, Luke! You trapped a mouse.”

“I know.” He giggled some more, tapping his feet excitedly against the floor. “Can we keep him, Dad?”

“Only if you take him outside, kid.” Shane, who’d limped out to the front porch, returned with a rolled-up newspaper. He unrolled it and slid it beneath the ice cream bucket. Lifting both items, he turned to face his son. “Carry him as far away from the kitchen as you can. We don’t want him coming back inside.”

Nodding excitedly, Luke placed his hands over his dad’s and listened as he walked him through the final set of instructions.

As soon as Luke left the room, Shane shot a look of apology to Carol. “We probably have a few holes to plug up in the eaves outside.”

She nodded dazedly.

“Now, where were we, Pastor Gilman?” He dusted his hands off and faced her solemnly.

“Um...cookies.” She hated how breathless she sounded. “I was telling you that the only thing standing between you and my homemade cookies is a simple yes or no.”

Though his lame knee made his movements stiff, she could’ve sworn there was a swagger in the step he took to bring them closer. “I’m going with yes.”

He smelled like smoke from the bonfire outside, but the burning furniture had nothing to do with the smolder in his gaze as it met hers.

Awareness crackled in the air between them. “Practice starts at six o’clock. If truck boy over there wants to get in another game of four-square, you might want to come early.”

“We’ll be there, Captain.” His playful wink sealed the deal, making it feel more like they were discussing a date instead of a rehearsal.



ON HER DRIVE DOWN THE MOUNTAIN, CAROL'S PHONE vibrated with a series of incoming messages and notifications. She waited until she reached a stop sign before checking them. *Uh-oh!* It looked like she'd missed several calls from her father.

She hastily dialed him back, and he picked up right away. "You called, Pastor Gilman?"

"Several times." He sounded mildly irritated. "Where have you been? I was worried when I couldn't reach you."

She drew a silent breath, instinctively knowing he wouldn't like her answer. "I drove some groceries up to Shane Jackson's cabin. I thought it would be a nice gesture to pay a visit to the newest member of my flock."

"Isn't he a little old to be a part of your flock?"

"I was referring to Luke, and you know it." *Wow, but he's in a cranky mood!*

"Hon, I don't know how to say this, so I'm just going to say it."

Here it comes. "What?" She braced herself for the fatherly advice she was about to receive.

"Nothing, I hope. After what I'm about to say, I'd like nothing better than for you to assure me I'm barking up the wrong tree."

"Let's get it over with, then," she returned lightly.

"Very well. As much as I appreciate the many sacrifices Shane Jackson has made for our country, I think we can both agree he's made some pretty poor choices when it comes to his personal life."

Never before had she heard him censure another person so harshly. "He strikes me as someone who's trying really hard to turn over a new leaf, Dad." To atone for past wrongs. In her

father's own words, Shane hadn't hesitated to take responsibility for the son he didn't know he had.

"Be that as it may, he and his brother weren't exactly choir boys growing up. Their grandfather rarely darkened the door of our church."

"Can't blame them for that," she murmured.

"True. We can only hope the changes Shane is trying to make in his life are permanent. In the meantime, I urge an abundance of caution in your dealings with him."

"I invited Luke to be a part of our children's Christmas pageant. I hope that's not going to be a problem?"

"No. Of course, not. I don't expect you to avoid him and his father altogether. I just want you to be careful."

"I'm always careful, Dad." Her voice grew wry. *Maybe a little too careful.* That's probably why she was still single at the age of twenty-six.

The sigh in her voice must have given him a hint about what she was really thinking. "I know you are, hon. I doubt there's a more dedicated children's pastor on the planet."

"But," she prodded wearily, sensing that his fatherly lecture wasn't quite over.

"It's more of a *what* than a *but*," he corrected.

"Lay it on me, Dad." The sooner he got whatever was bothering him off his chest, the better for them both.

"Your mother and I have always wondered what happened between you and that fellow you were dating at the seminary."

"Nothing." She drearily turned onto Main Street. *Story of my life.* That word *nothing* completely summed up her dating life.

"Why'd you break up, then?"

"We didn't." She blew out a breath. "Not officially, anyway. I graduated and came home. He graduated and stayed in Phoenix. We more or less drifted apart after that." Their

calls had become less frequent. Then their texts were left unanswered for days. And then it had all just stopped.

“So, if you saw him again, it wouldn’t be too terribly awkward, huh?”

Her lips parted in surprise. “It wouldn’t be too terribly comfortable, either.” She gripped her steering wheel. “Why are you asking me so many questions about Brock all of a sudden?” She sensed there was more to it.

“Because the church board has stepped up their hounding about hiring an assistant pastor.”

Holy smokes! She almost missed her turn into the church parking lot. “What makes you think Brock would even consider the job?” He’d chosen to remain in a much bigger city to preach at a much bigger church.

“He submitted his resume to me a while back.”

She nearly choked. Covering it with a cough, she inquired faintly, “How long ago?”

“About four years. Right after you graduated from the seminary and moved back home, actually. Said in his cover letter that he knew there might not be an opening anytime soon, but he didn’t mind waiting.”

“He and I are not together anymore, Dad, if that’s the information you’re fishing for.” Her voice was flat. “I’m not looking to start anything again with him, either.”

“Thanks for your honesty, hon. Maybe I won’t reach out to him after all.”

“Reach out to him about what?” A tendril of alarm curled through her.

“The job opening that the board posted for an assistant pastor.”

She swallowed hard, hoping Brock wouldn’t see the job opening. “Well, I know one guy who won’t be applying for the job.”

“Oh, yeah? Who’s that?”

“Shane Jackson.” She wasn’t sure why she was steering the conversation back to him. His name had just sort of slipped out. “He’s way too busy being a single dad. Plus, he’s going to help build our backdrop for the pageant. He sounds like he’s pretty handy with tools.”

“Interesting.” Her father sounded less than thrilled. “Guess he’s got plenty of time on his hands since he’s between jobs. He hasn’t, by any chance, said when he plans to go back to work, huh?”

“Not to me, but here’s an idea. Maybe you could recommend him for a job at Castellano’s. From what I understand, they’re always looking for extra help.” Her father happened to be close friends with the dinner theater’s owner, Angel Castellano.

“An excellent idea!” The approval was back in her father’s voice. “I’ll get right on it.”

She mentally gave herself a point for talking him into doing something that might actually help Shane and his little boy.



REVEREND GILMAN LAID DOWN HIS CELL PHONE, SCOWLING AT it like it was a coiled snake. His conversation with his daughter certainly hadn’t gone the way he’d hoped. For one thing, he wasn’t any closer to finding out what had gone wrong between her and Reverend Brock Leighton. Since the very mention of his name seemed to have struck a chord with her, he’d chosen not to inform her that Brock had already resubmitted his resume for the new job opening. As promised, Pastor Gilman wouldn’t respond to it, but there was no guarantee that another member of the church board wouldn’t.

After a moment of deliberation, he picked up his phone again and dialed Angel Castellano.

The dinner theater owner’s voice boomed across the line. “What a nice surprise, Pastor!”

Though they were close, Angel always showed him the respect of calling him Pastor.

“I need a favor, and it won’t offend me if you say no.”

“Just tell me what you need, and I’ll see what I can do.”

“There’s a new guy in town who might be looking for a job.” Then again, he might not be. For all Jonah knew, Shane might be content to spend the rest of his days living off his disability check — the same as his grandfather had done.

“Tell me about him.” Angel’s voice went from friendly to all-business in a heartbeat.

“Served the past eight years as an Army Ranger. Came home wounded. Walks with a cane, but I hear he’s skilled with tools. So if you’re looking to hire someone for set building...” He finished the request inside his head.

I wouldn’t mind you keeping this particular guy so busy at Castellano’s that he doesn’t have any extra time left to hang around my daughter.



CHAPTER 4: KEEPING SECRETS

SHANE

Two-and-a-half weeks later

Shane stood in the living room doorway to admire his latest completed project. Finding out that he was a dad had been unexpectedly motivating. He'd found himself focusing less on his knee pain and more on what needed to be done around the cabin. According to a high school friend he'd gotten back in touch with, he'd spent the last couple of weeks working like a dog. Chad Hofstetter had cautioned him to take more breaks along the way.

Bro, you're no longer dodging grenades and high-stepping around landmines, he'd said. You can slow down a little.

But Shane still had way too much on his to-do list to slow the pace just yet. On the flip side, he hadn't felt this much energy surging through his veins since his release from the hospital. There was just something about being a dad that inspired him in ways he'd never been inspired before.

He wanted to give Luke the world. Or at least everything he'd gone without as a child. The winding yellow slide stretching from the loft to the front left corner of the living room was his finest step yet in that direction.

Following Carol's advice, he'd paid a visit to the salvage yard; and, sure enough, one of the water park's old slides had been in good enough shape to repurpose. He'd had to trim it down a little to fit in the cabin. Plus, he'd installed a few extra safety features — a protective dome over the first ten feet of it, plus a large foam landing pad at the end of it.

Due to its size and shape, he'd been forced to abandon his original plan to install the colorful chute next to the new set of stairs he'd constructed against the far right wall. He didn't mind the change of plans, since it had allowed him to build a storage closet with shelves beneath the stairwell.

Since Luke was now attending the church daycare three days per week, Shane had also been able to purchase a sander and refinish most of the wood flooring in the cabin. All he had

left was the final coat of polyurethane sealant to roll onto the freshly stained pine wood floor in the living room. He planned to do it after Luke went to bed this evening. Though it was the biggest room in the house, it wouldn't take long. The only thing he'd have to work around was the base of the slide.

“Not bad, Dad!” Talking to himself was another thing he'd gotten into the habit of doing during the past couple of weeks. Maybe Chad was right about him needing to get out more, but being a single dad made it difficult to have much of a social life. Instead of hanging out with his friends, he was home making grilled cheese sandwiches and helping Luke cut out snowflakes from computer paper, a skill he'd learned in preschool. Luke was determined to have them strung across the ceiling of every room in the cabin by Christmas.

Which meant Shane's entire social life could pretty much be boiled down to two things — attending church on Sundays and attending Christmas pageant practices on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Naturally, everyone he'd gotten to know through children's church was married with kids. Everyone, that is, except Carol Gilman. Unfortunately, she was way out of his league when it came to dating. Though he flirted with her now and then during moments of weakness, he was mostly on his best behavior when he was around her. She was a good person. She deserved to be treated with the utmost respect.

It was getting harder and harder not to put the moves on her, now that he was working alongside her and witnessing her beauty, kindness, and phenomenal talent first hand. She was complete and utter perfection poured into blonde hair and jeans, everything he'd ever dreamed of and more. Sadly, she remained out of his reach for one simple reason — she was too good for him. He knew it. She knew it. Everyone knew it.

His inability to squash his secret crush on her was simply his cross to bear. He'd tried so many times to turn off his feelings for her. So far, it hadn't worked. He wished he knew what it would take to get it through to his brain that she was never going to be his.

With a groan of self-recrimination, he pushed away from the doorframe and headed to his bedroom to shower and change before picking up Luke from daycare. No way was he going to show up at the church all smelly and sweaty after a full day's work at the cabin. He didn't want to scare Carol Gilman to Kingdom Come with his stench.

He emerged from the bathroom, barefoot and in jeans, toweling off his hair. While he was shrugging into a fresh plaid shirt, his cell phone rang. Since his cell number was new, very few people had it yet. He didn't receive many calls, not even junk calls.

The caller ID indicated it was a local number, but it was one he didn't recognize. He briefly considered ignoring it, then discarded the idea. It was a small town. If someone had gone to the trouble to track down his phone number, they probably needed something. Even more concerning, it might involve Luke.

With that in mind, he quickly accepted the call and raised the phone to his ear. "Shane Jackson speaking."

"Hi, Shane!" The voice on the other end of the line was unfamiliar to him. Whoever it was had the advantage of knowing who he was, though, so he waited for the guy to continue.

"This is Angel Castellano from the dinner theater."

"Oh! Hello." He wasn't sure what he'd done to warrant a phone call from the guy who employed nearly half the town. Even meeting him over the phone like this felt like an honor. "Great Christmas show you're putting on this year. I got to see it my first night back in town."

"So I heard."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yes. Jonah Gilman has been singing your praises about the work you've been doing on the set for the children's pageant. I've heard good things about your work from some of the parents, too."

“No kidding!” Shane was both flattered and surprised. He’d been getting some mixed vibes from the senior pastor of The First Church of Pinetop, making it impossible to tell if the reverend liked him or not. Though impeccably polite, his attitude toward Shane was a far cry from warm and friendly. Shane wasn’t sure if he’d done something to offend him, or if he was simply wary of Shane’s less than lustrous reputation.

“Bottom line is this. I have an opening on my team of stagehands if you have time for any more set building.”

Wait. What? “You’re offering me a job?” Of all the directions their conversation could’ve taken, Shane hadn’t seen this one coming.

“If you want it.”

Shane was flabbergasted. “Don’t you want to interview me first?” *And discuss things like pay and benefits?*

“Of course, but it’ll be more of a formality.” Angel Castellano’s voice was confident, as if he knew what Shane’s answer would be. “It’s a small town, so word travels fast. I already know everything I need to know in order to make my hiring decision. Thank you for your service, by the way.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Eight years in the Rangers, eh?”

“Hoo-ah!” *Rest in peace, brothers.* Shane ducked his head in a quick prayer for the surviving family members of the brothers in arms he’d lost. It was something he did every chance he got.

“I’m still at the office if you have time to meet with me this evening. Otherwise, we can schedule an appointment for later in the week.”

It was Wednesday evening, just shy of an hour from Luke’s pickup time. In two hours, his next pageant rehearsal would begin.

“I have about an hour before I need to pick up my kid from preschool, and I’m about a ten-minute drive from your office. Is that enough time?”

“Enough to get us started on the paperwork.”

“I might have someone who can watch my son until his pageant rehearsal starts. No guarantees. I’ll try to arrange it over the phone on my drive in.” He was already strapping on his knee brace and stepping into his boots.

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll see you when you get here.” Angel ended their call without setting a firm start time for their appointment.

Shane returned to the bathroom to blow-dry his hair for a minute or two. Then he clapped on his Stetson, grabbed his cane, and hobbled to the garage. He hoped his crippled state wouldn’t catch Angel off guard. After all his talk about being in a small town, Shane was hoping that meant the guy already knew about his bum knee.

He dialed Carol before he started the motor.

“Hi, Shane!” Her musical voice filled the cab of his truck, making his day a thousand times better. “What’s going on?”

He saw no point in beating around the bush. “Believe it or not, I’m headed to a job interview.”

“Oh, my goodness! Where?”

“At Castellano’s. Sounds like your dad recommended me for their set building crew.”

She was silent for a moment. “Is that what Angel told you?” The suspicion in her voice caught him by surprise.

“Yep. Is that a problem?”

“Not so long as you keep building the set for our Christmas pageant.”

“Of course, I will!” He had zero interest in abandoning her. He couldn’t believe she was worried about it.

“Then, no. Your new job shouldn’t be a problem for us, soldier.”

“Good to know.” He loved how often she referred to his former life as a soldier. Though she did it in a light and teasing

way, it never failed to make him feel appreciated for his eight years of service in the military.

“Since you’re heading there now, do you want me to take Luke to dinner?”

“Would you?” Her offer filled him with relief. He’d been wracking his brain for a tactful way to broach the topic, one that wouldn’t sound like he was completely taking advantage of their new friendship.

“In a heartbeat. I absolutely adore your son. For one thing, he’s the first kid who’s ever called me a goddess.”

A groan of mortification escaped him. “Say it isn’t so!”

“Oh, it’s so, Mr. Jackson. I hope you can live down the gossip it’s bound to stir now that Ruby Hart has overheard it.”

He groaned louder. “Not Ruby Hart!” *Anyone but her!*

She was the widowed mother of Castellano’s world-famous trick rider. That wasn’t the reason for his despair, though. The fact that Ruby Hart had been caught flirting over Thanksgiving with the widower father of another woman in town, however, was. She apparently had the hots for some local painter by the name of Dean Isaacson. Or so the rumor went. Dean’s side of the story was that he’d merely been advising her on the purchase of a painting. However, the wagging tongues of Pinetop already had them paired off.

“She’ll probably personally thank you for helping divert some of the local gossip from their direction to ours. After, of course, she personally engineers the diversion.” Though there was laughter in Carol’s voice, Shane detected a bit of anxiousness as well.

“Listen, I’m really sorry about this. This is on me.” He should’ve never been so careless with his words in front of his son. In his defense, it was his first day on the job of being a single dad, but still. His face turned red at the memory.

“Apology accepted, though I kind of like being called a goddess.”

“Of course, you do. You’re a woman.” His face grew even hotter.

She giggled. “He treats me like a goddess, too. Always opening doors for me and offering to carry stuff. You’re raising a complete heartthrob.”

Way to go, son! He inwardly applauded his son’s taste in women. On a scale of one to ten, Carol Gilman was a solid twenty. Apparently, even a four-year-old could see that.

Just thinking about his son’s age reminded him of something else. “So, uh...while I have you on the phone, mind if I ask another favor?”

“Tell me what it is first. Then I’ll tell you if I mind.” There was a breathless note to her voice that made him wonder if he’d caught her in the middle of lifting something heavy.

“Luke’s gonna turn five next week, so I’ve got only a few days left to figure out how to throw an epic birthday party.”

“Oh, I definitely do *not* mind helping throw a party!” She sounded so excited that he smiled.

“Do you really mean that, or are you just being nice?”

“I’m offering my goddess hostess service here, mister. Take it or leave it.”

“I’m taking it.” His face turned red all over again at the realization that he was never going to live down the goddess thing. “Just tell me what to do, please!” Five-year-old birthday parties were not in his lineup of skill sets.

“Tell you what.” She adopted a conspiratorial tone. “Luke and I will plan his party over dinner, and I’ll text you the shopping list afterward.”

Uh-oh. “You do realize he thinks Batman is real, and Mater from the Cars movie is his best friend?”

“Not anymore, soldier. His four new besties are Danny, Suzy, Mitch, and Jill. Try to keep up.”

“I’m aware of that, but—”

“He’s got a crush on Suzy, in case you haven’t picked up on that.”

“He’s four, Carol. Four!” That was way too young for crushes, wasn’t it? The fact that Shane couldn’t honestly answer that question threw him emotionally off balance.

“Going on five. Plus, he’s your son, Romeo.”

You may have a point. Carol worked with kids all the time, so he trusted that she knew what she was talking about.

“I’m still the only goddess in his life, in case you’re wondering,” she assured with a snicker.

“Man!” He snorted. “You’re something else.”

“A goddess, I know. We’ve already established that fact.”

“Right.” He wanted to kiss her so badly that it was probably a good thing they weren’t in the same room right now. The more time he spent with her, the harder it was getting for him to hide his feelings from her. He was going to have to step up his efforts in that department, because she was never going to stop being too good for him.

Only after he drove into the dinner theater parking lot did he realize they’d talked on the phone during his entire trip to town. “I just reached Castellano’s.”

“Oh, you made great time! Just pull around back and enter through the red door,” she instructed. “Angel’s office is either the second or third door down on the right. You’ll know him when you see him. Tall, dark, handsome Hispanic guy in a suit.”

“Should I be jealous?” The question slid out of him before he thought it through. As he pulled into a parking spot, he wanted to punch himself for his carelessness.

There was a brief pause before Carol answered. “He’s married. Very married. If you ever see him and Willa together, you’ll know exactly what I mean.” She sounded a little breathless again.

Shane decided to end the call before he said anything else stupid. “So, uh, thanks for keeping an eye on Luke for me. I

owe you big-time.” He knew exactly how he was going to repay her, too. He’d already done some initial research on the new acrylic window pane that he planned to make her — one that looked like stained glass. All he had left to do before getting started was to climb up there and take some measurements, hopefully without being caught. He preferred to keep this particular project a secret.

“You don’t owe me a thing, soldier. I’m so far in your debt for the set building that a little babysitting is the least I can do to repay you.”

Aw, man! He hadn’t considered that. Lifting his Stetson, he ran a hand through his hair. “Listen, I wasn’t trying to call in a favor here because I thought you owed me. I just trust you with my kid, alright?” More than anyone else in the world.

“Oh, my lands, Shane! Just focus on your interview. I’ve got this. You do things for me. I do things for you. That’s how friendship works.”

Normally, he would’ve hated being tossed into the Friend Zone like that, but being Carol Gilman’s friend felt like a true honor. He valued their friendship more than any other relationship he’d ever had with a woman.

“Thanks,” he said again. His heart was in his voice as he added, “I don’t say it enough, because I’m no good with words, but I appreciate you. So much. I, uh...better go.” He disconnected the call before he crossed any boundaries that couldn’t be uncrossed.

Adjusting his hat over his forehead, he reached for his cane, hating the necessity of pounding it against the ground before every step he took. Canes were for older folks, not guys who were twenty-six. However, it was better than rolling through life in a wheelchair, which was exactly what he’d be doing right now if he’d let the surgeons remove his leg.

On that sobering note, he dragged his damaged right leg across the short distance to the red door leading into the dinner theater. He found himself in a long hallway lit by wall sconces. Administrative offices lined both sides of the hallway. A few doors down on the right, an office door was propped open.

Removing his hat, Shane made his way there and paused in the doorway.

“Come on in.” A tall Hispanic man rose from his throne-like desk chair and beckoned him to approach. “I’m Angel Castellano.” He moved around the desk to shake Shane’s hand. “Have a seat.” He waved at a pair of upholstered guest chairs. “Would you like something to drink? We run a restaurant, so we have everything.”

“Nah, I’m good.” Shane waved away the offer as he took a seat and propped his cane against his good leg. He was surprised to discover that Angel didn’t appear to be much older than him. With the way folks talked about the wildly successful businessman, he’d been expecting to meet with someone closer to Pastor Gilman’s age.

“Not even coffee?” Angel raised his eyebrows. “I could use another shot of it myself about now.” When Shane didn’t turn down his second offer, he cocked his head. “How do you like yours?”

“Black.”

Angel took a seat behind his desk with a knowing smirk. Leaning over a complicated-looking phone panel, he pushed a button. “Two black coffees, please.” He settled back in his chair, steepling his hands. “How does it feel to be back in town?”

“I’m still getting used to it.” It was better than dodging RPGs, though. Far better.

“Though I grew up here, too, I don’t remember our paths ever crossing.” Angel was studying him through narrowed lids, as if trying to place him in his memories.

“Probably because we didn’t get off the mountain much.” He grimaced. They’d been too poor to participate in local sports and stuff. He and his brother had lost their parents when they were young, so their invalid grandfather had raised them. He’d been Luke’s age at the time.

“Believe me, I didn’t get out much, either. I grew up on Christmas Tree Farm,” Angel explained. “If I wasn’t at school,

I was working in the fields.”

“I hear they’re under new management out there.” A lot of things had changed in Pinetop since Shane’s enlistment in the Army.

“Yep, and the farm is in good hands with Emilio. Not sure if you’ve met him?”

Shane shook his head.

“Well, he’s a great guy and a great friend. I’ll introduce you sometime.”

Their coffee arrived. They sipped on it for about a minute. Then Angel sat forward in his chair, indicating he was ready to get down to business. “I usually start my construction crew off part-time at this rate.” He named an hourly pay rate that was a little less than what Shane had been hoping for. Watching Shane’s expression closely, he added, “However, between your exemplary military service and Jonah Gilman’s glowing recommendation, I’d be willing to offer you full-time right away. That would be Monday through Friday at this rate.” He named another amount that was right in line with Shane’s expectations.

“Sold.” Shane leaned forward, setting his coffee mug on the edge of Angel’s desk. “Where do I sign?” He hadn’t been expecting to land a full-time job this soon after his return to town. Up until now, he’d been so busy remodeling the cabin that he hadn’t taken the time to do much job hunting yet.

“There’s a bunch of paperwork to sign, because that’s how Human Resource folks keep their jobs,” Angel joked. “Seriously, though. Just give me your email address, and I’ll send you the link to all. You can complete about ninety-five percent of it online. It shouldn’t take more than an hour.” He typed something into his computer, then glanced expectantly across his desk at Shane.

Shane rattled off his email address, and Angel started typing again.

“The only other thing I’ll need is a drug test at the clinic.” He slid a card across his desk. “Here’s the address. They’ll

have your order from me by close of business today. Feel free to stop by tomorrow morning or anytime after that to pee in the cup. How soon can you start work?”

Shane’s eyebrows rose. “Don’t you need to see the results from my background check and drug test first?”

“We both know they’re going to come back clean. My employment offer is provisional, of course, based on those expected results.”

“Then maybe I should be the one asking how soon I can start.”

“How does tomorrow morning sound?”

Shane grinned. “So long as I can get the church preschool to keep my son for another two days per week, I’ll be here.” Normally, Thursday was one of Luke’s days at home.

An answering smile lit Angel’s dark features. “Pretty sure the goddess who runs the program will reserve a spot for your kid.”

Shane stared at him for a moment, feeling the heat of embarrassment creep up the back of his neck. “You heard about that, huh?” Apparently, Ruby Hart had wasted no time spreading the word about his verbal gaffe.

Angel guffawed at his expression. “Welcome home, soldier. Don’t tell me you already forgot just how small of a town this is.” He shook his head in sympathy.

“Where everyone knows everything about everybody,” Shane grumbled beneath his breath.

“Most unfortunately.” Angel’s voice was deceptively cheerful as he stood to end their appointment. “I’ll apologize in advance for what I’m about to say, but see you in the morning, and...” he paused a beat, “bring your hammer, Thor.”

As he stood, Shane groaned at the guy’s second reference to his unfortunate goddess comment. “You’re killing me, man.”

Angel chuckled. “Bet you slapped a filter on real quick after that slip-up.”

By now, Shane’s face was flaming like a five-alarm fire. “It was my first day as a dad.”

“Figured that, but excuses will get you nowhere in this town. You might just have to double down and own what you said.”

Shane gaped at his new boss, wondering if the guy meant what he thought he was implying. “She’s the minister’s daughter, and I’m...” he gestured helplessly at his bum knee, “a broken-down soldier and a single dad to boot.” A match between the two of them was never going to happen. If Angel was as close of friends with her dad as Carol claimed he was, he had to know that.

Angel studied him thoughtfully. “Word on the street has it that you don’t just call her a goddess. You treat her like one. Women dig stuff like that.”

It slowly dawned on Shane that this was probably another employment test — an unofficial one. It had to be. The guy was too close to the Gilmans for it not to be. “I have nothing but enormous respect for Carol and her family,” he said firmly. “May we please leave it at that?”

Angel nodded, looking satisfied. “For now.”

It was clearly a warning, but it was so kindly stated that it was hard to take offense to it. “Thank you for the job.” Shane was truly grateful.

“Welcome aboard. I’ll give you a tour of the place in the morning and introduce you to our general foreman on the construction team. I’ve already given him a heads up about you. Now go get your kid.” Angel glanced at his watch. “I made sure we finished before the preschool closed.”

“Thanks again.” Shane held out a hand. “For everything.”

There was nothing but friendly curiosity in Angel’s dark gaze as they shook hands and parted ways.



JONAH GILMAN HAD HIS ELBOWS RESTING ON HIS DESK IN HIS church office. His head was gripped between his hands. He'd been staring at his cell phone for several minutes, silently begging it to ring.

When it finally flashed to life with an incoming call, he realized he'd forgotten to turn the sound on. If he hadn't been looking directly at it, he might've missed the call altogether.

He hastily straightened in his chair and accepted it. "Well?"

"I hired him," Angel drawled. "Full time. You're welcome."

Jonah expelled a heavy breath. He could only hope that Shane Jackson's new job would keep him so occupied that he'd have a lot less time to hang around church.

And around Carol.

"What did you think of him?" He tried to convince himself he wasn't asking the question out of any need to self-validate his disapproval of the guy. Way down deep, though, he knew that was exactly what he was doing.

"If he hadn't made a good impression, I wouldn't have hired him. Certainly not full time with benefits."

"That's not what I asked."

"I'm trying to preserve our friendship."

Jonah's heart sank. "It was that good of an impression, huh?"

"He's genuinely in love with your daughter, if that's what you're really asking."

Jonah groaned loudly, gripping his head between his hands again. "Please take that back."

"I would never lie to you."

“What made you draw that less than desirable conclusion?” He felt like a man who’d drifted too far out at sea and was frantically treading water to stay afloat.

“I pressed him a little about a certain rumor making its way around town, and he assured me he had nothing but the utmost respect for both Carol and her family. In so many words, he made it very clear that there was nothing romantic happening between them and that there never would be.”

Jonah’s hands flew into the air in a silent praise to His Maker. “Thank you!” It was exactly what he’d wanted. He wasn’t sure why Angel was acting all doom and gloom about it.

“He’s a good man, Jonah.”

“Oh, yeah? He had a kid for five straight years that he didn’t even know about.” From Jonah’s angle, that was a textbook demonstration of the morals of an alley cat.

“According to you, he took responsibility for him the second he found out.”

“None of which qualifies him to date my daughter,” he growled.

“If you say so, pastor.”

The gentle chiding in his friend’s voice wasn’t lost on him. However, he wasn’t ready to open his heart to the idea of a relationship between his precious only child and the recently returned wounded soldier. Her current fascination with him was downright typical. She’d always been a fierce defender of those less fortunate than herself, an ally to the underdog, the rescuer of strays.

As soon as Shane Jackson started his new job and got back on his feet, so to speak, her interest in him would surely fade. Buoyed by that thought, Jonah ended the call after wishing his friend a wonderful rest of his evening.

He remained in his swivel chair, idly twirling his cell phone on his desktop, not quite ready to call it a night. Though Shane’s acceptance of the job at Castellano’s was a step in the

right direction, it might not hurt to add a little insurance to the situation.

He opened his center desk drawer and withdrew two pieces of paper. They were the resumes of the men the church board had selected as finalists in their search for an assistant pastor. He'd already set up an interview with one of the candidates, but he'd been stalling all afternoon on calling the second one.

The right thing to do would be to go back to the church board and disclose the fact that the second candidate might have a conflict of interest concerning the job. Instead, he dialed the man's number.

"Hey, Pastor Gilman!" The young minister who answered the call sounded every shade of surprised. "I honestly wasn't sure if I'd hear back from you."

A heavy feeling settled in Jonah's chest as he started to speak. "Hello, Brock. I'm calling to let you know you've been selected as one of the final candidates in our search for an assistant pastor."



CHAPTER 5: NEW FACE IN TOWN

SHANE

Saturday

Shane took one step inside the kitchen and stopped, unable to believe how quickly Carol had transformed his cozy cabin into a birthday wonderland. Cheery red and blue balloons were woven around the trio of iron pendant lights hanging over his butcher block island. She'd managed to angle each of them in such a way to hide all the rust spots. Replacing the pendants with new rods and covers was still on his to-do list.

A birthday cake anchored the center of the island. Not just any old, grab-it-from-the-premade-section-of-the-store kind of cake. It was a custom, two-tiered masterpiece that had been decorated to resemble a race track from the *Cars* movie. There was even a collision scene where one corner of the cake had been blasted off. Luke's beloved Mater was hitched by a licorice string to the dented and mangled fondant version of Lightning McQueen, preparing to tow him away — compliments of the decorators at Santa's Cake Shop on Main Street.

The cake was flanked by bowls of Goldfish crackers and packages of gummy fruit snacks. At both ends of the mini feast were fruit and veggie trays, which Carol had assured him were more for the parents in attendance than the kids.

Even his round kitchen table had been transformed. The scratched tabletop was now covered in a bright red plastic tablecloth. Two more balloons bobbed from the center of the table — black-and-white checkered ones that brought to mind a pair of race flags. Paper plates printed to look like black tires were placed at even intervals around the table.

“Wow!” Shane surveyed the decorations in wonder. Then he scanned the room for Carol, wondering where she'd taken off to. He'd left for only a minute or two to go take his pain meds. It was the only way he stood a shot at making it through the entire party while remaining on his feet. A glance at his

watch told him that their guests would start arriving at any time now.

“Carol?” Turning around, he thumped his way back to the living room. He arrived just in time to watch her shoot from the bottom of the wide yellow slide. Her arms were locked around Luke’s middle. They landed together on the vinyl-covered foam pad that he’d ordered from a gymnastics store online.

“Again! Again!” Luke hopped to his sock feet, yanking down the Cars sweatshirt that had ridden up his belly on his trip down from the second floor.

“Whoa there, Speedy! You’ve got friends on the way that’ll be here any minute.” While Luke raced to the front window to peer outside, Shane limped across the room to hold out a hand to Carol. The lights on his Christmas tree twinkled behind her head. The tree had arrived only yesterday from Angel Castellano. Apparently, he’d gifted them to all of his employees the weekend after Thanksgiving. It was super kind of him to make sure Shane’s family received the same special delivery from Christmas Tree Farm this late in the season.

Carol’s smile washed over him like warm sunshine as she placed her hand in his and allowed him to tug her to her feet.

“We did it,” she declared softly, reaching up with one hand to smooth back the long blonde hair that had fallen across her face during her slide.

“It was mostly you.” His fingers itched to help her brush back the remaining silky strands that were still plastered to her cheek. “Thank you.” He squeezed her fingers, which reminded him he’d yet to let go of them. “The cabin looks amazing.” As much as he didn’t want to, he forced himself to let her hand go.

“I’ve enjoyed every minute of it,” she assured, sounding a little breathless from her most recent trip down the slide. “Probably even more than Luke. With no nieces, nephews, or kids of my own, it’s actually the first children’s birthday party I’ve ever gotten to plan.”

He shook his head in astonishment at her. “Well, I feel like the luckiest guy on the planet that you were willing to practice on my kid.”

She finally gave up trying to smooth back her hair, and no wonder. The plastic slide must have sparked some static electricity. Instead, she pulled a black elastic band from the pocket of her jeans and proceeded to twist her hair up into a ponytail.

His mouth went dry as her movements caused the silkscreen Mater on her long-sleeved t-shirt to mold itself against her feminine frame. It took every ounce of his willpower to look away.

He didn’t realize he was grimacing until she asked, “Is your knee hurting again?”

He swiveled his head back to her. “It’s fine. I took something for it.”

“Shane, you don’t have to lie to me.” She impulsively took a step closer to him, tipping her face up to his as she worriedly scanned his features.

His gaze instantly dropped to the lip gloss outlining her very kissable lips. It smelled good, too, like candy and apples.

“I can tell the new job has been aggravating your injuries,” she continued softly. “You should probably go see a doctor.”

The door bell rang, eliciting a boyish shriek of excitement from Luke. “They’re here!” He bounced away from the window and raced toward the door.

Shane waggled his eyebrows playfully at Carol. “Saved by the bell.”

“This conversation isn’t over.” She stabbed a finger lightly against his chest. “You really do need to make an appointment to get your leg looked at.”

He reached up to remove her hand from his chest, but couldn’t resist tangling their fingers for a second before doing so. Though he appreciated her concern, he already knew what the doctors were going to say, and he didn’t want to hear it. He

had every intention of keeping his leg attached. *Thank you very much!*

Luke managed to undo the deadbolt and wrench open the front door all by himself.

Shane shot Carol a worried look. “Think I should install another latch higher up?”

She jostled him with her shoulder on their trek to the front door. “Aw! Look at you, all worried about dad stuff.”

He pretended to glare at her. “It’s my job to worry.”

“I think you’re safe up here on your mountain, soldier,” she assured with a snicker. “Pretty sure the only reason Luke’s guests found the place was because of all the balloon signs we put out.”

“Hey! Hey!” The first dad burst through the front door with a kid’s gloved hand clasped tightly in his. He was in solid camouflage, right down to his ball cap, as if he’d paused in the middle of a hunting trip to take his kid to a birthday party.

Shane was pretty sure he was Danny’s dad. “Thanks for coming.” To his enormous gratitude, Carol stepped forward to take the gift bag he was holding out. She carried it to the coffee table, which was also wrapped in bright red plastic cloth that she’d fastened to the legs with more white-and-black checkered balloons and ribbons.

“Nice place.” The dad’s gaze appreciatively roved the cabin, then came to a dead stop on the opening of the fat yellow slide.

“A slide?” His son breathed the words reverently. “You have a slide in your house?” His eyes grew as round as the birthday plates as he tipped his head back to follow the snaking yellow chute to the second-floor loft.

“Looks that way.” His father continued to gape, open-mouthed, at the slide.

“Come on, Danny,” Luke urged, waving frenziedly at him. “Let’s go down it together.”

Yep. The man was definitely Danny's dad — Dan, since the kid had the word Junior after his name. Shane gave himself a mental high-five for correctly identifying him. They'd only briefly run into each other a couple of times at children's church.

Dan folded his arms and moved closer to Shane as he watched the boys sail down the slide. "I'm never gonna hear the last of this from my kid. You're really raising the bar on parenting in this town."

Shane shrugged, feeling a little embarrassed. That had certainly not been his intention. "Guess I've got a lot of lost time to catch up on."

The doorbell rang again. Dan beat him to it and pretended to wave away the next set of guests. "Just go back home. The contest is over. Shane's already clinched the Dad of the Year Award."

"Oh, get out of the way!" A woman laughed and swatted his shoulder as she shoved past him. "Pregnant woman looking for cupcakes. Extra icing, please."

Shane immediately recognized Suzy's mom, Shelly Hofstetter, since she worked at the check-in table in children's church. Though she swore up and down that she was one of his high school classmates, he sort of remembered her from back then and sort of didn't. They'd all changed so much. He liked her, though, and appreciated the fact that she never made a big deal out of his single dad status. Incidentally, she was Carol's best friend, which was extra neat since her husband, Chad, had been one of his best friends back in high school.

Chad was right behind her with Suzy's hand in his. Suzy immediately ran squealing toward Luke and Danny. They ended up in a dog pile on the red foam pad.

"No to the cupcakes *and* the extra icing, darlin'." Chad was a tall guy with a booming voice and a lumberjack beard. He grinned and nodded in Shane's direction as he shrugged out of his buffalo plaid jacket and tossed it on the hall tree.

Shelly pouted at him as he helped her out of her quilted white coat. “You sap all the color out of my existence.”

“Nope. Just the sugar,” he retorted, stooping to plant a kiss on her pursed lips. “Doc said you gotta watch your triglycerides. Not to worry, though. I can all but guarantee Carol made sure there’s a celery stick in the house with your name on it.”

She was blushing when he lifted his head. “I don’t like you very much right now.” She tipped her nose haughtily into the air.

Chad winked at Shane and gave his wife’s belly a quick, affectionate rub before extending a hand to him. “She’s spent her entire life pretending she doesn’t like me, but our second bun in the oven says otherwise.”

Shane chuckled as he shook his hand. “Glad you guys could make it. Luke’s been asking all week when Suzy—”

“Whoa!” Chad staggered further into the living room with both hands outstretched. “Is that one of the old slides from the water park?”

Dan shook his head in resignation at him. “Tried to warn you, buddy, but you never listen.”

The brief lull in their conversation lasted long enough for Suzy’s exhilarated declaration to waft over them. “I’m going to stay here *forever!*”

“Me, too.” Chad exchanged a mirth-filled look with Dan. Then they sprang into motion, sprinting for the stairs leading to the loft. Dan made it there first, though he got his ball cap knocked off in the process.

“What are you? Twelve?” Shelly called after them.

“Twelve going on twenty-seven.” Carol joined them, laughing. “Not that I have any room to judge.”

Shelly pointed accusingly at her. “You totally went down the slide, didn’t you?”

“Let me guess.” Carol twirled a finger through her ponytail. “All this lovely static electricity gave me away?”

“More like the big, goofy smile on your face.” Shelly’s pout returned as she spun impulsively back to Shane. “Please, please, pu-leeeeeease invite us to come back and play at your house again after the baby’s born!”

“Consider it done.” Shane chuckled. “Visiting the water park is one of my favorite childhood memories.” Technically, he’d snuck in through a tear in the back fence since his grandpa refused to spend money on stuff like that.

“Mine, too.” Shelly laughingly tipped her head against his shoulder. “If Chad and I lived here, we’d be on the slide more than the kids. How could we resist?”

“Infinite willpower,” he sighed, watching Dan and Chad clown their way down the slide and wrestle on the mat in the effort to be the first guy in line on the stairs again. “And the fact that one trip down that thing, and I might never walk again.”

Shelly abruptly straightened. Her gaze dropped to his wounded knee. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to be insensitive.”

“You’re not. Trust me.” She was one of the kindest people he’d ever met. “You have no idea how bad I want to go down it. Maybe someday. Until then, I get to live vicariously through my son.”

“You and me both, Shane Jackson. You and me both.” She slid a hand across her swollen belly and grew still. “He kicked me. Oh, my goodness! The baby kicked me.” She reached for his hand and pressed it against her midsection.

He felt a flutter of something against his callused palm, then a sturdier thud. “First time, eh?”

“With this baby, yes.” She reached for Carol’s hand and placed it next to Shane’s. “Since my husband is playing on the slide, you two can share this moment of adulting with me.”

Carol’s blue gaze grew soft with wonder and something else as she met Shane’s gaze. “Do you feel it?”

“Yeah.” As he studied her expression, it dawned on him that what he was witnessing was pure longing. She wanted to be a mother, too.

“Ahem!” Shelly’s husband cleared his voice loudly as he approached them. “Anything you care to tell me, darlin’?”

“Shh!” She held up a finger to silence him. “The adults are talking.”

Chortling, he nudged Shane and Carol aside to take a knee in front of his wife. He pressed a cheek to her belly.

“Kick ‘im, baby,” Shelly hissed.

He pretended the baby kicked him so hard that it knocked him sideways.

“Very funny,” she grumbled.

He caressed her with his eyes. “You’re just jealous that I got to go down the slide, and you didn’t.”

“So jealous,” she agreed, pouting again.

“She’s already scheduled another playdate at Shane’s house after the baby’s born,” Carol announced airily, making a rally signal for them to adjourn to the kitchen.

The parents laughed as they collected their kids. It wasn’t easy plucking them off the slide until Carol asked, “Who wants some birthday cake?”

Hands shot upward amidst a chorus of happy shouts. “Me!”

Since Shane moved slower than everyone else, he stepped aside to let his guests enter the kitchen ahead of him.

Carol was already at the island, presiding over the candle lighting. The three kids gathered close to watch her. When she finished lighting the candles, she raised her head to catch Shane’s eye.

He nodded for her to continue, content to remain by the doorway and watch her in action.

“Alright!” She clapped her hands. “Let’s sing Happy Birthday.” She led them in the song. Though she wasn’t trying to put on a show, her lovely alto rang across the kitchen in perfect pitch, mingling with the rest of the room’s slightly off-tune rendition of the song.

Chad, who'd remained on the other side of the doorway, nodded knowingly at Shane. "If pastoring doesn't work out for her, she could easily hire herself out as a party planner."

Shane nodded back, though he was pretty sure Carol was more than content presiding over children's church.

Chad's gaze took on a sly glint. "She could call it Goddess Productions or something along those lines."

Shane's heart sank to realize that his friend was referring to the embarrassing piece of gossip working its way around town. "Guess you heard about my slip of the lip."

"Dude, everybody in Pinetop has heard it by now." Chad grinned.

"I was a dad-in-training at the time." Shane grimaced. "Still am."

"Looks like you've got plenty of help." Chad angled his head at Carol. "She's pretty incredible, isn't she?"

"Incredible doesn't even begin to describe Carol Gilman." To divert the conversation from where Shane was pretty sure it was headed, he added, "I'm lucky to have a friend like her."

"Just friends, huh?" Chad's mouth turned down at the corners. "That's too bad."

"Why's that?" Shane's hand mechanically came out to accept the plate of cake that Shelly delivered to him.

Chad threw his hands into the air as he stared in disbelief at his wife. "Where's mine?"

"If I can't have cake, you can't have cake," she admonished in a severe voice. "We're in this together, remember?"

"You're a cruel, cruel woman." He shot a longing look at Shane's plate.

The moment Shelly turned around, Shane shoved his plate into Chad's hands. "Make it quick, bro. Then return the evidence."

Chad practically scarfed it down whole. He was still brushing cake crumbs from his mouth when he handed the plate back. “You’re my hero.” His words were muffled around the bite he was still chewing. Somehow, he managed to swallow it before his wife turned around to give him the stink eye. She pointed two fingers at her eyes, then pointed the same two fingers at him.

He blew her a kiss. She stuck out her tongue at him.

Chad waited until Shelly turned around again before sidling closer to Shane. “Not trying to pry, but if you’re gonna make your move, the sooner the better.”

Shane raised his eyebrows, not comprehending what they were talking about.

Chad lowered his voice. “If I were you, I’d stake my claim on Carol pronto. Build a fence around her. Put up a sign and everything.” He mimed the shape of a rectangular sign.

So, we’re back to this again. “Like I said, we’re just friends.”

“Dude.” Chad shook his head sadly at him. “I don’t know who you’re trying to convince — me or you. All I know is you look like you’re drooling inside your mouth every time you lay eyes on that goddess.”

Shane snorted out a laugh. “You just had to throw that in there again.”

“Yep. Too good to pass up.” Chad’s expression waxed glum as his broad shoulders settled back against his side of the door frame. “Like I said, not trying to pry or anything. Just wanted to warn you.”

You’re totally prying, just like everyone else in this town. Shane raised his eyebrows at him.

“Okay. Fine!” Chad’s hands came up in defense. “I was prying a little, but only because I want to stay married. Shelly put me up to it the moment she found out Brock Leighton was moving to town.”

“Who’s Brock Leighton?” The name meant nothing to Shane.

“Guess I should call him Reverend Brock Leighton, since he just accepted the position of assistant pastor.” Chad’s voice took on a mocking sing-song note, as if he was about to deliver a sermon.

“At The First Church of Pinetop?” Shane felt like he was still missing a few crucial details of the story.

“Yep. Can’t believe Pastor Gilman actually hired him. He’s the fella Carol dated while she was at the seminary. Everyone was expecting wedding bells after they graduated, but nothing happened. Well...” he grimaced, “until now.”

Shane’s insides tightened in foreboding. “What do you mean? What’s going on?”

Chad’s expression turned incredulous. “Come on! Haven’t you heard a word I said?” The volume of his voice rose, earning him a warning look from his wife. “Her ex-boyfriend is moving to Pinetop. With as protective as Pastor Gilman is of her, I can only imagine he’s given the guy his blessing.”

“For...” Shane prompted when Chad fell silent.

“For pursuing Carol.” Chad shook his head, like he couldn’t believe he had to keep spelling stuff out.

Shane scowled at him. “Thought you said he was her ex-boyfriend.”

“For now.” Chad made a grunting sound. “There’s no law that says he has to stay that way.” He lowered his voice even further. “My guess is, Carol is the real reason he’s coming to town.”

“Not to accept the job of assistant pastor?” It seemed prudent to inject that detail back into the conversation.

“That, too, but...” Chad glanced furtively around them before continuing, “Between me, you, and the door post, he already had a job. A good one at a much bigger church in Phoenix. One that probably paid a heck of a lot more than he’ll ever make in Pinetop.”

Shane nodded slowly as he watched Carol scoop an extra serving of Goldfish onto Danny's plate. The kids were gobbling down the party food as fast as she could dole it out to them. His gaze narrowed in speculation as he tried to come up with a reason why she hadn't mentioned the new assistant pastor. He vaguely remembered hearing about the job announcement, but he hadn't heard anything about it since then.

Not that she owed him an explanation for how she conducted her personal life, but they'd grown closer in the past few weeks. She was his kid's preschool teacher and pastor. She was also their Christmas pageant director, his occasional babysitter, and now his unofficial party planner. It seemed to him that she should've mentioned the fact that her ex-boyfriend was on his way to town — not just for a quick visit, either. He was about to become her full-time coworker. A guy she'd undoubtedly be running into all week long at church.

Carol shot him a worried look as she herded the young revelers between him and Chad into the living room. She had them sit on the floor around the festively decorated coffee table. Several times while Luke was opening gifts, she cast unreadable looks in Shane's direction. At one point, she beckoned him to come join in the festivities.

He held back, unable to find the heart to do anything more than step inside the living room to lean against the other side of the wall. Finding out about Carol's ex was a real bone crusher.

It meant that this time next year, she wouldn't be blowing up balloons for lowly Luke Fuller Jackson. She would have long since moved on with her perfect minister boyfriend. *Shoot!* She might even be married to him by then.

At one point, he thought he overheard Shelly hiss to Carol, "Is he okay?"

The two women glanced toward him, caught him staring at them, and quickly glanced away again. It seemed to Shane that their guests left pretty quickly after that.

Carol shut the door behind the last of them and slowly turned to face him. He still hadn't moved from his post by the doorway leading to the kitchen.

"Well?" She clasped her hands uncertainly in front of her as she glided back in his direction. "I think the party went well." She smiled over at Luke, who was on his belly in the living room, putting together the new car track he'd received from Suzy. Suzy's parents and Danny's parents must have coordinated their gifts, because Danny's gift was a set of extra accessories that hooked onto the same car track — flags, a building for changing tires, and a jump ramp.

"I couldn't have done any of this without you. You know that, right?" He drearily met her gaze, longing to do exactly what Chad had suggested. He wanted to sink steel fence poles into concrete and pound at least eight feet of solid wood paneling into place around her. He wanted it so badly that his chest ached.

Her eyes misted as she studied his expression. Without warning, she closed the distance between them and slid her arms around his middle. Resting her head against his shoulder, she murmured. "I'm sorry your leg is hurting you. I almost wish my dad hadn't recommended you for the job at Castellano's. It's been hard watching you—"

"Why didn't you tell me about Brock Leighton?" He was tired of her sympathy. Tired of her pretending that things were okay between them when they weren't. They never had been okay and never would be okay.

"What?" She drew back in astonishment, dropping her arms. "Is that why you're being so cranky? I just assumed your leg was hurting again."

"My leg is fine, Carol. It's been fine, so you can quit following me around with your puppy dog eyes like I'm about to collapse any second." He hated being an invalid. He didn't need her or anyone else reminding him of it every chance they got.

The way she flinched told him she got the message loud and clear. "Wow!" A layer of frost covered her gaze as she

took a step back from him. “Just...wow! I have never before wanted to slap somebody as badly as I want to slap you right now, so I’m just going to leave...before I do.” To her credit, she managed to keep her voice down. The fact that she’d done so for Luke’s sake should’ve made him feel better. It didn’t.

As far as he was concerned, she’d already delivered her slap in the form of Brock Leighton. “Whatever makes you feel better,” he growled, hating himself a little more with every angry word he uttered.

“I don’t feel good about anything right now, Shane.” Her voice broke as she whirled away from him and headed for the door.

He felt like the world’s biggest brute as she yanked her coat from the hall tree, nearly tipping it over. He knew he should apologize, but the damage was already done. A simple apology wouldn’t fix anything at this point.

He braced himself as she reached for the door, fully prepared to watch her walk out of his life forever.

She paused with her hand on the knob, speaking in the same low voice as before. “I didn’t tell you about Brock, because I didn’t think I needed to. He’s part of my past, Shane. Believe it or not, we all have one. You don’t have a corner on that market.”

“Listen, I...” Unable to bear hearing the hurt in her voice any longer, he finally pushed away from the wall. “You’re right. You don’t owe me anything. I’m sorry.”

“You should be,” she returned bitterly. “Coming at me like that was completely uncalled for.”

“I know.” His chest felt like it was weighed down by one of the boulders in his front yard. “I’m sorry,” he said again.

“I don’t want to argue with you about Brock.” Her voice trembled as she faced him again.

“Me, either.” A little more reassurance would be nice, though.

“I knew he applied for the job. I didn’t know my dad had offered it to him or that he’d accepted it.”

“Really?” Shane finally reached the door. Slapping his hand on the wall beside it, he tried to put a leash on the fresh surge of anger her words inspired, but failed. “I know how close you are to your dad. There’s no way he would’ve made a decision like that without telling you.”

“You’d think.” Her voice was as bleak as he felt. She scanned his face again, then shook her head at him. “Bye, Shane.”

Though he was crowding her personal space, she managed to get the door open wide enough to squeeze past it. The sound it made when she shut it behind her was like a bullet piercing his heart.

Shane wanted to run after her and beg her to come back. As the sound of her Jeep motor revved, he almost did. He moved to the living room window to watch her taillights fade. A full moon was rising over the evergreen trees in his front yard. He was half-tempted to head out to the porch and start howling at it.



CHAPTER 6: WRINKLE IN PARADISE

CAROL

The moment Carol was back inside her Jeep, she allowed her tears to start falling. She started the motor and turned the steering wheel toward the gravel driveway leading away from Shane Jackson's cabin.

Away from him.

Away from everything she'd mistakenly thought they had between them.

By the time she reached the mountain road, her shoulders were shaking with silent sobs. Never in her life had she felt so defeated.

Fearing that she was in no condition to drive, she pulled to the side to gather her emotions. There was no shoulder this high up the mountain, but there was also no traffic. Absolutely none. Zero.

She glanced in her rear-view mirror a few times, hoping to see the headlights from Shane's pickup truck. It was a foolish wish, but she longed for him to come after her — for him to want to make things right with her again. However, the street behind her remained dark. Nothing but the glow of the full moon filtered between the tall spruces, pines, and junipers lining both sides of the road.

Only after her weeping settled into hiccups did she risk pulling back on the road. As she drove down the side of the mountain, her lips moved in prayer.

"Please, God. I know Shane is hurting, or he would've never lashed out at me like that." She'd been forced to watch him for the last week as his gait had gotten stiffer and his face had grown paler. He was like a wounded wild animal, gnawing at the very hand trying to release him from the trap he was caught in.

As a minister, she was trained to handle situations like this. According to the textbooks, Shane's behavior wasn't personal. Except it was.

Because I made it personal.

She could've invited Luke to children's church without arm-twisting his dad to come with him. She could've recruited Luke to the Christmas pageant without begging Shane to help build the sets. She could've had Luke's classmates sing Happy Birthday to him at the preschool without offering to plan an entire Cars-themed birthday party at his house.

This was exactly what her father had warned her about. He'd been pretty specific on the details, too. *Don't get too close to the guy. It could damage your reputation. It could nullify your witness. It could derail your ministry.*

Though she wasn't 100% convinced any of that was true — at least not in her and Shane's case — she couldn't deny that the goddess gossip had made some serious rounds through Pinetop.

“Goddess!” A sigh eased out of her as she turned onto Main Street. Only Shane Jackson would've thought to call her something like that. She'd noticed the worshipful way he looked at her. Everybody else probably had, too. That was what made it such a juicy piece of gossip. Shane hadn't just called her a goddess in a moment of silliness. He truly thought of her that way.

Sadly, she could only come up with one explanation for his continued standoffishness. He thought she was too good for him. Which still didn't explain his blowup at her this evening. Unless...

The truth hit her so hard that she pulled into the nearest parking lot, which just so happened to be Castellano's. Setting her emergency brake and turning off her headlights, she reached for her phone and dialed the one person she always called when she was hurting.

“Hey, baby.” There was a sigh in her mother's voice, almost as if she'd been expecting the call. Eve Gilman was a quiet, demure woman. She'd always remained in the background throughout her husband's career, content to let others lead the choir, run the ladies' auxiliary, and chair the fundraising committee. For years, Carol had assumed it was

because her mother's health was on the delicate side. Now that she was all grown up, though, she'd come to appreciate the fact that her mother considered her ministry to be in the home. She was the glue that held the three of them together. She was their sounding board, their biggest cheerleader, and the one who fought the hardest for them from her knees.

"Hi, Mom." Carol swallowed hard, trying not to break down again.

"How was the birthday party?"

"It was perfect. Absolutely b-beautiful." Her voice quivered. "Until the very end."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"Yes, please," Carol whispered.

"Over coffee?" her mom offered.

"No." Carol sniffled. "I just want to stay right here." *In the dark. Where nobody can see my puffy eyes and splotchy cheeks.* She hadn't just cried her way down the mountainside. She'd ugly-cried down it.

She described the balloons and the tablecloths, the incredible cake, and the more incredible company. "I had the best time, Mom. Luke is such a great kid, and I think the world of Shane. You know that. Being with them at the birthday party, surrounded by friends and laughter...it felt like I was part of something special. Like we were..." She wasn't quite sure how to put the next part into words.

"A family?" The suggestion was made with the same gentle understanding her mother infused into everything she said.

"Yes." More tears gushed from Carol's eyes. She'd been a fool to allow herself to get caught up in the fairytale inside her own head after Shane had made it clear they were nothing more than friends. He was still trying to figure out how to be a single parent. He was putting his son first, like he should.

"I'm sorry," she rasped, diving into her purse for a tissue. "I really thought I was done crying."

“You care for them deeply. I can tell.” It was a statement, not a question.

“I do, Mom. I never meant for it to happen, though. Dad must be so disappointed in me. He warned me again and again to keep my distance from them.”

“He’s not disappointed,” Eve Gilman said quickly. “He’s afraid. That’s all.”

“What’s he afraid of?” Carol’s voice rose shrilly.

“This.” Her mother gave a damp chuckle.

That was when Carol realized she was crying, too.

“I’m sorry, Mom.”

“Don’t be. You haven’t done anything to be sorry about.”

“Other than screwing things up with Shane,” Carol sighed.

“I’m not sure that you have,” her mother said carefully.

“What do you mean?”

“Love is a messy business, sweetie.”

Carol caught her breath. “Who said anything about love?” She hadn’t allowed her brain to even go there. Yet.

“I did. I’ve never seen any man wring these kinds of emotions out of my daughter, and I think I know why.”

“He only wants to be friends. He’s made that very clear.” *Which is why I can’t let myself fall in love with him.* It would be so easy to, though. Carol squeezed her eyelids shut, awash with memories of all the moments they’d shared. The quiet ones. The sweet ones. The ones she was so sure would lead to more, but hadn’t.

“That might be what he said. I’m not so sure it’s what he really wants.”

Hope leaped into Carol’s heart. “He’s not ready for a relationship.”

“True.”

“He so new at being a dad,” Carol prodded, sensing her mother wanted to say more.

“Yes, but you’ve been a tremendous help with that.”

“You think?” Her mother’s praise warmed her heart.

“Beyond the shadow of any doubt, sweetie.”

Carol drew a deep, shuddery breath. “Luke is always going to come first with him.”

“Would you respect him more if that wasn’t the case?”

“No. Of course, not.” Carol experienced a nagging sensation that her mother was still holding something back. “Mom, what aren’t you telling me?”

“There’s something else weighing on Shane right now. Something very few people in this town are aware of.”

“What are you talking about, Mom?”

“He’s at real risk of losing his leg, baby.”

“What?” Horror shook Carol. She reached for the steering wheel, desperately needing something to hold on to. “How did you find out?”

“It wasn’t easy, believe me. I had to call in a favor from many years ago to learn the truth. HIPPA rights might have been violated in the process.”

“Mom!” It was the first time Carol could recall her mother breaking the law. Ever. The woman didn’t have so much as a speeding citation to her name.

“Don’t worry. I’ve already repented for my sins, but here’s the bottom line. The surgeons wanted to remove his leg after the explosion. Still do. But so far, Shane won’t let them. Sounds like he’s holding out until the bitter end.”

“Oh!” Carol whimpered the word, overcome with fear and concern for him. What her mother had found out about him connected a lot of dots for her. “I’ve been so worried about him, Mom. Ever since he started that new job, he’s lost weight and grown paler. He can’t get through a few hours without popping his next pain pill.” And she’d unwittingly been

making it worse by wheedling him into finishing the sets for the Christmas pageant. “But every time I bring it up, he gets all defensive.” And angry, though Carol wasn’t entirely sure his anger earlier had as much to do with his pain level as it did his frustration over finding out about Brock the way he had.

The more she thought about it, the more convinced she was that someone at the party had broken the news to him, probably Chad. He’d kept Shane cornered longer than anyone else. Plus, he and his wife had exchanged a number of covert glances, which were making a lot more sense now, too.

“And right in the middle of Shane’s medical crisis, he finds out he’s a dad,” her mother reminded. “Boom! Talk about emotional whiplash.”

“And now Brock is on his way into town,” Carol added dully. “I can’t believe Dad’s doing this to me.”

“Me either, baby, but I can assure you he’s convinced himself he’s doing what’s best for you.”

Carol couldn’t have disagreed more. “Don’t you think it’s a little odd he kept his hiring decision from me? I didn’t find out until the official announcement was posted on the church website.”

“He’s a father, Carol. I’m not sure that’s something you or I will ever fully understand.”

“I’m trying to, but it’s hard.” Carol shook her head. No matter what her father’s reasons were, she still felt betrayed.

Silence fell between them. Her mother was the first to break it. “I saved a plate of leftovers for you if you’re hungry.”

“Thanks, but I ate at Shane’s house.”

“Want me to set it in the fridge?”

“Yes, please. I don’t know when I’ll be home.” Carol had a lot of thinking to do and a lot more praying. After she ended their call, she set her course for the church.



Two days before Christmas

“GOOD AFTERNOON, PASTOR GILMAN.”

Carol jolted at the sound of Brock Leighton’s voice. She glanced up from the stage. She was on her hands and knees, laying out tape X’s for the key actors to stand on. A few of the old X’s had gotten kicked up during their last rehearsal. Instead of patching them, she’d decided to pull up all the old pieces of tape and put down new ones.

He strode her way, hands in the pockets of his pinstripe gray trousers. Though every strand of his slick blonde hair was sprayed into place, his shirt-sleeves were rolled up and his jacket was missing. His power red tie, however, was very much still wrapped around his cocky neck. The most remarkable thing about his appearance was the cautious look riding his angular features. He approached her like a bomb squad member stepping closer to diffuse a ticking explosive.

“What are you doing here?” Though she and her father weren’t exactly on speaking terms at the moment, her understanding was that Brock was supposed to report to his new job after the first of January.

“Nice to see you, too, Carol.” He lazily withdrew his hands from his pockets to spread his arms wide. “Thought you’d at least congratulate me on my new job.”

“Congratulations.” She lowered her head over her roll of tape and went back to work.

“Wow!” He let out a long, low whistle. “You’ve always been good at getting your point across. I see that hasn’t changed.” He moved across the room to take a seat on the edge of the platform. “It kind of sounded like you were booting me from the room just now.”

She shot him a speaking look. “Is that why you’re still here?”

“Ouch!” He sounded like he wasn’t sure how to take that.

“I’m kidding, Brock.” She shot him an exasperated look. “You’re welcome to visit the children’s sanctuary anytime you want. You work here now, the same as I do.”

“Thanks.” His voice was sarcastic. “That’s very generous of you, work buddy.”

She chuckled at how easy it was to get under his skin. That hadn’t changed, either. “No offense, but I never pegged you for a country pastor.”

“Then you’d be wrong. I sent my resume to your dad the day you came home to become the children’s pastor here.”

So I heard. She flicked another glance at him as she slapped the final piece of tape into place. “That was four years ago.” *You don’t write. You don’t call.* And neither had she. They’d simply drifted apart.

“What can I say? I’m a patient man.” He spread his hands again.

“Listen, Brock.” She glanced around them. “It’s really nice catching up with you, but I have a Christmas pageant to get ready for, so…”

“So scram, huh?” He stood and backed toward the door.

“Not necessarily. You’re welcome to stick around, but I know how you feel about kids and they’ll be showing up any second now.”

As if on cue, the double doors of the sanctuary banged open, and the first pair of boys sped into the room.

“Hey, Pastor Carol!” One of them waved at her on his mad dash to the four square game on the other side of the room.

“Hey, Billy!” She bit back a chuckle as Brock arched his back to avoid the pumping arms of the other kid.

“Whoa!”

Carol felt like she’d been hit by a lightning bolt as Shane’s booming voice filled the room.

“There’s absolutely no running in kids’ church. You boys know that.” His cane thumped nearer as he passed the stage and headed toward the four square game.

“Yes, sir!” Both boys grew slack-jawed with attention as they faced him.

“I warned you there’d be consequences the next time I caught you running in church, didn’t I?” Though it was the day of the Christmas pageant, Shane was still in his usual jeans and boots. The only thing different about his appearance was the suede blazer thrown over a white-collared shirt. No tie. One button undone.

“Yes, sir,” the boys chorused again.

“Alright, then. Drop and give me ten pushups.”

Luke, who’d remained shyly at his side during his entire tirade, was the first to drop to the floor. The other two boys quickly followed suit. To Carol’s consternation, Shane lowered himself first to his left knee, then to the prone position.

She watched with bated breath as he somehow managed to get his left foot hooked beneath his right one. Keeping his weight balanced on his one good foot, he lowered his chest to the floor and counted, “One.”

Carol pressed a hand to her mouth to cover her smile as the two boys being punished went into all sorts of contortions in their attempt to keep up with him.

“This is hard, sir,” one of them groaned, pausing with his bottom stuck high in the air.

“Maybe you’ll remember that the next time you have the urge to run in church, kid.” Shane continued to count out the pushups. “Eight. Nine. Ten.” He wasn’t the least bit out of breath by the time he finished, though the three boys were flushed and panting. Getting back into the standing position wasn’t nearly as easy for him. While the kids bounced back up like pogo sticks, he painstakingly worked his way back to his left knee. Then he reached for his cane and used it to slowly pull himself back to his feet.

“Sad.” Brock muttered the word for Carol’s ears alone. Then he raised his voice. “Thank you for your service, Ranger.”

Carol’s insides turned queasy at the realization that he knew exactly who Shane was. The way Shane’s jaw tightened

as he nodded back at him told her that he was mistakenly assuming she'd told her ex-boyfriend all about him.

Brock faced her again. "I take it you're not coming to lunch with us?"

It was a dumb question. She shot him an incredulous look. "Who do you mean by *us*?"

"Your parents invited me over to the house for lunch."

It seemed to her that he was speaking a little louder than necessary, probably to ensure that his words carried across the room to Shane.

"That's nice." Hopefully, by her response, Shane could tell that this was the first she was hearing about it. "Eat one of Mom's famous dinner rolls for me."

"I can do you one better than that and bring you a plate later on." Brock's voice turned caressing.

Her eyebrows flew upward at the realization that he was flirting with her. She blinked at him, hardly knowing what to say. When she finally found her voice, she tried to keep it light. "No thank you, Pastor Leighton. I'm happy to inform you that we're all stocked up on Goldfish and cookies here." Inside, she was seething. If he thought he could march back into her life and rekindle what had long since fizzled out between them, he was sorely mistaken!

Her cheeks were so hot after he left the room that she returned to all fours to blindly fiddle with the tape some more.

Luke joined her on the platform and squatted down beside her. "Whatcha doin', Pastor Carol?"

She pasted on her brightest smile as she met his gaze. "I'm marking out the place where Joseph, Mary, Gabriel, and the three wise men will be standing during the pageant."

He bobbed his head in understanding. "Only one more practice until the big show, huh?"

"Yep. It's the last one, kiddo. It's been fun, hasn't it?" Despite everything that had happened, both good and bad, she had no regrets about inviting him to join the cast of the

Christmas pageant. Being part of the team had helped him acclimate to his new surroundings and make a few friends along the way. Word about his slide in the living room had quickly spread, making him one of the most popular kids in church. Pretty much all the kids were angling for an invitation for a playdate at his house.

“Yep.” Luke bounced to his feet and scampered back to the four square games. Both were in full swing now that kids and parents were pouring into the room.

As hard as it was, Carol straightened and forced herself to meet Shane’s gaze.

He nodded at her and thumped his cane in her direction. He came to stand directly below the stage. “About the other night—”

“I’m sorry,” she breathed. “Everything I said after Luke’s birthday party was completely un-pastorly of me, and I’m sorry.”

“Even pastors are allowed to be human, Carol.”

She nodded, blinking back tears. “Thanks.”

“I’m sorry, too.” He shook his head regretfully. “You were right. My leg was killing me that night. I shouldn’t have lied about it, and I definitely shouldn’t have taken a bite out of you for noticing it.”

She glanced down at his wounded knee, and it was all she could do not to start weeping.

“Hey! Are you okay?” He looked like he was about to climb on the platform, but she stopped him with a head shake.

“Maybe we could take this into my office?” She held his gaze, silently pleading for him to say yes.

“Of course.” He held out a hand to her, ever the perfect gentleman, and assisted her down from the stage.

She had no idea how much pain the maneuver cost him, though she imagined it was less pain than the pushups had been.

On her way past the check-in table, she bent her head closer to Shelly. “Do you mind keeping an eye on the room for two minutes?”

“Not at all.” She gave the two of them an arch look. “Anyone who steps out of line will be assigned pushups.”

Shane’s lips twitched.

She pointed at him. “In case you’re wondering, I highly approve of our new discipline policy.”

He was still smirking when he escorted Carol into her office in the back of the room. Though the wall was made of glass from the chair rail up, her door was solid oak. He shut it and leaned back against it.

As he studied her face, he sobered. “What’s wrong?”

“Your leg.” Her eyes filled with tears. “You’re afraid of losing it, aren’t you? That’s why you don’t want to talk about it.”

He paled a little, but continued to meet her gaze squarely. “Who told you that?”

“I’d rather not say, but my source is impeccable.”

“Any particular reason you were asking around about me?”

“I wasn’t.” She shook her head. “I was bawling my eyes out to my mom about how the birthday party ended, and...” She gulped, realizing that she’d inadvertently given away her source.

“Why would your mom care about what happens to my leg?”

A tear streaked down her cheek. “Newsflash, soldier. A lot of people care about you. If you didn’t want to be surrounded by folks like us, you shouldn’t have come home.” There. She’d finally admitted that she cared. He could take it however he wanted. She was tired of dancing around the topic.

“Just tell me how your mom found out,” he pressed.

“Fine.” She waved a hand irritably at him, afraid he was missing the point. “She used to date the guy who handled your grandfather’s estate.”

His eyebrows rose. “So much for client-attorney privilege.”

She made a face at him. “Are you going to sue her for caring?”

“No.” His smile was sad. “It’s nice. Really nice. It might take me a while to get used to it, though. I’m more accustomed to being a loner.”

“Oh, really?” Her voice was bitter. “I hadn’t noticed.”

His eyes glinted with humor and another emotion she couldn’t name. “Sorry to break it to you, but sarcasm isn’t really your thing, pastor.”

He was right. Worrying was more up her alley. “Please go to the doctor, Shane.”

“Not happening.” His jaw tightened.

“Why?”

“Because the surgeons in San Antonio didn’t mince words. I already know that nothing but a miracle is going to save my leg. And since I don’t qualify for one of those, I’m putting off the inevitable for as long as I can.”

“Miracles aren’t something you earn, Shane.”

His dark gaze raked her face. “Are you saying that as a pastor or as a friend?”

She spread her hands. “Both, I guess. Miracles are gifts. Not promises or guarantees. All we can do is ask for them, then accept them when they come our way.”

He snorted. “Then maybe you can put in a good word for me up there.” He pointed toward the ceiling.

“That’s what I brought you in here to tell you.” She drew in a deep breath. “Now that I know what’s really going on, I’m going to be asking God every day for a miracle.” She gave him

a watery smile. “I’m not too proud to do a little begging, either.”

“Thanks.” He reached up to wipe the tear off her cheek with the pad of his thumb. “That means more to me than you’ll ever know.” He cocked his head toward the glass wall, where a few kids had their faces pressed to it. “I think we exceeded our two minutes.”

“Right.” She gave him a tremulous smile. “Are we okay again, Shane?” She couldn’t bear the thought of them going another day angry at each other.

“If you’re good, I’m good.” He dipped his head a little to gaze deeper into her eyes.

“I’m good,” she whispered.

“Good.” He pushed away from the door. “Let’s go rock our last rehearsal.” Whether he intended to or not, their hands brushed as he straightened.

Her heartbeat escalated to dizzying heights. She had to press a hand to her chest and take a few slow, measured breaths before she stepped out the door he was holding open for her.



CHAPTER 7: THE TEACHER'S PET

SHANE

As Shane followed Carol from her office, a crowd of kids converged on her. They were asking her about everything from when the rehearsal would be starting to when they'd be stopping for snacks.

“Okay, okay!” She smiled as she lifted her headset mike into place and snapped it on at the box clipped to her waistline. As she raised her hands, he was almost disappointed to see that her hair hadn't gotten snagged again, because he'd really enjoyed getting it unsnagged the last time that had happened.

As if reading his thoughts, she smiled in his direction. “Testing one-two-three. Can everyone hear me?”

A chorus of young voices shouted, “Yes!”

“Awesome! Sauce-em! So here's the plan. We're going to do one last rehearsal, and we're going to do it quickly.” She clapped her hands for emphasis. “You guys already know your parts. You've done a really great job of memorizing your lines. I couldn't be more proud of you. And I'm not just saying that because I'm your pastor, and I love you, which I do.” She wagged a finger playfully at them. “I'm saying it because you've turned out to be a tremendously talented group. I'm talking about the kind of acting that could land you on stage at Castellano's down the road.”

Her words were met with a smattering of applause from the parents.

“Yep! You're that awesome.” She fell silent and remained that way until everyone who was whispering or giggling grew quiet. “You want to know who else is awesome, boys and girls? Our God is awesome, and He's what Christmas is all about.” She backed slowly toward the stage. Though she was in heels, she broke into a short jog and leaped onto the platform, avoiding the stairs altogether.

Shane felt like his heart was in his throat as he watched the spiky heels of her pumps make contact with the carpeted floor.

Only when she landed on her feet and straightened did he breathe normally again. He made a mental note to request her to use the stairs next time. She was too valuable of an asset to their church and the entire community to take risks like that. The parents depended on her. The kids needed her, especially Luke.

I need you, too.

The truth slammed into Shane like a baseball between the eyes. If he was being honest with himself, he'd passed the point of simply crushing on Pastor Carol Gilman. He was falling for her. Hard. Unfortunately, his feelings weren't something he was at liberty to act on yet, not with how much her dad still disapproved of him. It was something he'd been praying about, but didn't have any answers to yet. He wasn't sure it was going to be possible to change the guy's mind about him. It wasn't like he blamed her father for feeling the way he did.

If I had a daughter, can't say I'd choose a guy like me for her to date.

Regardless, the situation wasn't something Shane could do anything about at the moment, so he turned it off in his brain like a switch. Right now, he had a kid to get through the final dress rehearsal of his first Christmas pageant.

Shane had already changed Luke into his costume, so he felt safe remaining in the back of the room, silently watching Carol herd the kids onto the platform. Each of the key actors stood on their tape X's like she'd instructed them during previous rehearsals.

The sound track started playing softly in the background. As it grew louder, the audience fell silent. Several parents who were still standing finally took their seats.

Shane was proud to see Mary and Joseph take their places beneath the sturdy, barn-like lean-to he'd constructed. He'd also built the manger and a few other props. Though he'd mostly used bits and pieces of wood he'd found in the storage sheds behind the church, Carol seemed happy with the finished products. That was all that mattered to him. Making

her and his son happy was all that had ever mattered to him. He could see that now.

Only after the laser light show part of the program began did Shane pull out the small device he'd brought with him. Since he was in the back of the room, most people weren't paying any attention to him. Plus, several parents had their cell phones out, recording the performance, so he doubted anybody would give the device he was holding up a second thought.

It wasn't a cell phone, though, and it wasn't recording the rehearsal. It was measuring the exact dimensions of the stained glass window he intended to rebuild with acrylic material as a gift to Carol.

He was pleased with how easy it was to take the window measurements. He decided on the spot that the laser measurer was the best few hundred dollars he'd ever spent. It required no ladder, no juggling a stupid cane, and no risk of falling.

He pocketed the device a minute or two before the laser light show ended. It was neat what the video team had done with the lights. They'd very cleverly used them to depict the star of Bethlehem. His clapping and cheers were among the loudest in the room, enough to earn an eye roll from his son.

Carol wrapped up their final rehearsal by having them practice their bows. "This is how we show our wonderful audience just how much we appreciated their clapping and cheering." She shot an amused look Shane's way. "And all the photos and videos they've taken of you. And how much we love them for driving you to and from practice for the last several weeks. And for bringing us so many yummy snacks to share."

At the mention of snacks, a raucous cheer rose from the kids.

"Oh!" She nodded knowingly at them. "It sounds like you're ready for snack time, huh?"

They cheered louder.

As usual, they enjoyed the opportunity she gave them to engage with her. She never simply monologued at them. She

was forever asking them questions that they could answer back. She had the heart of a teacher, which was a truly endearing talent.

She also possessed the heart of a mother. Though she was still single, all the kids blossomed under the nurturing, guidance, and praise she constantly showered them with. Luke treated her like she was second only to God.

Her capacity for love exceeded everything else. She didn't just go through the motions. She truly cared about everyone around her — the children, their parents, and their grandparents.

And me.

After their quick meeting in her office earlier, there was no more doubt in Shane's mind that Carol cared deeply for both him and Luke. Since they hadn't yet had the chance to explore those feelings, he wasn't sure what all that meant. Did they simply share an extraordinary friendship, or did their relationship have the potential to become something more? The discovery that his feelings for her weren't as one-sided as he'd originally assumed filled him with as much fear as joy.

If someone as wonderful as Carol Gilman chose to entrust him with her love — something he hadn't earned and would never deserve — how was he supposed to respond? He didn't exactly have an exemplary resume when it came to relationships. He'd never had a serious one or a long-term one. On top of that, he'd been raised by a drunk, had a brother who'd died in a head-on collision while intoxicated, and managed to bring a son into the world after a tipsy one-night stand.

Yeah, his track record was complete garbage. A wave of moroseness swept over him, one so powerful that he wished he could leave the room and be alone with the feeling. A quick glance to his right proved that his son was still chatting and munching happily at the snack table.

Maybe it wouldn't hurt to take a short walk to clear his mind and stretch his legs. His sudden craving for solitude probably had something to do with how tired he was. One of

the side effects of the pain meds he'd been taking was insomnia. He'd spent way too many nights lately staring at the ceiling and rolling out of bed exhausted the next morning.

As he made his way down the hallway toward the main sanctuary, the only sound was the thumping of his cane. He stopped before reaching the front vestibule, knowing there was no point in grandstanding down at the altar. God's ears were sharp enough to hear what he had to say from anywhere in the building. After a quick glance around him, he decided to have his talk with the Lord inside the storage closet used for Sunday School literature.

He glanced up and down the hallway once again to ensure he hadn't been followed. Then he let himself inside the small room and shut the door. Technically, it was more than a storage closet, since it was big enough to fit a small work table and a copy machine. Using his flashlight app on his cell phone, he found the folding chair he remembered seeing tucked against the wall by the copy machine.

He took a seat and turned off the flashlight. Hardly knowing where to begin, he simply took the plunge.

He propped his cane in front of him and folded his hand over the top of it. "God, I don't know how interested you are in hearing a sinner's prayer, but I could really use your help." Before long, his words were tumbling out of him. He found himself begging God to help him be a better father and a better man. With his begging came a little weeping.

He'd never been one to shed many tears. He was made of tougher stuff. Then again, he'd never had this much at stake. He had a son depending on him now. A new employer. And Carol. Just thinking about her made something inside him break. Never before had he wanted so badly to change. He didn't want to turn out like his grandfather or his older brother. He wanted to do better. He wanted to *be* better.

When he finished praying, he wasn't sure how much of it God had listened to. All he knew was that he felt better. Cleaner. Stronger. Which made little sense, considering that

he'd spent the last five to ten minutes mostly blubbering about his problems.

A quick glance at his cell phone made him shoot to his feet. *Correction.* He'd been blubbering for a good twenty minutes. Strange how it hadn't felt near that long. Maybe he was more tired than he realized.

He flipped his flashlight app back on to search for a box of tissues. Locating it, he grabbed a handful of tissues to wipe his eyes and blow his nose. Then he waited another five minutes to give his red-rimmed eyes a chance to return to normal. He wanted to wait longer, but he was afraid Carol would send a search party after him if he didn't reappear in children's church soon.

He cracked open the door and was about to take a peek out. Then he realized how dumb that would look if anyone saw him sneaking around. It was always best to keep one's shoulders squared and to walk with confidence. Folks rarely questioned a guy who looked like he knew where he was going.

He thought he heard footsteps around the corner leading to the vestibule and church office, but he might have imagined them.



Twenty minutes earlier

"I DON'T KNOW WHAT'S GOTTEN INTO YOU, JONAH GILMAN, but you've never given that boy a chance. You haven't even tried. If I didn't know you better, I'd think you'd brought Brock Leighton into town solely to drive Shane away from our girl."

As a general rule, the head pastor at The First Church of Pinetop refused to argue with his wife, and he wasn't about to start now for one simple reason. She was right.

"I reckon I've made a mess of things." He had her on speaker phone. She was supposed to be taking a nap. Instead,

she'd called him on his drive back to the church to give him the verbal scolding he deserved.

He pulled his old Wagoneer into the church parking lot and pulled guiltily into his assigned spot. Never before had he felt less worthy of parking there.

"Did you make it back?" Eve inquired in a gentler tone.

"I did. Thank you." Her ability to lay aside her frustration long enough to ensure he was safe made him feel all the more remorseful. He remained seated in the vehicle after he turned off the motor. "What do you think I should do to fix this?"

"I don't know, babe. All I can tell you is that I don't like the feeling of having a wedge driven between us and our own daughter."

"I don't like it any more than you do." He dropped his forehead onto the steering wheel. "All I ever wanted was what's best for her."

"I know that, and she knows that."

"But I really screwed things up this time, didn't I?" He tasted the bitter tang of despair.

"That's what we tend to do every time we take things into our own hands, instead of waiting for God to answer our prayers. You of all people should know that, Jonah."

"I just want her to be happy." He banged his forehead a few times against the steering wheel.

"Well, she's not. I've never seen her this unhappy before," his wife sighed. "On the day of the Christmas pageant, no less."

"If you're trying to make me feel worse, it's working."

"I love you too much to do that, Jonah. You and Carol are my whole world. I'm only trying to help."

Just tell me what to do to fix this, sweetheart! Knowing how reluctant she was to offer advice, he tried to coax it out of her from a different angle. "If you were me," he said slowly, "what would you do next?"

“I’d make an effort to get to know Shane Jackson. You might be surprised what you find out about him.”

“How?” He grimaced against the steering wheel. He’d been afraid she was going to say something like that.

“You’ll think of something,” she assured in a warmer voice. “Maybe tear a sheet from your own playbook. Look at how you treat Brock. You called him, interviewed him, hired him, and then invited him to lunch. That’s four ideas right there.”

“I already got him an interview at Castellano’s, which got him hired,” he grumbled. It wasn’t like he had it in for the fellow. He’d not done anything to deliberately hurt him. He simply didn’t consider him to be the best candidate for dating their daughter. Did that really make him such a bad parent?

“Which leaves two great options — talking to him and inviting him over for lunch,” Eve returned cheerfully.

He was silent for a moment.

“Jonah?” There was a note of warning in her voice.

“Fine. I’ll talk to him,” he conceded in a grudging voice. He wasn’t ready to invite the guy into their home, and he felt no compunction to apologize for that. *First things first*. He’d make an effort to get to know the guy a little better. Only if he liked what he saw would he follow it up with a lunch invitation. He wasn’t holding his breath, though.

For the life of him, he still didn’t understand why his wife, daughter, and everyone else in town seemed to be championing Shane so strongly. Had they already forgotten how he’d brought a child into the world without knowing it? And that he’d gone nearly five straight years without knowing it? What if Carol had been the young woman he’d treated so carelessly?

A surge of righteous indignation made his temples ache.

“I love you, Jonah,” his wife said softly.

“I love you, Eve.”

Confessing their love for each other was how they started and ended each day and how they ended each conversation. He disconnected the line and headed indoors with his shoulders slumped. He was praying long before he made it inside the building.

“Please, God. Help me to see Shane the way You see him.” Jonah knew he wasn’t capable of doing it on his own. He’d already proven that.

The front doors were already unlocked, since the final rehearsal for the Christmas pageant was taking place in the children’s sanctuary.

He trudged to his office, past the empty desk where his secretary sat on weekdays. The security monitor against the wall flashed from one section of the church to the next on its pre-programmed loop. He’d always considered it a little foolish to capture live video feeds of what was happening inside the church hallways. This was the safest place in town, for pity’s sake! However, installing the new security system had given them a significant discount on their insurance policy.

He blinked in surprise as he caught sight of Shane Jackson limping his way up the long hallway leading from the kids’ sanctuary. Suspicion leaped into his chest, making him take a step closer to the screen.

The wounded Army Ranger didn’t look like he was in a hurry to get anywhere. He had his head down and looked like he was lost in thought. When he passed by the entrance to the men’s room, Jonah’s suspicions grew.

What on earth was he up to? According to Carol, who couldn’t stop eulogizing Shane’s every move, he was supposed to be helping out with the Christmas pageant. However, that wasn’t what the video feed was showing.

Shane stopped in front of the storage closet at the end of the hallway. He looked both ways before opening the door.

“Alright. That’s enough, soldier boy.” Convinced that he was up to no good, Jonah stormed from his office. Since his

wife was so bent on him having a conversation with the guy, now seemed like the perfect opportunity.

His steps slowed as he approached the storage closet. Not only was the door closed, there was no light showing beneath it. He found himself tiptoeing the rest of the way. There seemed little point in revealing his presence until he knew what Shane was doing in there.

He thought he heard Shane's voice, but it wasn't until he pressed his ear to the door that he could make out what he was saying. At first, Jonah thought he might be on his cell phone, but it soon became apparent that wasn't what was happening at all.

His eyes grew wide as he realized he was eavesdropping on a prayer, one he'd never before heard anything like. Shane's voice took on a note of desperation as he begged God for the wisdom and strength to be a better father and a better man.

Jonah stood riveted, half expecting Shane to pray for healing next. However, he didn't utter one word about his injuries. It was surprising, considering that the toe of his cowboy boot was scuffed from how badly he'd been dragging his right leg.

A loud snuffle nearly rocked Jonah off his feet. It took another few snuffles for him to be sure, but there was no denying that Shane Jackson was weeping — in a stinking storage closet where no one but their Heavenly Father was supposed to be listening.

Something about the sound wrenched something deep in Jonah's chest. He instinctively knew that tears weren't something that came easily to a man like Shane. Tears weren't what had gotten him through his school-of-hard-knocks upbringing. Tears hadn't gotten him through his Ranger training. And tears certainly hadn't been what motivated him to drag two of his buddies to safety after the blast that had nearly torn off his own leg. Yet tears were what he was shedding in front of Almighty God in his quest to become a better version of himself for his kid.

Jonah slowly turned away from the storage closet, hating just how wrong he'd been about the wounded soldier. It wasn't until he reached his office that it dawned on him that he still hadn't done what his wife had asked him to do. He hadn't said one word to Shane, but maybe he *had* gotten to know him a little better. It wasn't a huge comfort, considering what he'd found out about the guy.

He did a little weeping of his own on his drive home to pick up his wife for the Christmas pageant.

She met him at the door, took one look at him, and held out her arms.



MAYBE IT WAS SHANE'S IMAGINATION, BUT IT DIDN'T FEEL like his leg was dragging nearly as badly during his trek back to children's church. When he stepped into the room, he found a much quieter scene than before. The lights had been dimmed, and soft instrumental music was playing over the speakers. A few children were reading quietly on the reading rug, and several other children were taking naps on the colorful foam sleeping mats that were used by the daycare students during the week. Luke was among those who were napping.

One of the dads was napping, too. He'd stretched out across a few chairs, folded his arms over his chest, and was quietly snoring.

Shane moved as quietly as he could to the back of the room where Carol's office was located. She glanced up when he appeared in the doorway.

"Come in," she called softly, beckoning him into the seat beside her desk.

He sat, and they gazed at each other during a moment charged with awareness.

"Are you ready for tonight?" By his best estimate, the guests would start arriving in a little over an hour.

“I am.” She searched his face curiously. “Are you?”

He shrugged. “You’re doing all the work. All I have to do is spectate.”

She wrinkled her nose at him. “I meant, are you ready to watch Luke perform in his first play?”

“I can’t wait,” he admitted. It was nice of her to ask.

She smiled. “You like being a dad, don’t you?”

“Yeah. I do.” Though the role of parenthood had landed without warning on his shoulders, he didn’t just like it; he loved it. It was only him and Luke, but he appreciated having a family again. It was nice not coming home to an empty house, and it was downright motivating to have someone besides himself to look after. Luke had given him more reason than ever to roll out of bed each morning.

And more reason than ever to keep my leg.

“You’re a good dad, Shane.” Carol reached across her desk, interrupting his thoughts. It was almost like she wanted to take his hand in hers, but she stopped a few inches shy of doing that.

Her choice of words washed over him, though, making him feel like his prayer in the storage closet was already being answered.

“I’m trying to be, Carol.”

“Oh, come on!” She rolled her eyes at him. “You’ve got a slide in your living room. You’re totally rocking the dad thing.”

“Thanks.” He leaned his elbow against her desk and propped his chin on it, gazing at her some more. He could’ve easily stayed there, gazing at her for the rest of the evening.

“What are you thinking?” Her smile grew mystified.

That you’re so wonderful and so beautiful, and I’m falling in love with you. Unfortunately, he wasn’t ready to tell her yet. There were too many things standing between them, things like Reverend Brock Leighton and Reverend Jonah Gilman.

After seeing her interact with Brock a few times, he was no longer too worried about her ex-boyfriend. Her father, on the other hand, was a different story. After all the brokenness Shane had experienced in his own life, especially as a kid, there was no way he was coming between her and her dad.

He held her gaze for a moment longer. “I think we should pray about tonight.”

“Together?” She looked surprised, but pleased.

“Yeah. The kids are a little nervous, and you’ve had a lot on your shoulders for weeks.”

“It’s sweet of you to care, Shane.” She impulsively held out her hands to him.

He stared at them for a moment.

“Oh. Sorry.” She hastily lowered them to her lap. “Old habit, I guess. To this day, my family holds hands when we pray over our meals.” She gave a soft chuckle. “And before long trips, that sort of thing.”

“It’s not a bad idea.” He lifted his chin from his hand and extended his arm toward her.

She shyly placed both of her hands in his.

The gesture struck him as so innocent and trusting that he closed his other hand over them, sandwiching her hands between his. He closed his eyes, liking how many firsts they were checking off today.

It was the first time he’d ever prayed with a woman. Even more remarkable, it was the first time he and Carol had ever held hands.

“You go first,” she urged quietly. “I’ll pray after you.”

So he did.



AN HOUR AND A HALF LATER, HE STOOD TRANSFIXED AGAINST the back wall of the kids’ sanctuary, watching Luke boldly

recite his few lines. The room was packed, so he'd opted to remain standing, allowing at least one more elder to be seated.

Reverend Brock Leighton was standing next to him. He leaned closer when Luke finished his part. "Not bad."

Shane nodded to acknowledge the compliment, though he would've chosen a different adjective to describe his son's performance. To him, it had been epic.

The show went as seamlessly as it could for having a bunch of kids up on stage. A few of them stuttered during their lines. One of them tripped over his own feet, but managed to remain standing. Since they were kids, everyone expected stuff like that. If anything, their little flubs made the show even cuter.

The final curtain was drawn. Then it was time for the children to take their bows. Shane straightened as he watched Luke staring around the room. It was as if he was realizing for the first time just how many people were in the audience.

The narrator called his name — his new name that Shane was still waiting for the legal paperwork to be completed on.

"Luke Fuller Jackson, the wise man bearing the frankincense!"

Luke didn't so much as blink. His feet remained rooted to the floor.

Uh-oh. Shane had been alive long enough to recognize a case of stage fright. He'd seen grown men and women grow tongue-tied in public, whereas Luke was only five-years-old. A kid who'd lost his mother and even more recently met his father. A kid who'd only received two phone calls from his grandmother since relocating from Florida to Arizona. He'd been through an awful lot during the past month. And as far as Shane knew, this was his first drama performance.

"Come on, little buddy," he pleaded beneath his breath.

Without warning, Luke dashed across the stage to Carol Gilman. He reached her and flung his arms around her, burying his face against her leg.

Her expression melted. Her hand came down on his shoulder, gently patting it.

“Awwww!” A collective sigh rose from the audience.

“Nice,” Brock Leighton muttered in a voice that indicated he felt the opposite was true about what he was witnessing.

“Teacher’s pet,” some kid shouted, causing a ripple of humor to sweep through the crowd.

It was a tenderly poignant brand of laughter that told Shane the parents and grandparents present empathized with what his son was going through.

It took a while, but Shane finally managed to maneuver his way to the front of the room. On his way there, he was stopped by Eve Gilman.

“Luke did such a wonderful job!” Her eyes were misty as she threw her arms around him in a hug.

“Thanks, ma’am.” While hugging her back, he nodded at her husband.

Pastor Gilman returned his nod, but didn’t say anything. His expression was a little kinder, though, than it had been during the last encounter. Shane was counting it as progress.

Luke talked nonstop all the way home.

“I’m the teacher’s pet,” he bragged again and again. Then he practiced every animal sound he could think of — barking, meowing, mooing, baaing, and neighing.

Shane listened to him with a goofy grin stretching his face, inwardly vowing to step up his efforts to get his kid a real pet soon.



CHAPTER 8: THE HARDER THEY FALL

SHANE

Christmas

Shane's eyelids flicked open in the silence of the morning. His alarm hadn't gone off yet, so he wasn't sure what had awakened him until a muffled sob made him sit straight up in bed.

"Luke?" He swung his legs over the side of the mattress, reaching frantically for his cane. He hated the fact that he couldn't take off running like a normal parent when his kid needed him.

"Luke?" he called again, hobbling as fast as he could to the living room. He found his son sitting beside the Christmas tree with his knees drawn up to his chest. His arms were wrapped around them, and he was rocking back and forth, wracked with silent sobs.

Mostly silent sobs. At the sight of Shane, he scooted closer to the tree. "I'm sorry," he quavered. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"Luke! What's wrong, son?" More concerned than ever, Shane limped closer. A sick feeling filled his chest when Luke continued to shimmy his little bottom closer to the tree.

"I d-didn't mean to wake you," he stammered again.

"Well, you should have." Unsure of what was going on, Shane took a knee a few strides away from him. "Anytime something is wrong, you should come wake me up, day or night. That's what dads are for. You hear?"

Luke nodded, sniffing and wiping the back of his hand against his nose. His wrist came back wet.

Shane shook his head at him. *Typical kid.* "Come on." He used his cane to pull himself to his feet. "Let's get you cleaned up."

When Luke didn't budge from his curled up position beneath the tree, Shane limped on toward the kitchen. "Come

on, kid,” he repeated. “Time to wash your hands and wipe your nose so we can brew some hot chocolate.” Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw a little movement. “Extra marshmallows,” he added, reaching into the pantry to pull out the bag.

Luke slowly slunk into the kitchen, keeping close to the wall like a little shadow.

Shane dragged a stool over to the sink. “Up you go, kid. Soap up those hands. I wanna see extra suds. Enough to wash off all the boogers.”

Luke snorted with laughter, making a bubble of snot come out of his nose.

Rolling his eyes, Shane leaned his cane against the cabinet. He reached out to swoop Luke up beneath his armpits and set him on the stool. “Hold your hands over the sink,” he commanded, picking up the soap dispenser.

Luke watched wide-eyed as Shane proceeded to drench his hands in foam. “That’s a lot of soap!” He clapped his hands experimentally a few times, making a few bubbles fly upward.

“Yep.” While he was distracted, Shane yanked a paper towel off the holder and reached around him to wipe his nose.

“Ow!” Luke made a face at him. “Is my nose still attached?”

“Very funny, kid!” He tore off another clean paper towel and held it over his nose again. “Now blow.”

Luke honked his nose so loud that he made himself laugh. “Gross!”

Shane ruffled his hair and turned on the water. “I want to see some clean hands in less than thirty seconds.”

Luke shot him a merry look. “Or you’ll drop me for pushups, huh?”

“Nah. You get a free pass today. It’s Christmas.”

Luke’s face immediately puckered up again. “I thought so.” His voice hitched, and he looked like he was about to start

crying again.

With a sigh, Shane pulled another stool over to the sink and propped his hip against it to take the pressure off his bad knee. “How about you tell me what’s wrong?”

Luke’s eyes filled. “I m-miss my m-mom and other dad. I was kinda hopin’ they would come home for Christmas.”

Other dad? Shane was perplexed. His attorney had informed him he was on a holiday schedule, so the soonest he could get back to him about Luke’s name change was early January. It would’ve been nice if he’d at least contacted him with whatever he’d found out about the kid’s situation in Florida. How long had his mother been dead? How had she died? Was she married when she died? If so, to whom? And where was he now? Lastly, why was Luke living with his grandmother, and how long had he been doing so?

Tears poured down Luke’s face. Though the tap water was still running over his hands, he was making no attempt to play in the bubbles rising from the sink.

Shane leaned forward to turn off the faucet and hand Luke a towel. He took his time responding, wanting to carefully choose his next words since his son was only five.

To his dismay, Luke buried his face in the towel and started sobbing again.

“It’s okay, buddy.” Shane scooted his stool closer and tugged Luke against his chest. “It’s okay to miss the people you love. I have some people I miss, too.” Even though his grandfather had been a bit of a rascal, they’d shared some good times in this cabin. They’d watched a lot of football and baseball on TV. Plus, he and his brother had thrown a lot of footballs back and forth on the side lawn.

As Luke burrowed closer, his sobs waned. “Even though I m-miss my mom and other dad, I’m still glad to have a new dad.” He hiccuped.

“I’m really glad to have you as my son, too. You’re a pretty cool kid.” He gave his shoulders a gentle shake. “I might go as far as to call you epic.”

Luke snickered damply. “Mom always called me as cute as a bug. Dad called me a little snot.”

Shane grinned since that was his grandfather’s favorite nickname for him and his brother. He hadn’t thought about it in years.

“Dad called Mom baaaabe,” he drew out the word mockingly, “even though she wasn’t a baby. Mom just called him Trev.”

Trev? Shane’s breath left him in a huff. *No way!* “Trev, huh?” Though he tried to keep his voice normal, it shook a little as another mind-boggling possibility hit him — one that would explain why Luke bore such a close resemblance to him if he wasn’t, in fact, his son. “Any chance your other dad’s full name was Trevor?” *Just like my brother, Trevor?*

“Yup.” Luke nodded against Shane’s chest. “She called him that, too, sometimes.”

Shane dragged in a deep breath, wondering why the idea had never occurred to him before now. Trevor had been driving through Florida at the time of his fatal collision two years ago. Or at least that’s what everyone had assumed. Trevor had been a bit of a rolling stone, working construction jobs here and there and everywhere. But what if it was more than that? What if he’d been in Florida, visiting with his kid?

Which would make the boy sniffing in Shane’s arms his nephew instead of his biological son. He hugged him closer, kissing the top of his head.

You’re still my son, kid, in every way that matters.

Just as soon as his attorney’s office opened after the holidays, Shane intended to be camped on their doorstep. He needed answers, and he needed them as soon as possible.

His phone vibrated with an incoming text, but he ignored it. His only focus right now was comforting Luke. He ruffled his hair. “You about ready for that hot chocolate I mentioned?”

“Yes!” After Luke bobbed upright, Shane made sure he was balanced on the stool again before he let go of him.

As he moved around the kitchen, brewing hot chocolate and whipping up pancakes, his phone continued to buzz with messages. With a grimace, he finally pulled it from the pocket of his sweatpants and scanned the screen. Two of the messages were from Carol, and one was from Patty Fuller.

His upper lip curled. *Took you 'til Christmas to remember you had a grandson, huh?* He shook his head, half-tempted to ignore her message and move on to Carol's messages. However, curiosity got the better of him. Tapping his screen, he read what she'd written, then immediately wished he hadn't.

Tell that sweet boy of yours Merry Christmas from Grandma.

He shook his head in disgust. *Really?* She hadn't sent a gift for him or even a holiday card. Plus, it had been over two weeks since the last time she'd called.

"Something's burning, Dad!"

Luke's alarmed shout had Shane spinning back to the stove. "Sorry, buddy. My Rudolph pancake got a little too crispy." He dumped it into the sink to cool off before throwing it away. While he rinsed the pan under warm water, it hissed and steamed a little.

"Fire!" Luke hopped down from his stool. "Stop, drop, and roooooooll!" He laid on the floor and rolled across the room like a skinny log.

Chuckling, Shane soon had a fresh Rudolph-shaped pancake browning in the skillet. He flipped it expertly in the air just to show off. Then he slid it onto a white paper plate and added a few squirts of whipped cream and several M&Ms to make it resemble a reindeer face. For the nose, he placed a whole pile of red M&Ms on a dollop of whipped cream.

When Luke saw it, he broke into a dance. "This is the best Christmas ever!" He climbed back onto his stool and started to dig in.

"Hold up there, tiger." Shane leaned across the island to reach for his hands. "Let's pray for our food first, shall we?" It

was something he'd been meaning to start doing on a regular basis, and Christmas Day seemed like the perfect time to make it happen.

Luke bobbed his head happily. "Pastor Carol always prays for our food, too."

I bet she does. "We'll make it quick, though, because I'm really hungry." He lifted Luke's hand to his mouth and pretended to gnaw on his wrist.

While Luke dissolved into irreverent laughter, Shane blessed their food. "Thank you, Lord, for everything. For our pancakes. For my son. For Christmas. Amen."

Luke drew his fork through the white puffy nose and pile of red M&Ms first. "This is epic," he breathed before filling his mouth a little too full with his first bite.

Shane lightly tapped his shoulder with a fist. "Pace yourself, buddy. Chew every bite and eat slowly, you hear?"

Nodding, Luke made a gobbling sound as he took his next bite. As Shane watched him eat, adoration welled in his chest. Ever since Luke had entered his life, he'd made the simplest things more enjoyable — breakfast, driving to and from work, even laundry felt like a big adventure when he was in the room.

Shane couldn't imagine anyone willingly giving him up, which is exactly what Luke's grandmother had done. In a burst of anger, he dialed her number and lifted his phone to his ear.

"Be right back, kid." Balancing the phone against his shoulder, he retrieved his cane and hobbled into the living room out of earshot.

"Hello?" Patty Fuller's voice was gravelly and weak, much weaker than it had sounded during their visit in Pastor Gilman's office. "Is that you, Shane?"

"Are you feeling alright, Mrs. Fuller?" As angry as he was with her, his better judgment kicked in. He could sense that something was wrong.

"I'll be better soon."

“What’s going on?” The weariness in her voice concerned him. He’d heard that kind of weariness in all too many soldiers’ voices at the hospital. It wasn’t from physical tiredness. It was from pain.

“I’m in hospice care. It’s cancer. The doctors say it won’t be long now.” Her voice grew drowsier, telling him she’d probably been dosed with morphine or something.

His heart sank at the realization that she was in no shape for an argument right now. She might not even be awake long enough to ask questions. He drew a heavy breath. “Do you want to talk to Luke?”

“Oh, yes!” There was a surge of strength in her voice. “Put your sweet nephew on the phone, please.”

He caught his breath. “Did you say nephew?”

“Did I?” Her voice grew drowsy again, though it sounded more feigned than real this time. “These meds are making my brain fuzzy.”

His anger returned. “Why didn’t you tell me Luke is my nephew?” He couldn’t believe the woman was on her death bed and still spouting lies.

“Would you have taken him otherwise?”

“Yes, of course! He’s family.”

“Then you’re a better man than your brother was.” Her voice broke. “He sure wasn’t around much. My daughter deserved better, and so did her boy.”

He didn’t doubt that. “How long has Luke’s mother been gone?”

“Two years. She was in the same accident that took your brother’s life. It wasn’t their fault. It was a work truck that popped a tire and crossed the median.” Now that Patty Fuller had finally opened up to him, her words gushed out like water spewing through a broken dam. It was like she was anxious to get the rest of her secrets off her chest before she took her last breath. “I kept Luke as long as I could. I truly did. Only when the doctors told me I didn’t have much longer to live did I

purchase those plane tickets. It was a long shot.” She stopped and yawned. “If I hadn’t found your picture in my daughter’s things...” She broke into a fit of coughing. When she finished, she wheezed, “You look as much like Luke as his father did.”

Unsure how much longer the woman would last, even on the phone, Shane glanced toward the kitchen. “Hey, Luke! Can you come in here for a sec?”

“Sure!” His son immediately hopped off his stool and trotted into the room.

“There’s someone extra special who wants to talk to you.” He handed his cell phone to Luke.

Luke listened for a moment, then his smile grew wider. “Grandma!” While he told her all about his hot chocolate and reindeer pancake, Shane was kicking himself for assuming the worst about the woman. Though her health had prevented her from sending a Christmas gift to Luke, she’d already given him the best gift of all — her love.

Yeah, she’d been a little shiesty in her dealings with him, but she’d only been looking after Luke’s best interest. Shane vowed on the spot to do whatever it took to continue raising his nephew as his own son. He wasn’t sure if it would require official adoption paperwork or what. That was something else he’d be asking his attorney about after Christmas.

Luke pressed the phone back into his hands. “Grandma wants to talk to you again.”

“Hey.” His voice was gentle as he spoke into the mouthpiece. “Whatcha need?”

“I have a life insurance policy.” She paused for another fit of coughing. “A few days ago, I changed the beneficiary to you.”

“Wow! I don’t know what to say, Mrs. Fuller.” He didn’t know much about her, whether she had other family or not.

“It takes money to raise a kid, Shane.” Her voice was growing drowsy again.

“I have a savings account, Mrs. Fuller, and we’re living in a cabin that’s paid for.”

“Then use it to send him to college. It’s not like I have anyone else to give it to. You and Luke are all the family I’ve got left.”

“Thank you, ma’am. Thank you very much.” He hated that he’d harbored a few unkind thoughts toward her prior to their phone conversation. She truly cared about Luke. Everything she’d done for him proved it.

“Just take care of that boy for me.”

“I will,” he promised.

After ending their call, Shane joined Luke at the Christmas tree. “You see anything under there with your name on it, kid?”

“Yes! All of them!” Luke pounced on the small pile of Christmas gifts. Fortunately, Carol had been kind enough to advise Shane on what to purchase for a five-year-old. He’d gotten the kid another set of car tracks to hook onto the ones he’d received for his birthday, a set of blue PJs dotted with little brown tow trucks, a new red winter coat to replace the older one, and the pièce de résistance – a wooden sled with shiny red runners.

Luke’s shout of elation echoed off the rafters. He ran to the front window to press his face against the glass. Somehow, his tongue ended up against the glass, drawing a wet, sloppy snowman.

Shane followed him, realizing he was never again going to have a clean window in his house or truck until after the kid grew up. He peered over Luke’s shoulder and was pleased to see a fresh layer of snow on the ground. It was only a few inches, but it was more than enough for sledding.

“Can we go outside right now, pleeeeeease?” Luke jumped up and down a few times for emphasis.

“Are you sure you’re done eating?” Shane already knew what his answer was going to be, but he couldn’t resist teasing him.

“Yep! Pastor Carol says to stop eating when you feel full, no matter how much food is left on your plate.”

“Is that so?” Shane chuckled, hoping Luke had gotten a few bites of the actual pancake in his belly before filling up on whipped cream and M&Ms. “Hey! Speaking of Pastor Carol, she sent us a few text messages earlier. We probably oughta read them before we go outside.”

“You read it, Dad!” Luke raced toward the stairs to the loft. “I’ll go change into snow pants.”

Don’t mind if I do, kid. Man, but he was never going to get tired of hearing Luke call him Dad. Out of all the jobs he’d held, from that of an Army Ranger to that of a construction worker, being a father made him the proudest of all.

He scrolled through his messages on his phone and found a holiday greeting from Shelly and Chad, along with a photo of their dog in a Santa hat.

Cute.

He kept scrolling through the holiday sale alerts from several local shops until he finally got to Carol’s message. It sure hadn’t taken long for the marketers to get their hands on his number. He read her message, grinned, and read it again.

Please join us for Christmas lunch. Our house. She typed her family’s home address beneath the invitation.

Her second message was time-stamped only a minute after her first message. *Don’t you dare say no, soldier!*

He quickly shot a message back.

RSVPing for 2 since we’re not allowed to say no. 3 if Luke can bring Mater.

She sent him a laughing emoji.

Tell the little prince his Tuh-Mater is welcome.

Shane snickered.

Glad you remembered the Tuh. I’ve been corrected more than once about that.

Their banter continued while he was pulling on his jeans and boots. He wished he'd had time to finish the new stained glass window to give to her for Christmas. Unfortunately, at the rate he was going, it was going to take a few more weeks, maybe even a few more months. In the meantime, he'd sprung for something he'd found in one of the shop windows on Main Street — a novelty dry food dispenser.

Technically, it had three food dispensers displayed side-by-side. They were made of tall acrylic funnels topped with lids that looked like large peppermints. The red landing tray was shaped like Santa's sleigh. Luke had helped him pick the snacks to preload into the gift before they'd wrapped it. Naturally, he'd chosen things he'd liked. There were mini pretzel twists, nickel-sized cookies, and Goldfish crackers.

He was looking forward to watching Carol open the wide box wrapped in metallic red paper. Hopefully, Luke wouldn't spoil the surprise by accidentally spouting off what was in the box beforehand.

At first, Luke was wildly disappointed to hear about their change of plans. As soon as Shane assured him they could take his new sled in the truck, though, he perked right back up.

"Do you think Pastor Carol will wanna go sledding with me?" Luke kept himself occupied in the back seat by huffing on the window and scribbling in the fog he'd created.

"If you ask nicely, I think she will." Carol seemed like the kind of gal who'd be game for anything — from making snow angels to starting a snowball fight. Or finishing one. Shane smiled at the thought.

His smile disappeared when he pulled up to her parent's house. He found no fault with the modest-sized mountain chalet. He was a lot less thrilled about the glossy black Land Rover parked beside her red Jeep in the driveway. It felt like someone was trying to rub his nose in the fact that he'd also been invited to Christmas lunch — someone that he wouldn't be the least bit surprised to find out was Reverend Brock Leighton.

Carol met him and Luke at the front door, looking so festive in a red and white holiday dress that it took Shane's breath away.

"Merry Christmas, Carol." To his surprise, she leaned around the enormous wrapped box he was holding to give him a hug. "You're so beautiful," he whispered while her ear was conveniently close. He longed to bury his face against her hair and just breathe her in.

She gave him another hug before letting him go. "You look pretty slick yourself, soldier. So does this handsome young trooper." She curled an arm around Luke and drew him close. "Wow! Did Santa bring you a new coat?"

"Nope. It's from my dad," he informed her proudly.

"Epic!" She and Luke exchanged fist bumps, then drew their hands back, making sounds like explosions.

Shane snorted. "You've grown rather fluent in Luke Fuller Jackson lingo."

"The trials of being a youth pastor. You know how it is," Brock Leighton drawled as he walked up to hover behind Carol. With one hand in the pocket of his trousers, he gave Shane's jeans and boots a critical once-over, as if he found his simpler wardrobe lacking.

"Kids are great company," Carol assured quickly. She reached for the box Shane was holding. "How about I put this under the tree for you?" Before she stepped away from Shane, she whispered, "I did *not* invite him!"

His heart thumped with joy at her admission. "Thanks." He made sure their hands brushed as he relinquished his gift to her.

He loved how soft her fingers felt against his callused ones. He also adored the way her lips parted on a shallow gasp. He doubted anyone but him heard it, but it was a sound that went straight to his heart. There seemed no point in trying to hide the fact that he was watching Carol as she walked away.

“Come on in,” she called over her shoulder to him and Luke. Then she raised her voice. “Mom, we have a cookie sampler in the house!”

Shane grimaced at Brock. “You do not want to know how many sweets he’s already had.”

“Right you are.” Brock tried to laugh off the insult, as if he’d meant it as a joke, but Shane knew better. The guy didn’t seem to like kids very much.

“It’s a good thing that calories don’t count on Christmas,” Brock added. “Or so all the ladies in my life keep telling me.” He gave an exaggerated eye roll.

All the ladies, eh? For some reason, the young minister’s comment brought to mind an all-female choir of old ladies in robes. Shane muffled a laugh as he stepped past him with his hand on Luke’s shoulder.

“Welcome!” Eve Gilman sailed into the entry foyer to greet them. “I’m so glad you could make it. Are you hungry?” She beamed a smile down at Luke.

Shane’s hand tightened warningly on his shoulder. Unfortunately, they hadn’t been a family long enough for him to teach his son all of his secret sign language. He inwardly groaned as Luke did what he did best — tell the truth, all of it in exquisite detail.

“Nope. My dad made me hot chocolate and pancakes with *looooots* of whipped cream and M&Ms, and then we...” He had to stop in mid-sentence to refill his lungs so he could keep talking.

Shane pulled his son’s hood over his eyes to distract him. “Well, I’m famished. One of us worked up an appetite cooking that breakfast feast.”

Luke pushed his hood back. “He burned the first pancake. It sizzled like this.” He demonstrated the sound loudly. “Then it smoked a little, and I had to do the stop, drop, and rooooll!” He threw himself on the floor, did a short roll, and landed on top of Mrs. Gilman’s shoes.

“Nice.” Brock Leighton gave what could only be described as a princess clap.

Shane gave him a hard look as he reached down to grab a handful of his son’s coat to set him back on his feet. “That’s a mildly embellished version of the story, but...yeah.” He was about ready to toss Luke into the nearest snowdrift.

“It’s been the best Christmas ever,” Luke concluded with a cheeky grin up at him. “Totally epic! Wait until you see my sled.” He gave a bounce of anticipation. “Can we get it out of the truck now, Dad?”

“How about we wait until after lunch, kiddo?”

“But—” Before Luke could keep talking back, Shane took a knee in front of him and raised a finger to silence him. “I know you’re excited, son, but you still need to listen to me. Otherwise, you might just end up doing pushups in the corner of the living room, you hear?”

Looking crestfallen, Luke nodded and remained silent after that, leaning against Shane’s good leg while he helped him take off his coat. Mrs. Gilman collected their coats and draped them across a bench in the hallway.

“Now!” She faced them again. “I suspect you might be more hungry than you think you are, little man.” She beckoned them to follow her into the dining room.

“It smells good in here,” Luke whispered, squeezing Shane’s arm.

“No kidding.” He ruffled his hair. “I was thinking the same thing.”

“Even Mater thinks it smells good.” His son produced his tow truck. Shane had all but forgotten he had it with him.

“Tell Tuh-Mater he’s gotta be on his best behavior during lunch,” he warned, arching a single eyebrow at his son. “You, too.”

“Yes, sir.” Luke took a seat at the table and was soon diving into a lunch of ham, turkey, green bean casserole, and dinner rolls.

“This is amazing. Thank you. I really appreciate your invitation to lunch.” Shane nodded at Pastor Gilman, who hadn’t said two words since the lengthy prayer he’d spoken over their meal. He nodded back without quite meeting his eye.

“You’re welcome,” Mrs. Gilman said warmly. “I’m so glad you could join us.”

After an awkward pause in the conversation, Carol leaned toward Shane. “Mom always cooks enough for an army, so feel free to take some home with you.” She was seated across the table from him and Luke. Sadly, it meant she was next to Brock. Shane had been forced to watch him the entire meal as he held up various platters and bowls for Carol to spoon things out of. He was so meticulous about following dinner etiquette that Shane was half-tempted to throw a dinner roll at him.

As they neared the end of the meal, Brock suggested they play some complicated-sounding Christmas game.

Carol gave him an are-you-crazy look. “Maybe later. I’m not sure how long Shane and Luke can stay, so I was hoping we could open gifts next.”

Though Brock didn’t look too happy with her answer, he followed her wordlessly to the living room

When they reached the sofa, Luke tugged Shane down to whisper in his ear. “I think he’s a dork.”

Though Shane agreed wholeheartedly, he gave his son an admonishing look. He settled back into silence.

Carol moved to the tree and reached for the big red box. “They always say kids should go first, but I’m a kid at heart, and I’m seriously dying to know what’s in this beautiful box.” She dropped to her knees on the floor to lift it and shake it.

Luke giggled. “Can you hear the...?”

Shane clapped a hand over his mouth just in time to muffle what he said next. “Don’t spoil the surprise, champ!” He winked at Carol. “Make her work for it.”

“Oh, boy,” Brock muttered, watched with a bored look from the hearth as Carol tore open the paper. When she got down to the box, he produced a pocket knife and flicked it open.

Way to save the day, reverend. You're everybody's hero now. Shane gritted his teeth as Brock took his time, ever so carefully slicing open the box.

It was worth the unnecessary wait, though, when Carol lifted out the festive trio of dispensers. “Oh, my goodness!” Her gasp of delight filled the room. “I absolutely love your gift!” With a squeal, she placed her hand under the first dispenser nozzle. Then she stopped to drench Luke with one of her warmest smiles. “Since you clearly had some say in choosing these snacks, how about you come show me how to get them out?”

He was all too eager to comply. Somehow, he ended up in her lap afterward. Since Carol’s arms were clasped around his middle, Shane didn’t make his son come back to the sofa. They looked so perfect together. So good. So right.

Well, right up to the point when he caught Jonah Gilman glaring at him. Shane once again debated making his son return to the sofa. However, when he opened his mouth to do exactly that, Carol stopped him with a slight head shake.

“Take this to your daddy,” she ordered, nudging Luke to his feet.

“Oooo!” Luke shook the wide, flat box she handed him all the way to the sofa. “I can’t hear anything, Dad.”

He reached up to tap his son’s nose. “It’s probably safe to say it’s not Goldfish then, huh?”

“Open it,” Luke urged.

“It’ll go faster if you help.”

“Okay.” Luke eagerly tore into the paper. Over his head, Shane winked at Carol. He was enjoying every minute of his first Christmas with his son, and he sensed she understood that better than anyone else in the room.

Luke pulled what appeared to be a round slice of tree trunk from the box.

“It’s olive wood from Bethlehem,” Carol explained in a breathy voice. “I got to visit Israel last summer with my parents.” She reached over to her mother’s recliner to squeeze her hand.

“It’s a nice bowl.” Shane liked the simple, rustic look of it. He could easily picture it on the storage chest that doubled as a coffee table in his living room.

“You can certainly use it as a bowl, but—”

“There’s more inside, Dad,” Luke interrupted excitedly. He pulled out seven knobby bundles.

Shane helped him open each one to reveal five round wooden discs and two wooden fish.

“Fish!” Luke picked one up and swam it through the air.

“It tells a Bible story,” Brock announced in a superior tone of voice.

“Yeah, about the five loaves and two fishes.” Not in a million years would Shane have admitted it, but the only reason he knew that was because of the number of weeks he’d been sitting in children’s church.

“I remember it.” Luke’s eyes grew wide. “Pastor Carol told us that story in church.”

“Hey!” She laughingly threw her hands into the air. “You’re living proof that somebody actually listens to me in there, kid.” She made a face. “Sometimes, I worry they only come for the Goldfish.”

“And the four square,” Luke added, swimming the fish in her direction.

“And that,” she sighed.

“And you.” He ended up in her lap again.

“Thank you, Luke.” She hugged him again. “That’s one of the nicest things anyone has ever said to me.” Then she

reached under the tree again to set a small gold box in his hands. “This is for you, sweetie.”

“For me?” He sat up so quickly that he bumped his head against her chin. “Sorry!” He shot a nervous look at his dad.

Shane nodded at him to go ahead and open the gift.

It was a children’s Bible. Luke didn’t look overly impressed by it. “A book,” he said slowly. “A very thick book.”

Carol smiled down at him. “It’s full of the most wonderful stories in the world.” She didn’t look the least bit bothered by his lack of exuberance over her gift. Rocking him back in her arms, she continued in the same musical voice, “There are giants in this book, kiddo. And kings, soldiers, beautiful princesses, palaces, horses, big scary battles, and even bigger miracles.” Her gaze caught Shane’s gaze and lingered there. “The best part of all is that these stories are real. They’re about real people and a real God, who loves you very, very much.”

Luke nodded thoughtfully. “Cool!”

“More like epic,” Shane corrected, thanking Carol with his eyes. He was pretty sure his son had never before owned a Bible. It was a kind and thoughtful gift. “Speaking of epic,” he motioned for Luke to stand up, “we should probably let the Gilmans get back to their own Christmas celebration. Thank you.” He nodded respectfully at Carol’s mother. “Lunch was delicious.”

“You are most welcome!” She stood and beckoned her husband to join her. Together, they walked Shane and Luke to the door.

“Don’t forget this,” Carol called after them. She sailed from the living room into the entry foyer with one of the wooden fish in hand. Right before she reached Shane, the heel of one of her pumps got caught on the edge of the round Persian rug. She teetered precariously, looking like she was about to topple into the glass curio cabinet against the wall.

Shane’s brain went into defend and protect mode. Without another thought, he launched himself in her direction,

scooping her into his embrace and twisting with her in mid-air to ensure that his body broke her fall.

Blinding pain shot through his right leg as he landed on the hardwood floor. It was so bad that he nearly passed out.

“Shane? Shane!” It sounded like Carol was calling his name from a great distance.

He fought to keep his eyes open, turning his head dizzily in the direction of her voice.

“It’s his leg,” she shouted. “His brace must have gotten twisted when we fell.”

He felt her hands on the straps above his knee, sending another razor-sharp slice of pain through his leg. It was all he could do to keep his eyes from rolling back in his head.

“I’ll call an ambulance.” With a pitying look at him, Brock lifted his cell phone to his ear.

“No,” Shane rasped. “Just get me home.”

“You can’t go home, soldier.” There was a sob in Carol’s voice, along with genuine fear on his behalf. “You can’t even walk.”

“Sure, I can,” he wheezed, struggling to sit up.

“Dad!” Luke came up from behind him to slide his arms around his neck. He squeezed a little too hard, cutting off his air.

Mrs. Gilman hurriedly peeled Luke’s arms away from his dad’s neck. “How about we go back into the living room, sugar? I’ve got something to show you real quick.”

“Is my dad gonna be okay?” Luke sounded close to tears.

“Yes, baby. There are three ministers with him. He’s going to be just fine.” Their voices faded as they left the foyer.

Scrubbing a hand over his face, Jonah Gilman squatted in front of Shane. “Are you sure we can’t talk you into seeing a doctor, son?”

The unexpected kindness in his voice almost proved to be Shane's breaking point. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he tipped his head back a little to meet the man's gaze. "With all due respect, sir, I'm gonna need two legs to raise my nephew."

Something seemed to shatter in the middle-aged pastor's features.

From somewhere nearby, Shane heard Carol whisper, "He's your nephew?"

"Yeah." He briefly closed his eyes. "I just found out this morning."

"Come on." Pastor Gilman's arms slid beneath his armpits, tugging him to his feet. "Let's get you home, Ranger."

Shane wafted between consciousness and unconsciousness as Brock stepped forward to help. The two men hustled him between them to his truck and eased him across the back seat.

"I'll follow in my Jeep," Carol called in a frantic voice.

On the drive up Bear Mountain, waves of excruciating pain rolled through Shane, making him wonder if he was dying.

The moment Pastor Gilman and Brock had him standing upright outside his truck, he leaned forward and threw up his Christmas lunch.

Carol ran up to him, sobbing. She produced a wad of tissues and wiped his face off. It took him a moment to realize she was doing more than sobbing. She was praying for him.

"Father God, Your Word says all that we need is faith the size of a grain of mustard seed to move a mountain. So, I'm asking the God who moves mountains to heal my friend's leg. He needs it to raise his son. Amen."

"Amen," Shane echoed. His world had been reduced to one of pain and fear. All he had to hold on to at the moment was her voice. Her hope. Her faith.

It took another minute or two to get him inside his cabin. They laid him out on the sofa and propped his leg on a pillow.

“Ice,” Carol exclaimed. “We need to ice his leg to keep the swelling down.” In no time, she had plastic bags of ice cubes wrapped in hand towels propped against both sides of his knee.

He could hear her conferring quietly with her father and Brock. Then she was back, kneeling beside the sofa. “If you’d like, I can keep Luke at our house tonight. That way you can rest.”

He nodded and pointed toward the loft. “His suitcase is in the closet upstairs. Clothes are in the chest of drawers.”

She anxiously shoved his hair back from his forehead. Her fingers were still cool from the ice. They felt good against his skin.

When she returned downstairs, she came to stand beside the sofa again. “I don’t care how mad it makes you, I’m going to start a prayer chain and have everyone in town praying for you by nightfall.”

He reached for her hand. “I warned you it was gonna take a miracle.” Thankfully, the ice was doing its job, taking the edge off the worst of the pain.

She caught his hand and squeezed it. “You’re going to get your miracle.”

He wanted more than anything to believe her.

Pastor Gilman appeared at her side and slid an arm around her shoulders. “I’ll stay with him, hon.”

“Are you sure, Dad?” She let go of Shane’s hand to reach up and clasp his.

“Very sure,” he promised. “You and your mom know where to find me if you need me.”

Brock must have left with Carol, because the cabin grew abruptly silent.

Though Jonah wasn’t much of a talker, he didn’t sit down and prop up his feet. As Shane’s eyelids drifted lower, he was dimly aware of the man pacing the room. Every time he opened his eyes again, the pastor was still pacing.

And praying.

Even as the evening shadows settled and the room grew darker, his deep baritone voice droned on. It wasn't until the room brightened again that Shane realized the man had prayed all night long.

For me.

It was more than anyone had ever done for him. A sense of peace stole over Shane. Though he hadn't yet received his miracle, he was finding it a little easier to believe that one was on its way.



CHAPTER 9: MIRACLE ON MAIN STREET

CAROL

Carol didn't do much sleeping that night. Despite her mother's insistence that Luke would be just fine on the couch, she couldn't stop worrying about him. The last thing he needed right now was to be alone. He'd endured way too much already during his short five years on this earth. If her suspicions were correct, he'd lost both his biological mother and father. It was common knowledge that Trevor Jackson had died in a car accident.

And now Shane was at risk of losing his leg. He was right about needing two legs to raise a boy. If he couldn't walk, there was no way he could continue living alone on Bear Mountain in his cabin. If he and his nephew had to move, would they leave town?

The very thought made her stomach hurt.

She settled on the floor with her back against the sofa to continue monitoring Shane's prayer chain from her electronic pad. Because it was a small town, The First Church of Pinetop had nearly everyone's email address and social media accounts. Every hour on the hour, she sent out updates.

Sort of.

It was mostly the same message. *Keep praying!*

She could tell from the replies that word was spreading quickly up and down Main Street, then splintering across town in all directions.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, one of the comments still managed to make her smile. It had been posted by someone who'd hidden their ID to keep it anonymous. The caption read, *Don't forget about our other big prayer concern.*

A picture was attached. It showed Hope Isaacson's dad and Christie Hart's mom in full lip-lock at the coffee shop across from the dinner theater.

Oh, no! She chuckled her way through a few of the comments the picture had generated.

This looks more like a praise than a prayer request.

Everyone knows the greatest gift is love.

Oh, come on, y'all! It's Christmas. Lay off them for the day.

A private message arrived from Ruby Hart at nightfall. *Girl, you and Shane Jackson have done it again. Thank you for creating a news story that pushes us off the front page headlines. P.S. We are praying for him and you!*

The kissing story was soon buried beneath Carol's request for a miracle for Shane's leg.

You're welcome, Ruby and Dean.

Her eyelids drooped as she tipped her head back and watched the white lights twinkle on her mom and dad's Christmas tree. She was glad she'd gotten to open gifts with Shane and his son beside it earlier. Though they weren't officially dating or anything, their first Christmas together still felt special.

It was getting close to midnight when Luke rolled over and mumbled something in his sleep. When he repeated the question, it dawned on her that he might not be asleep after all.

"What did you say, baby?" She twisted around to peer at him through the glow of Christmas lights.

"Are you gonna be my new mom?"

"Oh, sweetie!" She laid her electronic pad on the floor to reach for his hand. "I would be so happy to have a kid like you for a son."

"Okay. I'll tell my dad."

What? Her heart leaped into her throat at the thought of him repeating their conversation to Shane. However, it was too late to take the words back. She could only hope he was sleepy enough tonight to forget what she'd said by morning.

It was Luke, though, so she wasn't holding her breath. The kid had the memory of an elephant.

She awoke to the feel of someone tapping on her shoulder. Letting out a silent moan, she sat up, wondering why her right hip was numb. It took her a few more seconds to realize she must have fallen asleep on the living room floor. She was still leaning against the couch and still holding Luke's hand.

She stretched and yawned, staring into space at the Christmas tree lights. The outline of a man's face came into focus, making her yelp in surprise.

"Shh!" It was Brock, holding out a hand to her. He angled his head at Luke and hissed, "He's still sleeping."

Only because her hip was so numb did she accept his help. They walked toward the kitchen. When he realized how bad she was hobbling, he slid an arm around her waist.

She twisted away from his grasp.

"Good gravy, Carol," he grumbled as they stepped into the kitchen. "I was only trying to help."

She slapped a hand against her side a few times, trying to bring the feeling back quicker. "Then why does it feel like you're trying to do more than that?"

"Like what?" He adopted a cagey look, leaning back against the island and folding his arms. Though it was still dark outside, he was already dressed in slacks and a button-up shirt, looking all GQ fresh.

"Can we not play games?" She limped around him to the coffee dispenser and slid a cardboard cup beneath it. Pushing the brew button, she turned around to face him again.

"Okay. Plain speaking it is." His voice grew frosty. "I care for you, Carol."

"Thank you. I'm happy to be friends. I'm not interested in anything else." She was way too tired to cloak her comments in meaningless niceties.

"I am." He jutted his chin at her.

“I’m sorry to hear it.” She wasn’t sure what else he’d been hoping to hear.

“You mean the world to me, Carol. I’m sorry we let our college education and careers get in the way of our relationship.”

“Sometimes things happen exactly the way they’re meant to,” she interjected firmly.

“I’m trying to have a conversation, which might be easier if you didn’t keep shutting me down.” It sounded like his patience was growing thin, so she fell silent.

“A conversation requires two people to be talking.” He raised his eyebrows at her silence.

“You don’t seem interested in hearing anything I have to say.” Her coffee was finished brewing, so she stalked to the fridge to grab her favorite French vanilla dairy creamer.

“I want to marry you, Carol.”

She paused in the process of swinging around with the coffee creamer in hand. “What?”

“You heard me.”

She stared at him, aghast. “I don’t want that at all.”

His handsome features grew hard. “Is it because of Shane?”

She gave a mirthless laugh. “Are you kidding me?”

“I can tell you care for him. I also overheard you last night telling Luke that you’d love to be his mom.”

“Talk about selective hearing!” She glared at him. “I was comforting a five-year-old, who was very worried about his dad, and for good reason.” She poured her creamer with a shaking hand and stirred it jerkily with her straw.

“Is he your son, Carol?”

The spoon fell from her nerveless fingers, falling to the granite countertop with a clatter of metal against stone. She wasn’t sure if he’d missed Shane’s confession on the floor of

the foyer yesterday, or if he was purposely ignoring it. Either way, making such an ugly accusation was crossing a line.

“I suspected as much.” He pushed away from the island.

It was all she could do not to throw her coffee at him as he stalked toward the hallway. “How dare you!” The anger shaking her voice made him pause.

He spun around, forcing a mocking smile to his face. “Is he or is he not your and Shane’s love child?”

At first, she was too appalled to do more than blink at him. “His mother,” she informed him when she finally recovered her voice, “is in a better place now.” She chose her words carefully, in the event a certain sly little boy was eavesdropping on them. “She was in a car accident. Head on. It was fatal.”

“So, that’s your story, and you’re sticking to it,” Brock mused sarcastically.

She pointed toward the front door. “Leave! And don’t ever come back.” She couldn’t believe she’d ever dated someone so malicious. It was inexcusable for an ordained minister. Where was his compassion?

His gaze turned cold. “In case you forgot, I have a job in town.”

“Not any longer.” Eve Gilman glided into the room in her silk night robe and slippers. “Reverend Brock Leighton, you would be wise to tender your resignation immediately in order to pursue other opportunities.”

He glanced between the two of them for a moment. Then he silently pivoted and left the room. It was a few minutes before Carol heard the front door open and close.

As the motor revved on his Land Rover, Carol’s lips parted. “Mom, I—”

“You don’t have to explain. I heard the whole conversation.”

“He’s—”

“I know, baby. I’m sorry.”

“And Shane is—”

“Yes. I am aware.” Her mother waved her closer to envelop her in her embrace.

“I love him and Luke so much,” Carol sighed against her shoulder.

“I’m aware of that, as well. So is your dad.”

“And?”

“He’s still with Shane. I think that speaks volumes.”

Carol nodded, allowing the familiar and comforting scent of her mother’s sunflower perfume to wash over her. “I love you, Mom.”

“I’ve never doubted it. I love you, too.” Her mother patted her back, then let her go.

The first glow of sunlight crept across the windowsill above the sink. Carol finished sipping her coffee and tossed the empty cup into the pull-out waste basket. “I should go check on Luke. I’m kind of surprised he’s not in the kitchen already.” Most kids were drawn to lights like moths. Most were also drawn to noise, and there’d certainly been a lot of talking going on in the kitchen this morning.

With a yawn, she moved toward the living room. She stopped short in the doorway. Other than a pillow and a wadded up blanket, the couch was empty.

“Luke?” She hurried into the room. “Luke!” She dashed up and down the hallway, checking every bedroom and bathroom in the house. He wasn’t there.

Flying back down the hallway, she nearly collided with her mother in the entry foyer.

Eve Gilman pointed at the open front door. “Did you open the door?”

“No, and I take it you didn’t either.” At her mother’s nod, she raced outside to the front porch. “Luke?” He was nowhere in sight.

“His coat is gone,” her mother called from the foyer. “It was lying on the bench last night, and now it’s not. His snow boots are gone, too.”

“What about his suitcase?” Carol jogged to her room and found it lying open on her bed. “Still here,” she cried. Stumbling back out into the hallway, she raised a hand to her forehead, feeling like she was coming down with a fever.

This is bad! She hastily replayed everything that had happened that morning. Though she and Brock had traded a few heated words, she didn’t think they’d said anything that would’ve alarmed Luke.

Unless...

She moaned out loud at the possibility that she’d done a little too good of a job at hiding the meaning of her words. Maybe Luke had heard just enough of her conversation with Brock to completely misunderstand it. *Good gracious!* If he’d heard the part about his mother’s car accident, there was no telling how he might’ve reacted. Hearing that she was “in a better place” might even indicate to a five-year-old that his mother could be found if he looked hard enough for her.

“This is my fault.”

“No, it isn’t, baby.” Her mother followed her back to the living room. “I know how upsetting this is, but I’m calling the police right now, and—”

Nodding frenziedly, Carol waved to cut her off since she was dialing her father. He picked up right away, sounding tired. “Luke is missing, Dad, and it’s all my fault. I think he ran off to look for his mother. Tell Shane it’s my fault for having an argument with Brock that Luke might’ve misunderstood. Mom is calling the police as we speak.”

“Slow down, hon!” Her father no longer sounded tired. “I’m still processing the first part of what you said. I’m putting you on speaker phone so Shane can listen in.”

Carol’s chest felt cold. *This can’t be happening to us.* Shane and Luke had already been through enough.

Shane's voice sounded over the line. "Carol, tell me exactly what happened. Don't leave out any details."

His steady, commanding voice helped her gather her shattered emotions enough to recount the story. "I'm so sorry, Shane," she concluded, "but when Brock accused us of having a love child together, I sort of lost it. I tried to be careful what I said after that, but—"

He jumped back in. "Are you sure the exact words you used were that Luke's mother is in a better place?"

"Yes. I believe so."

"That means he's coming home, Carol."

"To Bear Mountain?" she squeaked.

"That's my theory. Don't ask me why. I don't have time to explain."

She felt like fainting. "Okay. But that would mean he'd have to cross..." Her knees wobbled beneath her. She slid bonelessly onto the carpet.

"A very busy street, I know." Something surged in Shane's voice. "But I have some very special people in my life who just about have me convinced that miracles are real, so I'm going to hang on to that until we find my son."

"Shane, how is—?"

"I'm going to find my son."

She caught her lower lip between her teeth. She'd been about to ask him how his knee was feeling. "I'm going with you," she said quickly. He must be feeling better if he was heading out on a manhunt.

"Unless you can fly, sweetheart, I'll be gone by the time you get here."

Sweetheart? Her heart tilted dizzily at his use of the endearment. It was the first time he'd called her that. She wasn't sure he realized he'd done it.

"Please be careful, Shane!"

“I will, but I have to do this. It’s twenty-one degrees outside. He won’t last long in this weather.”

“Okay.” She drew a deep breath. “Okay.” She wasn’t sure why she kept saying that. Nothing was okay right now. It wasn’t even a little okay.

“I’m a Ranger. I know what I’m doing, Carol.” His voice was harsh with conviction. “I won’t stop looking until I find him.”

“I’m on my way to help,” she promised and ended their call. Yes, Shane would be gone when she arrived at his cabin, but she would be there, anyway — praying, searching the perimeter, and bracing herself for whatever happened next. One thing was for sure. She couldn’t sit around doing nothing.

Racing to her bedroom, she threw on a ski outfit and snow boots. Next, she mashed an insulated hat over her hair without taking the time to brush it.

As she was climbing into her Jeep, the church bells started to gong. She knew without asking that it was her father’s doing. She drew a shuddery breath, knowing what it meant. He was alerting the entire town. And when he spoke, people listened. She had no doubt he would soon have a massive search party combing every inch of town. But would it be enough? And would it be in time?

The mountains were treacherous this time of year — full of snow and ice, bitter winds, and hungry wild animals.

Her mother stood on the porch shivering in her robe, as Carol started her motor and took off. The bleak look on her face told Carol that she very much understood what was at stake. Though her body was too delicate to participate in a manhunt, she would be praying. That they could count on.

Carol scanned the road as she drove, keeping her eyes peeled for any sight of a little boy in a bright red coat. “Please, God. Help us find him.” She prayed the entire way to Shane’s cabin. When she arrived, she parked in front of the porch steps.

Her father was waiting for her in a borrowed pair of snow pants and boots. A thick backpack was looped over his shoulders.

“Dad!” She pushed open the door of her Jeep and practically fell into his arms.

Though his face was lined with exhaustion, he hugged her tightly, tucking her head beneath his chin. “It’s going to be alright, hon. I know it doesn’t look like it right now, but it is. I prayed all night.”

“No wonder you look so tired!”

“I’m fine.”

“Men,” she grumbled, pulling away from him. “You can be in screaming pain and dragging a leg behind you, but you’re always fine.” She was sick and tired of Shane telling her that he was fine when she knew he wasn’t.

“I prayed with Shane before he left. The Lord will direct his steps.”

“Was he dressed warm enough?” She was so worried about him that it was making her head hurt and her heart ache. She shaded her eyes from the sun with one gloved hand, but there was nothing in sight other than the snowy mountainside.

“Like the abominable snowman,” her father assured with an upward quirk of his mouth.

“What about his cane?” She didn’t want to even think about him hobbling across the snowy terrain with that thing.

“He didn’t take it, hon.”

“What?” She dropped her hand from her eyes.

“He didn’t take his cane with him.”

“Why?” Her throat constricted.

“I don’t know. All I can tell you is that he walked out of here on two feet.”

“Was he at least wearing his brace?”

“Yep.”

“Which way did he go?”

“This way.” Her father pointed toward the nearest mountain trail. “I told him we’d follow his footprints and be right behind him.”

“Okay, then. Let’s go!” Since he was already loaded down with supplies, she didn’t take the time to gather more. She simply fell into step beside him.

Ten minutes passed as they hiked deeper into the mountains, then twenty minutes. It soon became apparent that Shane was taking a southerly route toward Main Street. Clearly, he was attempting to intercept Luke on his way to “a better place.”

“I’m never going to forgive myself if anything happens to his sweet boy.”

She didn’t realize she’d said the words aloud until her father answered. “We’re going to find him, hon.”

“Shane must hate me right now,” she choked.

“Actually, he’s in love with you. He told me so.”

Though she blinked at his words, she was too filled with remorse to take comfort in them. “What I did was so wrong. So irresponsible.” She swallowed hard. “There were three adults in the house when Luke walked out the front door. Three!”

“We all make mistakes, Carol. At my age, my goal is to not repeat the same ones twice.”

“I should hope not!” Horror constricted her throat. “I lost a child, Dad. That means I’m not worthy to continue serving as your children’s pastor. You should fire me on the spot.”

“Fortunately, we serve the God of second chances, hon. I’ll say it a different way; you’re not getting out of running the children’s programs at church any time soon.”

“But—”

“You’re going to have to keep marching, soldier.”

They received regular updates from the search party in town via their cell phones. The church bells continued to gong every fifteen minutes.

The bottom of the mountain came into view. Carol paused in dismay, spinning in a full circle. “Did we lose his trail?”

“No, hon. It’s right here. We followed it to a T. Then it stops.” He squatted down to examine Shane’s footprints.

“Shane,” she called, spinning in another circle. “Shane!”

“Carol?” Shane’s voice wafted up to her. It sounded like he was standing somewhere below her feet. “Don’t take another step!”

“Shane!” Carol dropped to all fours and continued crawling forward, albeit at a much slower pace. “I’m coming to get you!”

“It’s a trap, Carol! Don’t come any farther.”

She continued to inch forward. “Where are you?”

“In a hole trap. Please don’t come any closer,” he begged.

“Are you hurt?”

“No more than when I started out. It’s an old trap. The spikes have been removed.”

She was so relieved that a wave of lightheadedness shook her. “What can I do to help?”

“I’m going to throw you one end of a rope. I need you to secure it somewhere so I can climb us out of here.”

“Us?” She swallowed a sob. “Does that mean you found Luke?”

“Yep. I’ve got our favorite little wise man down here with me.”

“Shane!” She gave a shriek of joy that was half sob. “Why didn’t you call to tell me?”

“Couldn’t. Broke my cell phone on my way down.” There was a brief silence. Then he called up to her, “Are you ready to catch the rope?”

Her heart raced in anticipation. “I’m ready, soldier!”

The end of it came flying in her direction. Her dad held on to her ankles while she lunged forward to catch it. Her upper body came down, arms flailing as she scrambled for something to grab onto.

“Carol!” Shane’s agonized shout filled her ears.

Her father’s grip on her ankles tightened. “Don’t worry. I’ve got you, hon.”

She abruptly stopped falling and remained suspended, upside-down, inside the massive hole she’d nearly fallen into. “I have the end of the rope,” she called weakly back to her father.

“Hi, Pastor Carol!” Luke’s tear-stained face peeped out from the shadows deep inside the hole.

By her best estimate, he was twelve to fifteen feet below her. “Hi, sweetie! Are you okay?”

He shook his head at her. “I didn’t find my mom.”

“I’m not so sure about that, son.” Shane stood and reached both hands towards her. Their fingers were just barely able to touch. “I love you, Carol.”

“I love you, too.” Happy tears streaked backwards down her face and dripped down onto the two people below her. “Both of you. So very, very much!”

Her body hitched into motion as her father dragged her back by her ankles. In little time, she was back on solid ground. Moments later, he had the end of the rope coiled around his waist.

He crept closer to the hole to call down, “Tell us when you want us to start pulling, Ranger!”

Carol stared at him in consternation, just then realizing he intended to pull Shane and his son to safety — one exhausted senior pastor and one short children’s pastor. Apparently, he didn’t like the idea of Shane climbing with his son to safety, probably because of his bad knee.

“How are we going to—?” Before the question finished leaving her mouth, a cluster of Pinetop citizens swarmed over the knoll. They converged on her and her father.

“They’re over there,” one man shouted.

The group cheered and ran in their direction. More hikers followed behind them.

The first man who reached them puffed, “As soon as you dropped your coordinates on the message thread, we knew exactly where you were, pastor.”

The clearing was soon dotted like ants with members of the search party from town. Six men took their places along the rope, as if preparing for the biggest tug-of-war contest of their life. Her father remained at the end with the final length of it coiled securely around his midsection.

“Are you ready?” he shouted.

“We’re ready,” Shane hollered back.

“On my count, we’ll all pull at the same time,” her father ordered. “One, two, three, pull! One, two, three, pull! One, two, three, pull!”

They pulled the rope back, one heaving step at a time. Carol waited with bated breath until Shane’s head appeared. Luke’s head appeared next, pressed tightly against the back of his dad’s shoulders. His arms were around Shane’s neck, and his legs were locked like a bear cub around his waist. As the men pulled the two of them to safety, she could see that the rope was looped around them like a harness, securing father and son together.

But that was far from the most remarkable thing about their rescue. When Shane reached the top of the hole trap, he stood and walked toward Carol with his son on his back.

“Shane?” She watched him, open-mouthed. “You’re walking!”

“I know, babe.” His knee brace had been torn loose, presumably during his fall. It was hanging off his pants leg and dragging the ground behind him.

“It’s a miracle,” someone breathed.

“Two miracles,” another person corrected.

It was true. Shane was walking, and his son was safe. That most definitely amounted to two miracles.

Shane’s gaze locked on Carol. He walked straight toward her. While he was still a few strides away, he broke into a dance. Reaching up to cover Luke’s clasped hands with his, he did a few spins on the snowy trail.

More happy tears leaked from the corners of Carol’s eyes as she watched him. They streaked warmly down her cheeks, then quickly turned cold.

He finished making his way to her and reached up to gently cup her face in his hands. Her cheeks warmed beneath his clasp, making her realize he was wearing heated gloves.

All she could do was gaze into his gorgeous dark eyes for a heart-shaking moment. No words were necessary. Everything he was feeling for her was glowing right there in plain view.

Luke was the first to break the silence that settled over the clearing. “Looks like I found a better place, after all,” he breathed in wonder. “And my mom. You’re gonna be my new mom, aren’t you, Pastor Carol?”

Shane glanced away from her, looking like he was seeking someone else out in the crowd.

As she followed his gaze, her heart sank. He and her dad were staring at each other, engaged in some sort of silent conversation.

Jonah Gilman abruptly uncoiled the rope from his waist and dropped it to the ground. Striding up to Shane and Carol, he placed a hand on each of their shoulders.

“You have my blessing.” He nodded at Shane. “Go ahead and ask her, son.”

“Thank you, sir.” Shane immediately lowered himself to one knee in front of Carol and reached for her hands.

“Shane,” she gasped, noting that he was balancing his weight on his right knee instead of his left. Luke was still clinging to his back, adding even more weight to the injury.

“Carol, I’ve loved you for as long as I can remember.” His voice was husky with emotion. “Probably since I was about Luke’s size. I’m nowhere near good enough for you, but nothing would make me happier than to spend the rest of my life loving you, cherishing you, and supporting your ministry. Will you marry me?”

“Yes.” More tears streaked shamelessly down her face. “I love you so much, Shane. You, too, Luke.” She beamed a watery smile at his hopeful, upturned face. “My heart belongs to both of you.”

There wasn’t a dry eye in the crowd as Luke let out a happy whoop. Shane removed a small black box from the pocket of his ski jacket and popped open the lid. A marquis shaped pink diamond glinted up at her. “It belonged to my mom. If you don’t like it, we can go ring shopping.”

“It’s perfect,” she assured, tugging off her glove to hold out her left hand.

He slid the lovely pink diamond onto her ring finger. It turned out to be a surprisingly good fit. Due to the frigid temperatures, she immediately tugged her glove back on.

Shane stood to take her in his arms. “I can’t wait to marry you.” He sealed the promise with a gentle brush of his lips against hers.

Then he turned with her to face the concerned citizens who hadn’t hesitated to come to their aid. “Thank you for heading out in the freezing cold to help find my boy. I’ll never forget what you did today and never stop being in your debt.”

They made their way down the final stretch of mountainside together. Several of the locals stayed close, pushing away low-hanging branches and kicking away the debris in their path. Carol’s heart swelled with gratitude. Their small mountain town might not have all the amenities of a big

city, but the folks who lived there more than made up for it with the way they cared for one another.

They emerged onto Main Street from behind The North Pole Candy Depot. Clapping and cheering erupted. People bundled to the gills in coats, gloves, hats, and scarves were crammed onto the sidewalks on both sides of the road.

The church bells gonged again, this time to celebrate the safe return of one very small, very precious boy.



CHAPTER 10: THE PERFECT GIFT

CAROL

Since both Shane's truck and Carol's Jeep were parked outside his cabin, they bummed a ride from Chad to the Gilman residence.

Jonah Gilman rode shotgun. When they reached the driveway, he twisted around to hand the keys of his Jeep Wagoneer over the seat to Shane. "You're going to need a set of wheels to get back up Bear Mountain."

"Thank you, sir."

Pastor Gilman muffled a yawn as he nodded and met Carol's gaze. "How about you head back with them, hon, so you can collect your Jeep?"

She was sitting in the back seat with Shane. Luke was tucked between them, eyes closed, with his head against her shoulder. Shane had an arm curled possessively around both of them, gazing at them like his entire world was sitting beside him.

"I sure will. I might stay a bit to make these guys some chicken noodle soup." Carol had been helping Shane with his shopping lists for weeks, so she was confident he had all the ingredients for the soup in his pantry.

"Take your time." Her father tried to muffle another yawn, but didn't succeed. "I won't be needing my vehicle back anytime soon. This ol' minister is heading to bed." He thanked their driver profusely, then headed inside.

Carol lifted the snoozing Luke into her arms.

"Stay right there. I'll get him." As Shane stepped from the back seat to the pavement, Chad rolled down his window and stuck out a hand.

"Thanks for the ride." Shane gave it a firm shake.

"Glad it turned out this way. I'm happy for you, man." Chad held up a fist.

“Me, too.” They bumped fists. “Let Shelly know I haven’t forgotten about the playdate at our house. I’m pretty anxious to make my first trip down the slide myself.”

“Will do.” They grinned at each other.

Shane hurried around to open the door for Carol. “I’ll carry him.” He held out his hands for Luke, but she shook her head.

“I’m not ready to let go of him just yet.” She cuddled him closer, so grateful he was uninjured and back where he belonged.

Shane caressed her with his eyes as he assisted her from the vehicle. “My two favorite people in the entire world,” he muttered huskily.

He helped her buckle the still sleeping Luke into the back of the Jeep Wagoneer. They were missing his booster seat, but they didn’t have far to go. The moment Shane was behind the wheel, he started the motor. Then he reached for Carol’s hand.

He raised it to his lips. “I can’t believe you’re finally mine.”

A delicious shiver worked its way through her. “I know the feeling. I’ve never been this happy, Shane.”

He kissed her fingers one by one. “Just to be clear, a rambunctious five-year-old is part of the deal. I have every intention of adopting him and raising him as my son.”

“Our son.” She laced her fingers through his as he lowered their hands to his knee. “I couldn’t be more thrilled about the package deal. In the short time I’ve known Luke, he’s become very precious to me. I’m looking forward to being his mom.”

Shane’s lips quirked as he backed from the driveway. “I’m still going to have a long father-to-son chat with him when he wakes up. Then I’m dropping him for pushups for scaring the daylights out of us.”

She caught her lower lip between her teeth. “I would’ve never forgiven myself if anything bad had happened to him. I couldn’t be sorrier for—”

“Don’t keep beating yourself up about it,” Shane interrupted hastily. “Luke knew he wasn’t supposed to leave the house without your permission.” He flashed the blinker to turn onto Main Street. “After the way he yanked open the front door during his birthday party, I installed latches higher up on both the front and back doors at the cabin. Then I explained why, so he knew better than what he pulled this morning.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Don’t be too hard on him. He was looking for his mother, which is something he doesn’t fully understand yet.”

He smirked at her. “Listen to you. You’re a natural at this mom stuff.”

Her insides melted at his praise. “I’ve had plenty of practice while serving as a children’s pastor. I’m sure you’ve noticed there’s a whole lot of mothering involved in that.” She squeezed his hand again. “And fathering. I’m so fortunate to have your help in children’s church, Shane. I don’t say it enough, but you’re amazing with those kids. I’m truly grateful.”

“Little snots.” He snorted. “Pretty sure they think I’m only there to mop up their messes and unstop their toilets.” He turned on the road leading up Bear Mountain. Because of the snow dusting the pavement, he slowed to a crawl.

“Ha! Those boys idolize you. Not all of them have strong male role models at home. You fill a very important void in their lives.”

“You fill a very big void in mine, Carol.” He reached the cabin and pulled into the driveway right next to her Jeep. As soon as the motor died, he leaned over the console, dipping his head closer to hers.

Luke abruptly stirred in the backseat. “We’re home,” he mumbled.

“Yeah, buddy. We’re home.” Shane’s gaze dropped longingly to Carol’s mouth.

She blushed at the look in his eyes.

“Can I take a bath?” Luke whimpered. “I’m cold.”

“Yep.” Shane pushed open the door and moved around the car to open Carol’s door.

As they bustled Luke into the house, she informed the boy in her brightest voice, “I’m going to make you and your dad some chicken noodle soup!”

“I’d like that.” Luke yawned as he slid from his dad’s arms and trudged toward the stairs.

Shane paused in the middle of the living room to touch her hand. “Anything you need before I head upstairs to scrub the boy cooties off of him?”

“A hair brush, pretty please?” Her lips twisted ruefully. “I left the house in a pretty big hurry this morning.”

He angled his head across the living room. “Around the corner, back of the house. Make yourself at home.”

“Thanks.” As soon as she stepped into the room in the back of the house, she realized he’d sent her to the master bedroom. She paused inside the doorway, feeling shy as she surveyed the antique wire bed. A simple blue-and-white patchwork quilt covered it. There were no throw pillows on the bed and no other decorations in the room. However, it was clean, and the bed was made to military perfection.

Why am I not surprised?

Smiling, she hurried across the bedroom to the adjoining bathroom. It was just as clean and tidy, with his tube of toothpaste resting in perfect alignment with his razor. Fortunately, a black brush was sitting on the other side of the razor.

She quickly pulled off her beanie and drew the brush through her tangled blonde hair. Her coat grew suffocatingly hot as she brushed, so she unzipped it and laid it on the counter until she finished freshening up. Then she returned to the front door to hang it on the hall tree. Afterward, she made her way into the kitchen and fetched a saucepan from one of the drawers.

The air was soon filled with the scent of simmering chicken noodle soup. When it was done, she turned off the

burner and put a lid on it to keep it warm. She was kind of surprised that Shane and Luke weren't back downstairs yet. A glance at her watch indicated that they'd been gone for the better part of forty-five minutes.

Moving into the living room, she leaned against the stair railing to call softly to them, "Is everything okay up there?"

Shane's head popped over the top of the railing. Without speaking, he motioned for her to join him in the loft.

Mystified, she padded silently up the stairs in her sock feet. He met her at the landing and pointed toward the large area rug in the loft bedroom. Luke was curled up on it in his new PJs. A blanket was tucked around him.

Her heart melted at the sight. "Guess he's pretty tuckered out," she whispered.

"Yeah," he whispered back. "I'm saving the pushups for later." Then he reached for her shoulders, turned her around, and gave her a nudge.

She found herself facing the opening of the big yellow slide. Tossing a laughing look over her shoulder, she took a seat at the mouth of it. Shane sat behind her, sliding his arms around her middle. His long legs were stretched out on either side of her.

"You ready?" His voice rumbled low in her ear.

She nodded, and he pushed them off.

A faint squeal escaped her at how quickly they flew down the winding chute. They skidded to a halt on the red foam pad at the bottom.

Instead of letting her go, Shane hugged her closer. "You have no idea how badly I've been wanting to do that."

She leaned her head back against his shoulder, giddy with happiness. "Is that all you've been wanting to do, soldier?" She turned her face his way.

"Nope. There's something else." His mouth descended hungrily on hers.

There was a reverent feel to his touch that made her feel like she was bathing in a thousand gallons of sunlight. He deepened their kiss, pouring everything into it that he'd been holding back.

He broke it off to declare in heartfelt tones, "My very own Christmas Carol."

She slid an arm around his neck to keep him close. "Forever and always, soldier."

"How soon will you marry me?" He kissed her again. "In case you can't tell, I'm ready."

She smiled against his lips. "As soon as we can reserve the church and pastor."

"That shouldn't be too hard."

"And purchase a wedding dress. And order a cake." Her brain was already swimming with a dozen or more details. It was a given that a bunch of church ladies would offer to help. She planned to let them.

"Sounds like you need at least a week." Shane's voice was teasing.

"More like a month or two, soldier."

He touched his lips to hers again. "I'll be counting the days."



February

CAROL PULLED THE CURTAIN ASIDE THE TINIEST FRACTION. SHE was standing in her wedding gown at the front window of the prayer room off the vestibule. The ladies auxiliary had temporarily turned it into a dressing room. However, they assured her that they'd already held a special prayer meeting in there to request that all the happiness in the world be showered on her and Shane's upcoming union.

Her mother moved across the room to peek over her shoulder. “Gracious! It looks like the whole town showed up.”

“I know. Where are we going to fit them all?” Carol was amazed to see a line of people waiting to make it through the front door — not just members of their congregation, either. She recognized a few people who were most definitely *not* regular church goers.

The door opened and closed behind them, and Shelly waddled in. “Oh, wow!” She paused to stare at Carol. “In case I haven’t already said it a million times, I love your dress.”

It was a waterfall of white chiffon layers with a sparkly white lace overlay. Long lacy sleeves hugged her slender arms. Her veil was held in place by crystal clips that sparkled like diamonds against her hair. She’d left it down since Shane preferred it that way.

“Thank you.” Carol moved away from the window to envelop her best friend and only bridesmaid in a gentle hug. “I can’t tell you how much your willingness to do this means to me.”

Shelly hugged her back. “I wouldn’t miss it for anything other than the early arrival of Chad Junior, which my doctor has assured me isn’t likely.” She was in a high-waisted gown of emerald velvet. Though it de-accentuated her blooming figure, it was impossible to hide her pregnancy. “I’m not thrilled about being forever pregnant in your wedding photos, though.” She wrinkled her nose prettily.

Carol chuckled. “I’m blaming it on Shane for two reasons. Number one, he’s not here to defend himself. Number two, he refused to wait another day to marry me. He insisted that the last month-and-a-half was torturous enough.”

Shelly’s expression softened. “He loves you so much.”

“I love him, too.” Carol couldn’t wait to be his wife.

Her mother piped up from the window where she was still watching the crowd. “It looks like the ushers have opened the door to the children’s sanctuary. They must be planning on displaying a live feed of the wedding ceremony in there for the

overflow of guests.” She spun back in their direction, chuckling. She was wearing a column dress the same color as Shelly’s, with matching pumps and a gold beaded clutch.

Carol shot her a puzzled look. “What’s so funny?”

“I was just thinking about how your dad agonizes over every sermon he writes, trying to give each message a flawless delivery. Yet your and Shane’s wedding is the event that will probably top our all-time record attendance. It just goes to show you that things like love and miracles trump everything else.”

A light knock on the door turned out to be Pastor Jonah Gilman coming to collect her. He was on triple duty today since he was escorting both his wife and daughter down the aisle, then performing the ceremony itself.

Carol had no doubt he was up to the task. He winked at her as he crooked his arm at her mother. “Are you ladies ready for this?”

“More ready than you’ll ever be.” Eve Gilman patted his arm. “You’d have been perfectly content keeping her a little girl forever.”

He nodded, grumbling, “Someone should’ve warned me she’d grow up faster than expected.”

Carol smiled at the affection behind his words. “I’ll only be a few miles away, Dad.” She was downright giddy with excitement about moving into Shane’s cabin on Bear Mountain. He’d been working hard to finish renovating it before their wedding. He’d brought in an electrician to rewire a few things, and he’d repainted all the rooms in colors that she’d picked out.

“I know. Just give me a few days to process all the changes.” His heart was in his eyes as he gently guided her mother from the room. Chad showed up next to collect Shelly.

Carol’s father returned seconds later. He held out his arms to her. “I may never be ready for this. The only thing that matters is that you’re ready.”

“I am, Dad,” she assured, walking into his arms. “Everything about today feels so right.”

His eyes grew misty as he nodded in agreement. “Shane is a good man.”

She squeezed his arm as she wrapped her hands around it. “It took you long enough to admit that.”

He pretended to scowl down his nose at her. “Couldn’t hand off my only daughter to just any ol’ guy. I wanted to make sure you ended up with the best.”

She gave him a tremulous smile. “Thank you for saying that.”

People were crammed into the vestibule, but they parted like the Red Sea as her father led her through them.

He nodded and shook several hands on their way to the entrance of the sanctuary. “Thank you for coming. Though you’re welcome to remain standing, there are extra seats in children’s church if you head down the hallway to the right.”

A few people hurried to take him up on his offer. Most of them stayed right where they were. There were two screens in the vestibule showing a live feed of the wedding party assembled at the altar.

Carol’s heart raced to see Shane was waiting for her there.

This is it!

The moment she’d been waiting for had finally arrived. As her father led her toward Shane, his dark gaze locked on hers. It was full of silent longing, admiration, and pride.

He ever so gently covered her hand with his as her father placed it on his arm.

“She’s everything to me, son.” Her father’s voice reverberated with feeling.

“And to me, sir.” Shane’s voice was filled with reverence.

Her father quickly mounted the stairs of the platform and took his place in front of them. Though his eyes misted more than once, his voice was clear and steady as he spoke the

opening prayer, then presided over their wedding vows. “By the power vested in me by God and the State of Arizona, I pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride, son.”

Shane gently took her in his arms. “I love you, Mrs. Jackson.”

“I love you, too.” She touched his cheek as his mouth brushed hers. “So much.”

The joy of the occasion spread to Castellano’s for the reception. Their five-star chefs had outdone themselves. In conjunction with The North Pole Candy Depot, they’d created a spectacular display of food. Fruit, veggies, meats, and cheeses had been arranged to form an entire Christmas village. In the center of Town Square was a chocolate fondue fountain.

Even more breathtaking was the life-sized wedding cake — a five-foot tall white replica of the church cathedral, complete with a bell and steeple. The rest of the afternoon passed in a happy blur for Carol.

As the festivities drew to a close, one of the church maintenance guys rushed up to her and Shane. He drew them aside and spoke in fevered undertones. “There’s been a situation in the children’s sanctuary back at the church. As much as it pains me to say this, you’d best get down there to handle it.”

With no further ado, they were hustled into a glossy white SUV and driven down the street. To Carol’s surprise, a small crowd was gathered outside the children’s sanctuary. People were pointing at the broken stained glass window.

“Oh, no,” she breathed, clutching Shane’s arm. “I wonder if the window finally finished shattering.” Her mouth went dry at the possibility. She’d known it wasn’t going to last forever, but it would’ve been nice if it had at least survived their wedding day.

Shane remained silent as he assisted her from the back seat and escorted her through the milling crowd.

Though the east side of the church building was bathed in a pink and orange glow from the setting sun, there was plenty of light remaining for her to see that the window was no longer broken.

“What’s going on?” She glanced up at Shane in astonishment.

“This one is shatter-proof, sweetheart.” His voice was infused with adoration.

“What do you mean?” She gripped his hand.

“I got my start in glass work during high school. This is my wedding gift to you, babe.”

“You made me a new stained glass window?” She gasped out the question, hardly able to believe what she was seeing. When had he found the time? Where had he worked on the project? And how had he managed to keep it a secret?

“Technically, it’s an acrylic replica. I repaired the original glass one and hung it behind your desk in your office.”

“Oh, Shane!” She gazed up at the window. “It’s the perfect gift.”

“I’m glad you think so.”

“How can I ever thank you?” Her heart felt like it was filled to the overflowing point.

“We have the rest of our lives to figure that out. I have some ideas, of course.”

She threw herself into his arms, oblivious to the onlookers, and pressed her lips to his.

“On second thought,” he declared in a voice rough with emotion, “I think this evens us up.” He drew her closer to seal his mouth over hers again.



EPILOGUE

One Year Later

Shane and Carol walked hand-in-hand down the sidewalk toward Town Square. Luke was clinging to his other hand, dragging his red sled behind him. He was determined to keep his end of the deal they'd made — to behave for the entire upcoming ceremony. A double reward hung in the balance. They would be taking a trip to The North Pole Candy Depot, followed by a sled ride down the base of the mountain behind the store.

“Dad!” Luke tugged at his hand. “Some kids are already sledding down the mountain.”

“And we'll join them right after the ceremony,” he reminded firmly. “There's something about to happen in Town Square that I don't want you to miss.”

“What?” Luke's face scrunched up in disappointment.

“The start of our first family Christmas season, that's what!” Shane swung their joined hands. “There will be a band playing and free hot chocolate.”

“I'd much rather start our first Christmas with a sled ride,” Luke grumbled.

“We made a deal.” Shane gave him a warning look.

“Yes, sir.” Luke dropped his head dejectedly.

Though Shane understood his son's anxiousness to go play, after his running away incident last Christmas, he'd been reluctant to let the kid out of his sight for long. Despite the two whole inches he'd shot up during the past year, he was still only five going on six.

“Ooo, here comes the hot chocolate,” Carol announced excitedly.

Though Shane flicked a look at the elf hurrying toward them, his gaze quickly returned to his wife's blooming belly. She was six months pregnant and already wearing that new mother glow.

As if feeling his gaze on her, she inquired softly, “Like what you see, Mr. Jackson?”

“Yep.” He never got tired of looking at her. She was his personal miracle. Their nine months of marriage had been like experiencing Heaven on Earth.

Smiling, she slipped her hand out of his to accept the first mug of hot chocolate the teenager handed her. Bending toward Luke, she held it out to him.

“Merry almost Christmas, sweetheart.”

With a whoop of delight, Luke handed the cord of his sled to his dad so he could cup both mittened hands around the mug. “Thanks, Mom!”

Shane and Carol exchanged a smile. Hearing him call them Dad and Mom never got old. Someday they would explain to him that Trevor was his biological dad and that he was technically being raised by his uncle and aunt, but that could wait. He was their son in every way that mattered and always would be.

Shane and Carol were soon sipping their own mugs of hot chocolate, listening to the local high school band play Christmas carols in Town Square. Since they lived in a community that celebrated the holidays year round, the band uniforms were fire engine red. Their dress-right-dress ranks formed a beautiful splash of color against the white mountainside behind them.

The mayor mounted the stairs of the gazebo and took his place behind the podium. As soon as the last notes of Jingle Bells faded, he started to speak into the microphone.

“Welcome, everyone! Without any further ado, we’ll be announcing the teams who will be competing in Pinetop’s Fiftieth Annual Holiday Grill Master Contest.” He gave a dramatic pause.

It was the biggest holiday fundraiser in town. Even more importantly, one hundred percent of this year’s proceeds would be going toward the church’s plans to expand the main sanctuary. Regular church attendance had spiked dramatically

after Shane and Carol's wedding and had yet to taper off. Apparently, the twin miracles of seeing a wounded soldier healed, followed by his marriage to the minister's daughter, had spread more hope than Pinetop had experienced in years.

“Are you ready?”

The drum line broke into a suspenseful drum roll.



“TEAM ONE IS DEAN ISAACSON AND RUBY HART.”

A collective gasp rose at the mayor's announcement. It was followed by a wave of knowing chuckles that worked its way across the semi-circle of those gathered around the gazebo.

All eyes turned toward the couple who'd managed to churn out the longest lasting piece of gossip to ever hit the streets of Pinetop.

Dean Isaacson tipped his Stetson and raised the hand of the woman he'd already been standing beside. He shook it exultantly in the air. “Team One intends to keep that number!”

“You'll have to do more than kiss,” someone yelled. More laughter met their remark.

Another person blustered. “How did they end up together? This contest is totally rigged!”

“Now, now.” The mayor held up his hands. “You know the rules, folks. Totally random selections for partners, and no swapping!”

Totally random, my hide! Brady McGrath had a few choice opinions about how random the partner selections were. For one thing, all the female names went into one bucket, and all the male names went into another bucket. It guaranteed that his partner would be a woman. However, if he'd learned anything during his twenty-seven years of being born and raised in Pinetop, it was this — the local leadership always had a secret agenda, and it always had something to do with

spreading Christmas cheer. Either that, or they just liked how couples grilling together looked in the pictures.

“Team Two is Ethel Carnegie and Chad Hofstetter.”

Brady’s lips twitched as his lumberjack-sized brother-in-law high-fived the tiny owner of the antique store down the street called Santa’s Sack.

“Don’t count your chickens before they’re hatched, Dean,” he bellowed across the square.

Ruby Hart shouted back, “You’re on, cowboy!”

The mayor cleared his throat and pushed his reading glasses higher as he read the next names on the list. “Team Three is Brady McGrath and Adeline Carver.”

What? Brady’s jaw tightened. He was half-tempted to withdraw from the contest right then and there. Everyone and their dog knew that Adeline was his ex-girlfriend! He hadn’t realized she was back in town. When had that happened? And where was she now?

He pushed away from the base of the pine tree he’d been leaning against to scan the snowy parkland around him. He saw nothing but a sea of faces swimming with sympathy.

He barely heard the rest of the names that were announced as he continued to peruse his surroundings through narrowed lids. He finally gave up looking for Adeline and stalked away from Town Square. Apparently, she hadn’t bothered to show up.

That figures.

Not showing up was something she was all too skilled at.

Just as he reached the sidewalk, a woman in a white coat with a furry white hood stepped in his path. “Looking for someone, stranger?”

Yeah. You. For a moment, all he could do was stare at her dumbfounded.

It was her alright. She looked good, too, in her stone-washed jeans and pink cowgirl boots. He bit back a groan at

the way his heart was thumping. Apparently, some things never changed.

He carefully schooled his features. “Hello, Adeline.” He was thankful she couldn’t see how tightly wound his insides were.

“Hi, Brady. Long time, no see.”

His upper lip curled. *Only because one of us left town five years ago. Not me.* She hadn’t called, texted, or emailed. *Shoot!* She hadn’t even formally broken up with him. She’d just left.

She took a step closer to him. “I can only imagine what you’re thinking, so I’ll keep this short. I’m back in town, and I’m sorry for the way I left.”

“Sorry?” His boots shuffled into motion again. With a snort of disgust, he neatly stepped around her and continued walking. She’d broken his heart five achingly long years ago. No, it was worse than that. She’d trampled it into a thousand tiny pieces. A simple sorry wasn’t going to cut it.

She jogged to catch up and fell in step beside him on the outer edge of the sidewalk. Back when they were dating, he would’ve insisted she walk on the inside of the sidewalk, but she was no longer his to protect. The thought made his jaw tighten even more. It also made him move over to allow her to put more space between her and the busy road.

“Listen.” She sounded out of breath. “You have every right to be angry with me, but—”

“There are no buts.” He cut her off with a frustrated wave. “You’ve been gone for five years, Adeline. Not five days or five weeks. Five years!” He stalked blindly toward his truck. He’d parked it down the street at Castellano’s. “Showing up out of the blue like this is pretty inconsiderate, even for you.”

“I didn’t just show up, Brady. I applied for a job at your ranch two weeks ago.”

“You what?” He was so shocked that he rounded on her, inadvertently crowding her closer to the edge of the sidewalk.

She tottered for a moment on the curb, flailing her arms.

“Oh, for crying out loud!” He caught her shoulders and yanked her back to safer ground.

He must have tugged her harder than he realized, because she tumbled against his chest.

The hood of her coat bounced down, revealing the short, glossy waves he remembered so well. Except it was no longer short. Her dark hair fell all the way to her shoulders now.

They stood there, both panting a little from her near tumble into the busy street. His hands were still clutching her shoulders. Her arms loosely circled his waist.

“At least you don’t want me dead.” Her smile was sad as she took a step away from him, pulling her hood back on. “That’s something.”

“I don’t need your death or anyone else’s on my conscience,” he growled. Needing to do something, he stuffed his hands into the pockets of his coat and balled them into fists.

“It still doesn’t explain why I haven’t heard back about my application. The Brady I once knew would’ve never been so unprofessional.”

He couldn’t believe she was adding insult to injury. He glared at her. “I honestly haven’t seen your application. Are you sure you remembered to hit the submit button? The Adeline I once knew was a little on the forgetful side.” He didn’t bother hiding his sarcasm. It rankled that she’d found it so easy to leave behind the town where she’d grown up and everyone in it.

Including me.

“Yes, I hit the submit button, Mr. Grumpy Pants. I have the confirmation to prove it.” She held up her cell phone to flash a screen shot at him.

Okay, then. She’d clearly pushed the submit button. He shrugged helplessly. “I haven’t seen it.” Which could only

mean one thing. Someone else in his family had seen it first, and they'd made sure he didn't.

She pocketed her phone, then clasped her hands beneath her chin. "All I'm asking is for you to give me a chance. And an interview, of course. I'm good with horses. You know I am."

She wasn't just good. She was horse whisperer material. However, the only job opening his family currently had on their ranch was for that of a certified horse trainer. Her high school diploma wasn't going to give her any sort of leg up against the competition.

Instead of answering the question, he spread his hands. "Why Bear Mountain Ranch? Why not any other ranch in town? Or Castellano's, for that matter? They're always hiring."

"Because I want to work with horses. Just horses."

He raised his eyebrows at her. "Is that why you threw your hat into the ring for the Holiday Grill Master Contest?"

She burst into laughter. "Of course, not. When I got into town yesterday, I asked around about you. Someone happened to mention you were going to be in the contest, so I figured why not? If none of my other attempts to get ahold of you worked, I was hoping our paths would cross during the contest."

They'd more than crossed paths during the contest. They were partners, which was a problem in more ways than one. "Have you ever even turned on a grill, Adeline?"

Merriment danced through her midnight blue eyes. "Do hotdogs on a George Foreman grill count?"

Oh, boy! He gave her a derisive look. He'd really been hoping to win this year. "It's not too late to drop out, you know."

Her eyes grew wide. "But I'd be automatically disqualified. Those are the rules."

He shook his head at her, not seeing the problem. “You already admitted you have no grilling experience.” She couldn’t possibly be expecting to win.

“Fortunately, you have enough for both of us,” she returned cheerfully. “Not to mention, serving as your partner might be as close as I get to an interview.”

He wasn’t sure how to respond to that, so he held up his hands as he backed away from her. “Just be here on Saturday morning. Early.”

“How early?” she called.

“Sunrise. I’d like to get an early start plotting out our winning game plan.” He tipped his hat at her and pivoted away without waiting for an answer.

He drove straight home to Bear Mountain Ranch. It was located at the base of the mountain it was named after. A trio of white farmhouses were lined up like dominoes on the left side of the property. The red horse barns, riding rings, and pastures were scattered across the right side.

He parked beneath the overhang in front of the ranch offices, which were located in front of the biggest barn. Pushing his door open, he leaped to the ground and slammed it shut. Then he strode through the double front doors.

His younger sister, Shelly, glanced up from her computer screen, eyes snapping with anger. She handled all the administrative stuff at the ranch. “So Adeline is back in town, huh?”

He slapped his hands down on the high countertop overlooking her computer. “Word travels fast around here.”

“It’s Pinetop.” The fury in her gaze intensified. “I can’t believe that little heifer has the nerve to show her face around here.” She paused to drag in an indignant breath.

He took the opportunity to inquire, “You mean after dropping her application for a job at Bear Mountain Ranch a couple of weeks ago?”

Shelly had the grace to look a little embarrassed. “I meant after she broke your heart. But yeah. That, too.”

“When were you going to tell me she wanted a job with us?” he exploded.

“Uh...never.” Shelly sat back in her swivel chair, folding her arms defiantly over the ugliest Christmas sweater he’d ever laid eyes on.

“I’m trying to be serious here,” he muttered, lips twitching.

“Oh, I’m deadly serious.” She lifted her chin.

“Not in that sweater you aren’t.” He gave a dry chuckle.

She glanced down, eyes widening in surprise as if just remembering what she was wearing. “Oh, this thing? I’m wearing it to a holiday party at Shane and Carol’s house tonight.”

“You mean your next playdate, right?” He knew all about the slide running from the Jacksons’ loft to their living room.

She made a huffy sound. “Just because none of your friends are cool enough to install a slide in their homes—”

“They’re more mature, but I’ll let that slide.”

“Haha!” She rolled her eyes at his pun.

“Back to Adeline’s application,” he sighed. “We’ve gotta give her an answer, even if it’s no.”

“Fine.” His sister unfolded her arms. “I’ll reject her application immediately.”

“Whoa!” He held up a hand. “Before you do that, at least tell me what job she applied for.”

“Head horse trainer.” His sister sounded every shade of disapproving. “The nerve of her!”

Brady’s eyebrows came together. “That’s a lot of responsibility for someone with nothing more than a high school diploma.”

“Agreed. Not that it changes my feelings about rejecting her application, but she holds some pretty impressive

credentials these days.”

“Such as?”

“She’s a certified horse trainer with four years of experience on one of the biggest ranches in Texas.”

So that was where she’d been. His breath eased out of him. His sister was right. Those were some pretty impressive credentials. And since Bear Mountain Ranch was down a horse trainer, maybe they shouldn’t be so hasty in turning Adeline away.

“Oh, my goodness!” Shelly gave him an annoyed look. “You’re already back pedaling on your decision.”

He spread his hands. “Maybe I was a little hasty in saying we should outright reject her application.”

“Are you even listening to yourself?”

Yeah, and I’m not any happier about what I’m saying than you are. “I don’t see why we can’t be professional about it,” he countered slowly, well aware that he was stalling. “Let’s first give her an interview, then reject her application.”

“Too late.” Shelly bent over her keyboard and started typing again. “Mom and Dad already selected the final candidates for the job. For all the obvious reasons, Adeline Carver wasn’t among them.”

“Have they started the interviews?” he demanded, a little perturbed that they’d been doing all of this behind his back.

“No, but—”

“Then add one more interview to the docket.” His voice was firm.

She made a face at him. “I was only trying to protect you, Brady.”

“I appreciate it, but that doesn’t mean I want to mishandle anyone’s application and kick dust on our reputation.”

Shelly pouted at the ranch’s calendar. “All the best time slots are filled, but I could maybe squeeze her interview in right before lunch tomorrow.”

“Let’s do it.” He made a rally sign in the air.

“You’re a glutton for punishment,” his sister complained.

“More like in a hurry to get this over with.” He moved around the reception booth to the hallway behind it. His office was the first door on the right.

The words *Ranch Manager* were monogrammed in gold letters on the door plate. He felt a bit like he was escaping as he entered the room and tossed his Stetson on his desk. Instead of taking a seat behind it, he strode to the window.

He stared outside at the snowy pastures. All he needed to do was make it through his interview with Adeline. Then he’d send her on her way again. He could only hope that nothing he said or did while she was in the room with him would give away the dirty little secret he’d been hiding for the past five years — that he wasn’t near over her yet. After all this time, he’d come to the dismal conclusion that he might never be over her.

Not that she or anyone else needed to find out. The fact that he was still madly in love with his ex-girlfriend was his alone to bear.



“CAN YOU BELIEVE ADELINE CARVER IS BACK IN TOWN?” Carol knew it wasn’t very reverent of her to be gossiping as she brewed hot tea, but she couldn’t help it. This was far bigger news than Dean Isaacson and Ruby Hart being caught kissing in public last Christmas Eve.

“To be honest, I don’t remember much about her.” Shane’s muffled voice came from the direction of the den. He didn’t sound nearly as interested in the topic as she was. Fortunately, Shelly was coming to their holiday party this evening. She’d be sure to share the whole scoop with them then.

“What do you think of this?” Her husband returned to the kitchen with a long, rolled-up paper in hand. He unrolled it on

the kitchen island and waved at it. “Take a look and give me your thoughts.”

As Carol bent her head over the paper, she murmured, “Oh, Shane! This is wonderful!” She might not be an architect, but she had no trouble identifying what she was looking at. He’d paid for someone to draw up the floor plans to add a nursery to the cabin. “What’s the other room for?” Though it was huge, it was simply earmarked as a bonus room.

He smiled indulgently at her. “A playroom for our two children. What do you think?”

“It’s...wow! Luke is going to love it!”

And so do I.

It was a perfect space for building car tracks, telling stories, and creating childhood memories.

“I was thinking of adding some acrylic windows in the back. One with some animal scenes for the kids, surrounded by clear panes that wouldn’t block the view of the mountains.”

“That would be amazing.” She turned impulsively to him. “You’re amazing.”

“Glad you think so.” He took her in his arms, cuddling her blooming belly closer. “I’m trying to keep my wife happy, just like the doctor ordered.”

“I am happy, Shane. So happy that I’m not sure it’s possible to hold another ounce of happiness.”

“Let’s test that theory.” His voice grew husky as his head dipped over hers.

As they kissed, Carol discovered that he was right. There was no such thing as too much happiness.



Ready to read more about why Adeline Carver is back in town...and Brady McGrath’s plan for hiding the fact that he’s still madly in love with her?

Keep turning for a peek at
Cowboy Grumpy Boss for Christmas
a sweet, grumpy-sunshine romance!



SNEAK PREVIEW: COWBOY GRUMPY BOSS FOR CHRISTMAS

W *hat happens when you throw a grumpy cowboy boss into the same holiday grill master contest as the girl who got away?*

Brady McGrath can't believe his rotten luck in getting paired off with his ex-girlfriend for the town's biggest Christmas charity fundraiser. But those are the rules: Random partner assignments and no swapping. It doesn't help that she's also applying for a job at the ranch he runs, which means he's about to become her boss.

Their first attempt at dating was an epic failure, so he's not about to repeat that mistake. If only if she'd take her sunshiny personality to some other ranch in town — literally *any other ranch*, he might be able to stop secretly falling for her again. Not that he was ever completely over her in the first place...



Hope you enjoyed this quick peek at

[Cowboy Grumpy Boss for Christmas](#)

This series is available in eBook, paperback, and Kindle Unlimited on Amazon!

A VERY COUNTRY CHRISTMAS WISH

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Cowboy Foreman in Love for Christmas

Cowboy Blind Date Mix-Up for Christmas

Cowboy On-the-Job Boyfriend for Christmas

Cowboy Single Dad Crush for Christmas

Cowboy Grumpy Boss for Christmas

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NOTE FROM JO



Guess what? I have some Bonus Content for you. Read more about the swoony cowboy heroes in my books (more first kisses, more weddings, more babies...) by signing up for my [mailing list](#).

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SNEAK PREVIEW: BEST FRIEND HERO

From *best friends, to high school sweethearts, to barely talking... He knows he was a fool to let her go. Unfortunately, it's going to take a miracle to convince her to give him a second chance.*

Brody Anderson and Star Corrigan made all the superlatives in their high school yearbook, right down to being voted the Most Romantic Couple. But life happened, tragedy struck, and they drifted apart. No, it's actually worse than that. He allowed his pride to push her away.

Now that he's back on his feet after a near-crippling accident and his ranch is finally turning a profit, Brody can't get Star out of his mind. More than anything, he wants her back. It won't be easy convincing her to date him again, though — especially while running the new bed-and-breakfast on his ranch. Not to mention how much of his time his newfound cousin, Crew, is demanding these days after a few brushes with the law. Nor is he overly thrilled about Crew's former prison buddy who's been hanging around and the trouble he brings.

But it's more than a matter of finding the perfect time and opportunity to romance Star. Will she be able to trust him again? Can she believe he has what it takes to stand by her and fight for her this time around, like he does again and again for his family? And is he capable of loving her the way she's never stopped hoping and dreaming he will love her someday?



Hope you enjoyed this excerpt from

Best Friend Hero.

*Available in eBook, paperback, hard cover large print, and
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[K - Kissable Hero](#)

[L - Long Distance Hero](#)

[M - Mistaken Hero](#)

[N - Not Good Enough Hero](#)

[O - Opposites Attract Hero](#)

Much love,

Jo

SNEAK PREVIEW: HEART LAKE BOX SET #1



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Perils of Starlight: A policeman who exclusively works the night shift to hide his scarred face, a lovely detective

determined to solve a cold case, and the trail of clues that leads to an accidental attraction...



Grab your copy!

Heart Lake Box Set #1

HEART LAKE BOX SETS

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Heart Lake Box Set #2 (books 4-6)

Heart Lake Box Set #3 (books 7-9)

Much love,

Jo

SNEAK PREVIEW: THE BILLIONAIRE'S BIRTHDAY SECRET

TEXAS BILLIONAIRES #3

H *e's perfect!*

Thea Ferrell was supposed to be sketching storyboards, not daydreaming about the swoony executive VP she'd met at a friend's wedding. As the celebrity hostess of the award-winning Texas Homestyle Show, she was in the middle of gearing up for their biggest episode of the season, the Christmas episode. It was a lot of fun, but it was also a massive amount of work — work that wasn't going to get done if she couldn't focus.

With a sigh, she stopped pedaling her white desk bike, which she'd wheeled into the center of the room earlier, and hopped off the seat. If she couldn't build storyboards while cycling, she'd just have to find another way to rediscover her inspiration. Fortunately, her office was built to maximize her creative flow.

The walls were a calming blue-gray. Well, one of the interior walls was, anyway. She was lucky enough to have a corner office on the twelfth floor of a high-rise in Corpus Christi, so she enjoyed the luxury of two whole walls of floor-to-ceiling windows. The Moroccan cherry hardwood floors gleamed with polish, and the glossy white plantation shutters were louvered half-open to bathe the room in the maximum amount of sunlight.

On one end of the room was a mod ivory sofa resting on a pale blue rug. She used it for meetings with clients, brainstorming sessions with her film team, and even took an

occasional nap there. On the other end of the room, a short flight of stairs led to her glassed-in recording studio that overlooked the rest of her office. A white bannister separated the two workspaces. Beneath the rail was a series of built-in shelves, containing everything from beverage fridges to props storage.

The only thing her state-of-the art cinematic office most unfortunately didn't contain was a time machine to make the hours fly by quicker, because she had a date this evening — her first date after an entire six months of not dating, to be exact. So she had an extra swarm of butterflies in her stomach over the thought of seeing Ford Merritt again. They'd met in Fiji at her bestie's brother's wedding, been stranded in a storm shelter together for a few hours, and had discovered some real chemistry zinging between them.

Unfortunately, Ford lived in Dallas, so it was one of those long distance relationship thingys. The kind she'd sworn she'd never get suckered into again, because they never seemed to work out. At least not once in her adult life had they worked. The two she'd attempted had started off with a bang, were fun and mysterious for a few weeks, then just as quickly fizzled out. Her last epic fail in the romance department was exactly the reason she'd decided to take a break from dating. She hope-hope-hoped she wasn't making a mistake by ending her dating diet.

Fortunately, Ford was a pilot, so he was able to turn the six hours of drive time between them into an hour and twenty-five minutes of flight time. As a top sales executive for Gulfstream, the sky was his office. He literally traveled the globe to meet with clients and prospective clients.

She was super lucky that his schedule was taking him down to Cancun to meet with a mega resort owner over the weekend, because that made the dinner date they had planned right on his way.

A triple knock on her door alerted her to her assistant's presence on the other side. She reached up to tap on her earpiece. "Come in, Ollie."

The door pushed open. Her right-hand man and partner-in-everything-show-biz-related breezed inside with an emerald green sequin shirt draped over one arm and a stack of folders clutched in the other. A fifty-ish or so man in a dignified gray plaid suit, he boasted a receding salt-and-pepper hairline that he swore made him look wiser. In her opinion, he was more than wise; he was indispensable.

Oliver Patrick was seriously a jack of all trades. He fielded her calls, maintained her schedule, and played gate guard for the revolving door of guests who found their way to her office each day. He also could organize a banquet for two hundred charity patrons as easily as he could pull together a small, intimate gathering. Oh, and he occasionally served as her makeup artist before she went on set — like the entire months of August and September when their regular makeup artist went on maternity leave.

“What’s with all the sequins?” She quizzically eyed the size and cut of the button-up shirt, figuring it was for her.

He waved it airily. “I’d like you to try it on, so we can see how it’s going to jive against the holiday backdrops that just got delivered.”

He was referring, of course, to the theme of this year’s special Christmas episode. They were calling it *Cowboys & Christmas Lights*, though they’d yet to zero in on the perfect Texan or ranch to feature.

She accepted the shirt with a groan, wishing she had more to show for the many hours she’d been glued to her computer screen for the last three days.

Ollie chuckled as he moved past her to drop the stack of folders on the slightly canted-forward desk tray of her bike. “By that dismal sound, I take it you’re still noodling your way through the applications for our main holiday feature.”

“I am.” She flipped a handful of her white-blonde hair over the shoulder of her lacy shell top. Her discarded navy blazer was hanging on the back of her bike chair. “It’s not that we don’t have some amazing applicants. I just haven’t yet

experienced that this-is-the-one feeling with any of them. I know you know what I mean.”

He nodded. “Who are the top contenders so far?”

“Well...” She frowned at the shirt in her hands, wondering if he meant for her to try it on right now as opposed to later on. “There’s a super cute barn that’s been converted to a veterinarian office up in Hereford. Then there’s this scrumptious farmhouse just north of Houston that another family has renovated into a gift boutique. I’d like for you to contact them both and offer them regular features in January or February.”

“Consider it done.”

“However, I’d like to hold out a little longer for someone or something wildly extraordinary for our Christmas show.” She waved her arms dramatically, nearly forgetting the shirt in her hand until one of the sequined sleeves narrowly missed slapping her on the nose.

She lowered the shirt to her side to fix her assistant with an imploring look. “Something that practically shouts hope, joy, and love.” The only problem with holding out much longer was how quickly their November 1 deadline was approaching. It could take weeks to iron out all the logistics for a feature this size. Waiting so long to make a decision was going to leave them with nearly zero wiggle room for contingencies.

Ollie eyed her with genuine concern. “Are you one hundred percent sure we’re still talking about the show?”

She wrinkled her nose at him. “Of course I’m talking about the show! What else would we be talking about?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” He lifted his brows and treated her to a comical look. “Maybe that dinner date I’m not supposed to know anything about?” At her gasp, he gave a knowing chuckle. “If you think for one second I don’t know what it means when you color-block a dinner engagement on your calendar in your favorite shade of pink...”

“Fine!” she snapped, feeling a blush stain her cheeks. “You’ve unraveled one of my deepest, darkest secrets.” *Big*

deal. “But, no. My date has nothing to do with my decision on the Christmas feature.” *Or does it?* Ollie’s cross-examination was suddenly making her second-guess herself. *Is Ford Merritt the real reason I can’t seem to think straight this afternoon?* She’d made very little progress on her storyboards.

“Okay.” Her assistant cocked his head at her. Then he held out a hand. “The shirt will be perfect on you. You can hand it back now.”

“But I haven’t even tried it on yet,” she protested.

“No need.” His mouth quirked with humor. “You’ve brandished it in the air so many times in the past five minutes that I already got the visual I needed.”

Relinquishing the lovely green shirt to him, she scrambled to put better legs on her thoughts for the upcoming holiday feature. “Don’t get me wrong, I don’t mind featuring family-owned businesses and all the typical outlets that make Texas, well...Texas.” Plus, it greatly helped small business owners boost their visibility and increase their bottom line. “In fact, I love doing it. Heck, those shows are our bread and butter. For Christmas, though, I was hoping for...” She shook her head. “I don’t know. Something less commercial in nature, maybe?” Preferably something that completely embodied the spirit of the holidays.

He grinned. “I was kinda hoping you’d say that.” He angled his head at her desk. “Because something interesting arrived in the mail today that I’d like you to take a look at.”

“What?” Her interest piqued. Most of the applications for their Christmas show had arrived via their online portal, but they’d left the option open for mail-in forms. Had Ollie single-handedly solved her current dilemma? It wouldn’t be the first time.

He waved a hand toward the folders on her desk. “It’s some artwork from a kid, actually.” His voice sounded vague.

Okay. Maybe he hadn’t yet saved the day, but there was still time. “Alright. Thanks.” Her interest dwindled. She was forever receiving fan mail and gifts, including solicitations like

these — people of all ages who fancied themselves to be the next darling of cinema. Future set designers and such. They sent her everything from personal sketches to digital files. This one sounded more like crayons. *Cute*. But not exactly what she was looking for.

He smiled. “Maybe sometime this weekend you could humor the kid and take a look at them?”

“Sure. No problem.” She’d already moved to the sofa and was kicking off her orange, four-inch heels and replacing them with a pair of ballet flats.

“Well, I’ll be around.” He backed toward the door. “Call me if anything comes up.” It was kind of a private joke between them. Ollie was always around. He ate, drank, and slept the Texas Homestyle Show. He literally kept an emergency cot folded beneath his desk for all-nighters. The show was his life.

“Night, Ollie.” She hoped he remembered to eat. Sometimes he got so busy working on sets and stuff that he skipped meals.

She heard the door click shut behind him while she was snatching up her briefcase. She was halfway across the room, heading for the exit when she remembered the folders he’d left on her desk. Spinning around in her flats, she returned to her desk to snatch them up and stuff them in the outer pocket of her favorite Italian leather case.

Time to get ready for my date! She’d waited all day for this. No, she’d waited all month, if she was being honest with herself. Maybe Ollie was right. Maybe her upcoming dinner with Ford was the honest-to-gosh real reason for her spike in jumpiness and disjointed focus.

All she knew was that she’d been crazy out of sorts ever since the trip to Fiji last month. She’d been trying to convince herself it wasn’t because she was envious of her best friends, Eloise Cantona and Elon Carnegie. But, yeah. She was at least a little jealous of them. The three of them had been close since high school, but Eloise and Elon had always shared an extra special bond that all too often made her feel like a third wheel.

After some friendly interference on her part, they'd finally admitted that special bond was love.

And now that they were dating, she was alone. Again. Just like she was back in foster care. One of the few kids that had attended their college preparatory high school without a big family name and pedigree to back her. The charity case on scholarship. Sure, Eloise and Elon had ended up offering her their hallowed uptown friendship (and heaven knew it had opened some pretty big doors for her, professionally speaking), but she remained an outsider, nonetheless.

A twenty-eight-year-old with no family and no roots. A woman who'd hired an administrative assistant in his fifties, simply because he might be the closest thing she'd ever get to a father figure in her life. She didn't even have a steady boyfriend. She never seemed to get far enough in her romantic relationships to be able to call a guy that.

Which was probably why she was so uptight about her upcoming dinner date. Every time she went out with a new guy, she hoped against hope that she might finally experience a spark of whatever it was that Eloise and Elon had. And she always went home disappointed.

But there had been some real chemistry between her and Ford Merritt. Maybe it was the sound of the water lapping the beach in Fiji. Or the electricity of the storm that had forced them into a shelter for a few hours. Or the moonlight the following evening. All she knew was that she'd enjoyed his company — a lot — and was really looking forward to seeing him again.

Like her office, the apartment she rented was on the beach. The two buildings were only a few blocks apart, which was why she'd changed into ballet flats. She preferred to walk the short distance instead of driving her own car or hailing a cab.

Ollie fussed at her for traveling so much on foot, telling her it was unsafe for a celebrity show hostess to be alone on the streets like that. He was probably right, but so far she'd never run into any problems. Then again, she was careful — always wearing big, dark sunglasses and tying an enormous

scarf over her hair. It was the one time of day she could be a part of a crowd. To blend in. To belong.

And tonight did not disappoint. The sidewalks alongside the city buildings were crammed with pedestrians. Many of them were strolling hand-in-hand or moving in small clusters, part of the Friday night dinner crowd.

The October evening boasted only the lightest of breezes, not quite warm and not quite cold. The perfect in-between weather before the bitter chill of winter blasted its way up the coastline.

She reached the front entrance of the Ocean Bay Resort and scanned her member badge to get the revolving glass doors moving. To her delight, one of the four sets of elevator doors was already open and waiting for her in the wide entry gallery.

Guess it's my lucky day! Hurrying to hop inside, she allowed herself the luxury of lounging back against the wall for a few moments. The glassed-in compartment started to move upward, giving her a panoramic view of the beach. The sun was a red and gold ball on the horizon, casting a rosy glow over the bay. Artwork in motion — the one and only reason she so willingly paid to live in an overpriced downtown suite.

It was truly a killer view — one she would've traded in a heartbeat, however, for the greeting kiss of an adoring husband or the happy chatter of children's voices upon her arrival. Instead, she sauntered alone down the hallway, turned her key in the lock, and stepped inside an utterly silent home.

Bolting the door behind her, she tossed her key on the entry table in the foyer. *I really need to adopt a puppy or a kitten.* She'd debated her options a thousand times but always put it off. It seemed cruel to adopt an animal, just to leave them alone all day long, five days per week. And sometimes on the weekends when she had to travel out of town to film her shows. *Maybe someday.*

She headed straight across her cozy living room to her bedroom, anxious to shower off the stress of the week. Tonight she was determined to take a break from work, a real break,

and just enjoy living. Tomorrow she could get back to reading proposals for her show. Maybe the perfect application would just float down from the sky, so to speak, and land in her lap like an early Christmas gift.

Maybe it was because the holidays were so firmly stamped on her mind, but she ended up discarding her original idea of donning a black cocktail dress in lieu of unveiling an all-new one that she'd been saving. She'd purchased it, thinking she might wear it to this year's company Christmas party, but tonight seemed like the right time to debut it.

The berry colored velvet settled over her feminine curves with a subtle snake print that seemed to glimmer in the light as she moved. Though the dress had long sleeves, it had a shorter skirt, which accentuated her toned legs. Her waistline was cinched in with a flattering knot detail. She completed the ensemble with a pair of velvet black heels that were held in place with a thin ankle strap, and a black beaded clutch.

A quick glance at the clock on the marble vanity made her abandon the idea of an up-do. She was running out of time before Ford's expected arrival. Not to mention, sometimes *less was more*, as the French liked to say. With that in mind, she left her hair down in its natural waves and popped in a set of black, princess-cut diamond earrings. They glinted alluringly from their white gold settings, simple yet sophisticated.

I'm ready. She gave herself one last once-over in the mirror to make sure she hadn't forgotten something major. Like her head. Then the doorbell rang, claiming her attention.

Pressing a hand to her heart, she willed her breathing to remain normal as she traversed the apartment to examine the security code she'd assigned to grant her date entry to the fifth floor. Yep, it was the right one. She clicked the button on her wall panel to accept it. In less than a minute, a knock sounded on her door. She turned the knob, and there he was — the guy she'd been daydreaming about almost non-stop for five straight weeks.

Ford looked every inch the successful executive vice president of sales that he was. He was the epitome of casual

elegance in a well-tailored black suit, a pristine white shirt that was unbuttoned at the collar, and no tie. His dark hair waved back from his high forehead, and his slate-gray eyes seemed to be drinking her in the same way she was drinking him in.

“Hello, you.” He gave her a slight head-shake. “Since it’s our first official date stateside, I know I’m supposed to say something poetic or eloquent about how beautiful you look tonight.” He gestured at her with one hand, treating her to a flash of a silver cuff link. His half-smile was unabashedly admiring, shy even. “Which you do. But I hope you’ll forgive me for skipping straight to the part about how glad I am to see you.”

Um, wow! “Thank you.” She felt her lips curve upward, reveling in the way his gaze caressed her. It was the kind of look that made her feel beautiful, no trite compliments required. “I’ve been looking forward to seeing you again, too.” Despite the evening shadow darkening his chin, or maybe because of it, he was even better looking than she remembered. How was that even possible?

He rocked back on his heels and gave a short, self-deprecatory chuckle. “More than anything, I’m glad to discover you’re real.” He held out his hand to her. “That I didn’t just dream up the fact that Thea Ferrell — *the* Thea Ferrell of the widely acclaimed Texas Homestyle Show — actually agreed to go out with me tonight.”

“Oh, stop already,” she scoffed, stepping into the hallway and pulling the door shut behind her. She gave the knob an experimental twist to ensure she’d remembered to lock it. She had.

He didn’t back up as expected to make more room for her, though, so her steps brought them nearly toe-to-toe. Close enough for her to catch a whiff of his clean, sandalwood aftershave.

“So are you a dinner-first or a dessert-first kind of girl?” His rich baritone resounded through her, underscoring just how close they were standing.

She wasn't certain she succeeded in stifling a delicious shiver of awareness. "How about you surprise me?"

"Okay." He closed the short remaining distance between them and lowered his head. Then his mouth brushed against hers in the tenderest of kisses.



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