

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Country
LOVE



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COUNTRY LOVE

A SWEET SMALL TOWN ROMANCE (MONTANA
PROMISES, BOOK 4)



LEEANNA MORGAN

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Fans of Robyn Carr's *Virgin River* series will love this small-town, feel-good romance!

When Becky O'Donaghue moved from Ireland to Montana, she had grand plans to create a florist store like no other. Nine years later, she has achieved everything she dreamed of and more. But becoming the guardian of her best friend's six-year-old daughter turned her world upside down.

Sean Gray is a cattle rancher, search and rescue volunteer, and closet romantic. When his twin brother asks him to help organize a surprise wedding for his fiancée, Sean thinks he's crazy—until he meets Becky—Bozeman's florist extraordinaire, and the woman who could change his life forever.

With his brother's happy-ever-after at stake, Sean works alongside Becky to create a magical day for everyone. And, if the luck of the Irish is with them, they might find a pot of gold at the end of their rainbow, too.

COUNTRY LOVE is the fourth book in the Montana Promises series and can easily be read as a stand-alone. All of Leeanna's series are linked. If you find a character you like, they could be in another novel.

If you would like to know when my next book is released, please visit leeannamorgan.com and sign up for my newsletter. Happy reading!

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Book 3: The Cozy Quilt Shop (Shona and Greg)

Book 4: A Stitch in Time (Laura and Joseph)

CHAPTER 1



Becky's gran would turn in her grave if she knew why the buckets of lovely roses were sitting on her workbench.

"Are you sure you want us to take the petals off *all* the flowers?" Laura, her part-time florist, asked.

"It may seem a little extreme, but the Pearsons have a grand aisle for their daughter to walk down."

"And the bride wants to see a carpet of pretty pink roses," her sister Molly added.

Becky refused to look at the grin on her sister's face. The bride, Cheryl Pearson, was a lovely young woman who struggled to separate her needs from those of her mother. Becky only hoped she wasn't swapping one overbearing relationship for another on her wedding day.

"I'll not be listening to any of your comments about my clients," she said in an Irish accent that hadn't mellowed with the passing of time. "Next you'll be telling me to pick and choose who I agree to help."

Molly sealed the first bag of petals and carefully placed them in the refrigerator. "I'll not be telling you how to run

your business, but it would be nice to work for clients who appreciate you.”

“In their own way, they do.” Becky opened the spreadsheet on her computer and updated the file. Tomorrow afternoon, Cheryl Pearson would marry the man of her dreams. The fairytale wedding would outshine anything ever seen in Bozeman and would be the talk of the town for weeks. For that reason alone, Becky was happy to work with someone who would try the patience of a saint.

With the list of tasks updated, she returned to the three-foot-high centerpiece she was creating. “Are all of your photos ready for the exhibition?” she asked her sister. Molly was a talented photographer who had shown her images around the world. To help Becky with the last details of the Pearson wedding, she’d taken a day out of her hectic schedule.

“I still have one to finish, but I have enough time to add a little magic to it.”

Becky hoped so. Molly had worked hard to build a career that would see her through the ups and downs of life. She didn’t want her to miss a deadline because she was helping in the flower shop.

The bell over the front door of Happy Petals jingled.

“I’ll get it.” Laura hurried across the workroom. “If I need a hand, I’ll let you know.”

“That would be grand,” Becky said as she reached for a long-stemmed rose. “If it’s Doris, tell her I’ll see her tonight.”

Molly grimaced. “Better you than me,” she whispered. “I don’t know how you put up with her meddlesome ways.”

“She reminds me of Gran. Beneath her no-nonsense exterior is a woman with a heart of gold.”

“If you say so.”

Becky’s lips twitched. “I do. When you’ve finished with the petals, come and give me a hand.” Her cell phone rang as she was about to add another flower to the vase. “Hello. You’re speaking to Becky at Happy Petals. How can I help?”

“It’s Lynda Graham, Mary’s teacher. Can you come to the school to talk to her? She wants to go home.”

And just like that, Becky’s world tilted on its axis and all her plans went out the window. “I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

“Is everything all right?” Molly asked.

Becky ended the call and grabbed her keys. “I need to see Mary. Will you be all right for half an hour?”

“Of course we will. Go and talk to our little girl.”

As she drove toward Bozeman Elementary School, Becky took a deep breath and focused on what was important. And Mrs. Pearson’s last-minute changes to the floral arrangements didn’t even come close.



SEAN STEPPED out of the barn. Late afternoon was his favorite time of the day. The sun had lost its unrelenting heat, but wasn’t ready to sink below the horizon. Depending on the season, most of the ranch hands were usually finished for the day—hanging up their cowboy hats for a hot shower and a cold beer. Apart from the odd snort, woof, or meow from his sister’s army of shelter animals, it was as if nothing existed beyond the wire fences circling the Gray family ranch.

Taking a deep breath, he surveyed the wide-open pasture surrounding him. For three generations, his family had raised

beef and bison on this land. When prices had plummeted and demand slowed, they'd plowed the fields, diversifying into wheat, corn, lentils and peas.

“Are you going to stand there all night or give me a hand to change the tire?”

He glanced over his shoulder at Matthew, his twin brother. “I'm appreciating what's around us.”

“Appreciate it another day. I promised Ashley I'd take her into town for dinner.”

“I thought you were saving your money for your wedding?”

“We are, but this is more like a mental health break. Her stepmom wants her to fly to San Francisco to buy a dress. Ashley wants to buy the one she's seen in town.”

Sean wasn't about to point out it was Ashley and Matthew's wedding, not her stepmother's. He knew how fragile family relationships could be and adding his opinion wouldn't help anyone.

“Have you seen the last tire nut?” Matthew asked.

Sean looked on the ground before moving the flat tire. “It's under here. Have you thought about what you're wearing when you get married?”

His brother took the nut. “It looks as though we're renting suits.”

“So, your idea of wearing jeans didn't go down too well?”

“You could say that. Ashley's mouth dropped open and Mom gave me one of her looks.”

Sean laughed. “And it still worked?”

“I’d have to be dead not to know when she isn’t impressed.” Wiping his hands on his jeans, Matthew walked to the back of the truck. “I’ll lower the jack.”

Sean waited until the truck hit the ground before tightening the tire. “I spoke to Nathan and Liam. They’ll both be here for your bachelor party.”

“I didn’t think either of our brothers would miss it. Have you told them what we’re doing?”

“It’s a surprise. Give me a hand to lift the flat tire onto the truck. You can take it into town with you.”

“What will I do with it? It’s six o’clock at night.”

“I called the garage. Mike said to leave it at the back door and he’ll drive past after supper and fix it for us. You can bring it back to the ranch after you’ve had dinner.”

“I should have known you’d have something organized. It’s a pity you don’t have the same skills with women.”

Sean closed the tailgate. “I’m more selective than someone else I know.”

Matthew grinned. “Ashley was always the love of my life. It just took both of us a little time to realize it.”

A lot of time and hundreds of miles, Sean thought. But, if two of his three brothers could find their soulmates, there must be hope for him.

A series of snorts erupted from a stall farther into the barn. Even if his parents’ llamas thought he was hilarious, there must be someone who’d take pity on a thirty-five-year-old cowboy—especially if they enjoyed chilled wine, horseback riding, and sunsets that drifted into forever.



BECKY HURRIED across the parking lot of Bozeman Elementary School. Twelve months ago, a phone call from her ex-fiancé's lawyer had changed her life. Even though their engagement had ended ten years ago, she'd kept in contact with Jamie. He was a good person with a big heart, and she valued his friendship.

When he'd married Sophia, she'd flown to Dublin to celebrate the day with her friends. A year later, she'd returned when Mary was born. When Sophia and Jamie asked her to be the legal guardian of their baby girl, she was both humbled and shocked. With no one in their families able to take care of their daughter, the American-born couple wanted to know Mary would be looked after if anything happened to them.

Nothing she'd said could change their minds, so she'd gone with them to their lawyer's office. Never in a million years had she expected Mary would eventually live with her, but a tragic accident had left their darling girl an orphan.

Instead of returning to Ireland for Mary's fifth birthday, she'd packed a suitcase and attended Jamie and Sophia's funeral. Mary had traveled back to Montana with her and, day by day, she was learning to live in a world that didn't include her parents.

Taking a deep breath, Becky stepped into the administration block. The last year had gone by so quickly it was hard to remember what her life was like before Mary arrived. Despite everything that had happened, they'd both found a new kind of normal and, most of the time, they were happy.

The school secretary smiled when she saw her. “Mary and Lynda are in the meeting room at the end of the corridor. Go on down.”

“Thanks.”

Lynda lifted her head when she walked into the room. “Thanks for coming so quickly.”

Before she could reply, Mary flew toward her, gripping Becky’s legs as if she was about to be swept away by a raging torrent. “It’s okay.” Placing her hands on Mary’s shoulders, Becky looked at Lynda. “What happened?”

“One of Mary’s classmates said something to her in the playground. She burst into tears and hid under the stairs again. I’ll leave you to talk to her.”

Becky dropped to her knees and pushed the honey-gold curls off Mary’s face. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

Big, tear-filled eyes lifted to hers. “Tommy Pinto told me you aren’t my mommy, so you can’t come to Parents’ Day.”

“Of course, I can come. Mrs. Graham said the day is for all the adults who look after the children in her class.”

“But Tommy said it’s only for moms and dads.”

“Tommy’s wrong.” Holding Mary’s small hand, she led her across to the sofa. “Let’s sit here for a few minutes.” Reluctantly, Mary sat beside her. “Do you remember when we talked about families?”

Mary nodded. “They’re like Goldilocks.”

“That’s right. Families come in all shapes and sizes, just like Goldilocks and the three bears.”

“But I don’t like porridge.”

“That’s okay,” Becky said with a smile. “Molly eats enough for both of us.”

Mary lifted her thumb to her mouth and leaned into Becky. “I told Tommy that Mommy and Daddy are in heaven. He said that’s a place where dead people go.”

With her arm around Mary’s narrow shoulders, Becky kissed the top of her head. “Tommy’s right about that. But, even though your mom and dad are in heaven, they’re still watching what you’re doing.”

Mary still didn’t fully understand what had happened. Some days, it was as if she expected her parents to walk through the door and take her back to Ireland.

“Would you like Mrs. Graham to let Tommy know it’s okay for me to come to Parents’ Day?”

“She told him before, but he doesn’t listen too good. Can I go home?”

“No. You have to say at school until the bell rings at the end of the day.”

“Please?”

Becky looked into Mary’s big brown eyes. It was nearly the end of the day and it wouldn’t make much difference if she left. But Mary needed to stay here in case leaving school early became a habit.

“I’ll be waiting for you after the bell rings.”

Mary scrunched up her face and sighed.

It reminded Becky so much of Jamie that a knot of grief snuck up on her. “Let’s go back to your classroom. It’s a fine day for learning new things.”

With another sigh, Mary slid off the sofa. “I got a gold star for the story I wrote yesterday.”

“That’s wonderful. Do you want to show it to me before I go back to work?”

With a resigned nod, Mary slipped her little hand into Becky’s and followed her into the corridor.

Becky sighed. It was hard enough being six, but missing your parents was worse.

CHAPTER 2



Sean kicked off his boots and left them beside the other shoes in the mudroom. He'd briefly seen his brother at breakfast, but Matthew wasn't in a talkative mood. He'd quickly eaten his breakfast and left the house before he'd explained what was wrong.

At a guess, Sean would say it had something to do with his wedding.

Sniffing the air, he headed toward the kitchen. Either Amy, his sister-in-law, had left one of her famous beef casseroles on the counter or Matthew was testing his culinary skills.

"Before you tell me I look cute, you can organize the potatoes."

Sean took one look at the apron Matthew was wearing and grinned. "Your fiancée has good taste." The black and white striped apron had the words "husband in training" written across the front.

"It was a Christmas present. Were you able to order more supplies from Jake?"

"All done. Did you organize all of this?" Not only was there some kind of beef dish in the oven, but a green salad and two loaves of garlic bread sat on the counter.

Matthew took their one and only tablecloth out of a drawer. “Ashley’s working so I thought we might as well have a decent dinner together.”

Sean’s eyebrows rose. “That’s not like you.”

“I’m turning over a new leaf.”

“I’d believe that a whole lot more if you didn’t look so guilty. Did you reverse into something again?”

With a flick of his wrists, Matthew opened the tablecloth. “Not today. You’d better peel the potatoes. Otherwise, they won’t be ready in time.”

“While I’m doing that, you can tell me what this is really about.”

“Can’t I cook my brother a meal?”

“You haven’t baked anything apart from spaghetti Bolognese and barbecued meat since you were a teenager.” Sean picked up a potato. “You didn’t agree to adopt more of Sally’s animals, did you?”

“She called me about a litter of pigs someone dropped off. I told her we’re happy with Frank and Mildred.”

At least he could be grateful for that. Their sister volunteered at the local animal shelter. Her mission was to rehome as many abandoned, unloved, or sheer desperate animals as she could. Their entire family had reached the limit of what they could take, but Sally kept calling them for emergency placements. Unfortunately, the temporary shelter often turned into something a lot more permanent.

Grabbing a saucepan, he filled it with water and put it on the stovetop. As Matthew took some cutlery out of the drawer,

he glanced at his brother. “How was your dinner with Ashley?”

“She’s still upset with her stepmom.” Matthew ran his hand around the back of his neck—a sure sign that something bigger was coming. “I was thinking about our wedding.”

Sean peeled another potato. “In what way?”

“Ashley’s stressed beyond belief. She’s even talked about eloping. Mom wouldn’t be impressed, but it would make things easier. I had another idea this morning.”

This should be interesting. Matthew wasn’t the type of person to worry about much. He’d always acted first and thought about it afterward. For him to put a lot of thought into what was happening must mean things were worse than Sean thought.

“I thought *you* could organize our wedding.”

His hand slipped and he nearly peeled half the skin off his thumb. “I’ve never been married. I don’t know the first thing about weddings.”

“Sure, you do. You helped Sally and Todd when they got married. You’re the most organized person I know. If anyone can pull this off, it’s you.”

He didn’t know whether to be flattered or alarmed by Matthew’s confidence in him. “Organizing a few tables and hanging decorations is completely different from doing everything. And even if I did help, Ashley might hate everything I’ve chosen.”

A dangerous smile lit Matthew’s face. “Ashley said she’d be happy if someone else organized the whole thing. I’ve got something that will make it easier. Wait here.”

While his brother ran upstairs, Sean took the casserole out of the oven and tested the meat. It was delicious and tasted remarkably like Amy's favorite recipe.

Matthew skidded around the doorframe. "Take a look at this." He took the spoon out of Sean's hand and gave him a scrapbook. "Since I asked Ashley to marry me, she's kept pictures of all the things she likes. You can't go wrong if you use this book as your guide."

Sean opened the scrapbook to the first page. "You've been engaged for a year. She might have changed her mind about what she'd like for her wedding."

"Not Ashley. When she gets fixated on something, it's in her head forever."

"Sounds like someone else I know."

"What can I say? We're a match made in heaven. What do you think?"

Sean skimmed through a few of the pages. There were pictures of barrels full of flowers, arches covered in white roses, and hundreds of fairy lights wrapped around the rafters of barns. "They're pictures of weddings."

Matthew groaned. "They're Ashley's *perfect* weddings. She wants a French country theme—whatever that is. To me, it looks like a typical barn wedding with lacy tablecloths and lots of flowers and candles."

"Have you talked to your fiancée about asking me to organize your wedding?"

A blush streaked across his brother's face. "I want it to be a surprise."

"A surprise?"

“Like in, “Good morning, Ashley. We’re getting married today. Here’s your wedding dress.”

“Are you crazy? No one does that.”

Matthew paced back and forth. “I’m desperate and Ashley’s stressed. We need help.”

“Why can’t I help both of you?”

“Because her stepmom will get involved and then we’ll be right back to where we are now. It has to be a surprise.”

Sean didn’t want to upset his future sister-in-law. “I know you think this would solve all your problems, but it won’t. Apart from not knowing the first thing about weddings, it’s one of the busiest times on the ranch. I don’t have time to organize a wedding.”

“The ranch hands are here and I can do a few extra hours. Ashley has already spoken to some people in Bozeman, so it wouldn’t be like you’re starting from scratch. Their business cards are in the back of the scrapbook.”

Sean turned to the last page. At least Ashley was organized. The cards were listed alphabetically by business name. “Do you have a date for your wedding?”

“It wasn’t supposed to be for another twelve months. That’s why no one has their invitations yet. But with everything that’s happened, the sooner we get married, the better.”

“How soon are we talking?”

“Six weeks.”

His brother was seriously delusional if he thought he could organize a wedding in that time. “Have you booked anything?”

“We’ve booked a room for our engagement party, but nothing for the wedding.”

“I didn’t know you were having an engagement party.”

Matthew shrugged. “Ashley and I have both been busy, but we decided it’s now or never. The large meeting room at the church is available on July 16. I told Ashley I’d organize everything. All she has to do is show up.”

Sean counted out the weeks. “You want to replace the engagement party with your wedding?”

“That’s the idea. I’ll tell Ashley on the morning of our ‘engagement’ party that we’re getting married. We can tell our guests when they arrive at the church about the change of plans.” Matthew looked incredibly pleased with himself. “Don’t frown. It will work.”

“Ashley won’t speak to either of us again. This is her big day we’re talking about.”

“It’s turning into her worst nightmare.” Matthew pointed to the scrapbook. “The contact details of Ashley’s preferred florist, caterer, and reception venue are all in there. It shouldn’t take too long to book everything.”

Sean didn’t like the pleading look in his brother’s eyes. Matthew was the most easy-going person he knew and nothing, barring a wedding that was going nowhere, worried him. “You’re forgetting the most important thing. Compared to other cities, there aren’t that many people in Bozeman. If I’m running around, organizing the wedding, someone will find out and tell Ashley or someone in her family. It’s not much of a surprise if the bride knows what’s happening.”

“She’s leaving for New York City tomorrow. Her editor wants her to write a feature article on an experimental drug

that everyone's raving about."

"How long will she be gone?"

"About two weeks."

Sean thought of all the things that could go wrong. But, compared to what was happening in the rest of the world, they weren't important. "Okay, I'll give it a go."

Matthew rushed forward and hugged him tight. "I knew you wouldn't let me down."

"Don't get too excited. What if the caterers and reception venues are fully booked?"

"You'll come up with another plan."

Sean sighed. Considering Matthew's tight timeframe, he wasn't confident about anything going to plan. Especially when it was supposed to be a secret.



TWO DAYS LATER, Sean read the sign above the door to the florist's store. Happy Petals wasn't far from his favorite café. If they couldn't provide the flowers for Ashley and Matthew's wedding, he'd drown his sorrows in a plate of Tess' famous blueberry pancakes.

The bright red door opened and a woman walked outside carrying a wire stand. She looked as though she knew what she was doing, but she was still struggling with the awkward shape of the frame.

Stepping forward, he reached for the end closest to him. "Let me help."

Her face lifted to his. "That would be grand. Thank you."

Sean's heart pounded. Sparkling blue eyes were framed by rich brown hair that curled to her shoulders. But it was her accent that took his breath away. Her soft Irish brogue pulled at something deep inside of him and left him wanting to hear more.

With a warm smile, she nodded at the stand. "We'll need to make a move if I'm to fill these shelves with pretty flowers."

Heat hit his face. "Sorry. Where would you like it?" There was something so sweet and appealing about her that he'd forgotten how to move.

"On the far side of the window." She led the way, carefully placing the wire rack where she wanted it. "That should do nicely. Thank you again for your help."

Before she disappeared inside, Sean cleared his throat. "I'm hoping you can help me, too."

Her brow arched. "If it's a bouquet of flowers you'd be wanting, you've come to the right place."

"It's more than one bouquet. My brother's getting married in six weeks and he needs an entire wedding's worth of flowers."

"And he has nothing ordered?"

Sean's heart sank. He'd already had a similar conversation with the caterers. With weddings booked up to two years in advance, they might be having a barbecue dinner instead of the catered feast Ashley had imagined. "Nothing has been organized."

Instead of turning him down, a smile appeared on the woman's face. "In that case, come inside. You can tell me what you need and I'll tell you whether Happy Petals can help."

That would have worked really well if he'd known what he needed. "I might have to rely on your suggestions."

The woman's hand froze on the doorknob. "Your brother is placing a lot of trust in you. Has your future sister-in-law told you what she wants?"

Sean looked over his shoulder. With only a few steps separating the flower shop from the café, anyone could hear what he was about to say.

"Before we go any further, my name is Becky O'Donaghue," the woman whispered. "I own Happy Petals, so if it's discretion you'd be wanting, you're talking to the right person." With her gaze focused on the two elderly women walking into the café, she opened the door. "I've lived in small towns all my life, but I'm still amazed at how fast other people's news travels."

"It's probably because there aren't a lot of other things happening."

"You'd be surprised," Becky said with a twinkle in her eyes. "Come with me before someone decides they know your business better than you do."

Pulling his gaze away from her face, he followed her into Happy Petals. Flowers in all shapes, sizes, and colors filled the shelves. He hadn't been here since his sister married Todd. With the bridal bouquets placed in boxes, he'd said a quick thanks to the woman who'd served him and made a hasty exit back to his parents' ranch.

He would have spent more time here if Becky had been standing behind the counter.

Taking a pen and notebook out of her pocket, she sent him another dazzling smile. "Tell me what it is you'll be wanting."

“My brother asked me to organize a surprise wedding for him and his fiancée. Ashley has been planning the type of wedding she wants for the last year.”

Becky frowned. “Are we talking about Ashley Fisher?”

“We are. Do you know her?”

“I talked to her a few weeks ago about her wedding.”

Hope sprung inside his chest. “So, you know what she wants?”

“She had some photos of other weddings she liked. I’d have to check my notes to look at what she said.”

He handed her the scrapbook. “Matthew gave me this. I color-coded the photos so it made it easier to link the images together. The pictures showing the flowers Ashley likes have a yellow Post-it note on them.”

After looking at the first four pages, Becky frowned. “If Ashley is your brother’s fiancée, you must be Sean.” When he nodded, the confusion on her face disappeared. “It’s lovely to meet you. My sister, Molly, is in the Bridesmaids Club with your sister, Sally. I’ve helped with a few of the weddings they’ve organized.”

Small-town life suddenly got a whole lot smaller.

“Don’t worry,” Becky teased. “Sally hasn’t told us anything she shouldn’t.”

“I hope not.” Sean wasn’t sure if the blush on her cheeks had anything to do with him, but it made her eyes even bluer.

Becky’s gaze dropped to the scrapbook. As she looked at the pages, he hoped she saw something he didn’t. “These photos are lovely. How many guests are coming?”

“About seventy, but none of the invitations have been sent.”

“And the date?”

“July 16, but I have to confirm that with Pastor Steven. The wedding will be at the church. I need to find a barn for the reception.”

“You have a difficult job ahead of you.”

Before he'd met Becky, he would have said it was almost impossible. But there was a determination in her eyes that hadn't been there before.

“Let me find the notes I made after I spoke to Ashley. From there we can create a plan that's everything she wants.”

As she sat in front of her computer, he let go of the breath he was holding. At least Becky hadn't told him he was crazy. Six weeks to organize Ashley and Matthew's dream wedding was a big ask—especially when he didn't know what he was doing.



AFTER SHE FINISHED work for the day, Becky drove to her sister's house with Mary.

“Do you think Aunt Molly has baked some cupcakes?”

Becky glanced in the rearview mirror. Mary loved cupcakes, especially if they had lemon frosting. “I'm not sure. We'll have to ask her when we arrive. How was school?”

“It was okay. Tommy was nice to me.”

“That's good.”

“When we were doing art, he said he liked my picture of a rainbow.”

“What did he draw?”

Mary lifted her arms in the air. “A ginormous dinosaur with big, sharp teeth, and a tail that bangs into things. It was really scary.”

“It sounds like it. Here’s Aunt Molly and Uncle Jacob’s house.”

Mary’s smile was as wide as Becky’s. The large, two-story house was built with red bricks, thick wooden beams, and long walls of glass. With its incredible view of Emerald Lake, it was a stunning home.

Molly’s husband, Jacob, was a property developer. He’d bought the large parcel of land surrounding the lake a few years ago. After subdividing it into four lots, he’d sold three parcels to people who had become friends, and built a new house for himself and Molly after they were married.

Becky couldn’t imagine a more perfect place to call home. She loved her cottage but, if she had a choice, she’d prefer to live beside the lake.

As soon as she stopped the truck, Mary unclicked her seatbelt and threw open the door. She loved coming here and seeing the menagerie of animals Molly and Jacob had adopted from the animal shelter.

“I can see Aunt Molly,” Mary yelled excitedly as she ran up the front stairs.

Becky looked at the kitchen window and waved at her sister. Taking a box of salads off the front passenger seat, she followed Mary into the house.

It had been a busy day and she was looking forward to spending some family time with the people she loved.



“AND WE SAW lots of birds flying over the lake,” Mary said excitedly as Becky placed the box of salads on the kitchen counter. “They were finding food for their babies.”

“Well,” Molly said with a grin, “that sounds like a fine thing to be doing. Did you finish your unicorn story today?”

Mary nodded and pulled herself onto a kitchen stool. “My teacher said it was great.” Her eyes lit up as she pointed to what was sitting beside the oven. “You baked some cupcakes!”

“I did. Jacob asked if we could make lemon frosting for them.”

“That’s my favorite! Can we put pink candy on them, too?”

Molly nodded and showed her the other decorations in her cupboard. Coming here was always good for Mary. It gave her a sense of family, a chance to enjoy her honorary aunt and uncle’s company, and make memories that added to what she’d known in Ireland.

While Mary chose the candy she liked the best, Molly handed Becky a glass of water. “How was work?”

“Busy. I had an interesting meeting with someone called Sean Gray. Do you know him?”

“If you’re talking about Sally’s brother, I do. He’s in the Gallatin Search and Rescue Team with Jacob.” Molly added some parsley to a bowl of potato salad. “What did you think of him?”

Becky didn't know what to say. If she told Molly about the butterflies dancing around her stomach while she was talking to him, her sister would jump to all sorts of conclusions that weren't true.

So, instead of telling her what she really thought, she shrugged her shoulders. "He seems nice enough."

Molly sent her a suspicious stare. "If you were Pinocchio, your nose would be growing. Sean is more than nice. He's one of the sweetest men I've met. Why was he in Happy Petals?"

Becky sighed. "He's doing something amazing for his family. For now, it's a secret, but it's more than most brothers would do."

Mary nibbled on the piece of apple Molly had given her. "You said it's not good to have secrets."

Sometimes, Becky forgot that Mary was like a sponge. Her six-year-old brain absorbed everything, even if you didn't think she was listening. "This is a good secret. If everything works out, it will make someone very happy."

"Like when Tommy is nice to me?"

"Almost."

Molly looked through the large window overlooking the driveway. "Jacob's home. It looks as though he's brought someone with him."

Becky turned to follow her sister's gaze. Jacob was driving his truck through the last gate. Behind him, a blue pickup truck was moving more slowly toward them. It wasn't until both drivers climbed out of the trucks that she realized who was here.

Her eyebrows rose as she turned to Molly. “Did you know Sean was coming to your house?”

“No, but it doesn’t surprise me. Jacob often invites him here after they’ve had a callout.”

“Don’t mention anything about the secret,” Becky told her sister. “I told Sean I wouldn’t say anything.”

Molly placed a bowl of frosting in front of Mary. “We’ll be too busy decorating the cupcakes to say anything, won’t we Mary?”

With a happy smile, Mary nodded.

Becky sighed. It would be a lot easier if she could tell her sister what was happening. Molly was a great photographer and, from what Sean had said, he hadn’t booked anyone to take the wedding photos.

Sooner or later, more people would need to know about Matthew and Ashley’s surprise wedding. Hopefully, none of them had inquisitive six-year-olds listening to what they said.

CHAPTER 3



Sean followed Jacob into the kitchen and was surprised to find Becky standing at the counter. After spending half the day talking to people about wedding venues, the accident they'd been to had pulled him back to reality. It was never easy helping people with serious injuries, but seeing Becky's gentle smile undid some of the tension in his shoulders.

"Hi. It's good to see you again."

"You, too. Molly just told me you're in the search and rescue team with Jacob."

"I've been a member for about fifteen years."

Jacob walked behind the counter and kissed Molly's cheek. "There was an accident on the road to Big Sky. Two people were flown out by helicopter and three others were taken to the hospital by ambulance."

Molly sighed. "I hope they'll be okay. It's lovely to see you again, Sean."

"It's great to be here. Jacob invited me to dinner, but I didn't realize Becky was here. If you'd like to have some family time, I can come back another day."

“Don’t be silly. It’s a simple meal that we’d love to share. Becky and I have made the salads and Jacob will cook the meat on the barbecue.”

“And we have cupcakes for dessert,” a little girl added as she ran into the room. “I’ve washed my hands, Aunt Molly.”

Sean frowned. As far as he knew, Molly didn’t have any brothers or sisters apart from Becky. That would mean the little girl was Becky’s daughter, but they didn’t look anything like each other.

“That’s wonderful, Mary. Before we decorate the cupcakes, come and say hello to Mr. Gray.”

The little girl stood beside Becky and frowned. “Hello. You’re tall.”

Sean dropped to one knee to bring her closer to eye-level with her. A lock of Mary’s honey-gold curls fell over her deep brown eyes. “Everyone in my family is tall, except my sister. What kind of cupcakes have you baked?”

“Aunt Molly made chocolate. They’re my favorite, especially with lemon frosting.”

Sean smiled at her slight Irish accent. “I like them, too. Do you bake other things with your mom and Aunt Molly?”

Mary’s troubled gaze shot to Becky.

“It’s okay,” she reassured her before turning to Sean. “I’m not Mary’s mom. I’m her guardian.”

“My mom and dad are in heaven,” Mary told him in a matter-of-fact voice. “Do you help people like Uncle Jacob does?”

“I try to.” Sean glanced at Becky. Even though Mary didn’t seem worried by what he’d said, he still felt embarrassed.

“It’s okay,” she said softly.

He stood as Mary reached for Becky’s hand. They might not be mother and daughter, but it was easy to see the connection they had with each other.

Jacob gave him a plate of raw steak. “While Mary’s organizing dessert, you can help me with the barbecue.”

“Sounds good.” With one last look at Becky, he followed Jacob onto the deck.

When they were away from the kitchen, Jacob said, “Becky isn’t married and she doesn’t have a boyfriend.”

Sean frowned. Were his thoughts that obvious? “That wasn’t what I was thinking.”

“But you were curious.”

“Maybe, but I have other things on my mind.”

“So did I before I met Molly but, at some point, you need more in your life. What’s the harm in getting to know Becky?”

Sean’s eyes narrowed. “Did you invite me here because she was coming to dinner?”

Instead of answering his question, Jacob turned on the grill. “There’s no harm in meeting new people. I didn’t realize you’d already met.”

“I talked to her this morning,” Sean mumbled.

For some reason, Jacob looked incredibly pleased. “In that case, you’ll have plenty to say to each other.”

There was a lot Sean wanted to say, but it all revolved around Matthew’s wedding. After talking to Becky, he’d spoken to Pastor Steven and confirmed the date for the mid-July wedding. Now all he had to do was organize everything

else his future sister-in-law wanted. And there was one person who would be even more help than his brother.

If Becky was interested, he had a job of astronomical proportions for her.



AFTER DINNER, Becky placed a dirty bowl in the dishwasher. Sean had continued to impress her throughout the evening. He'd listened attentively when Mary had spoken to him, helped set the table, and offered to fill the dishwasher before they enjoyed their cupcake dessert.

He was easy to talk to and fun to be with, especially when he'd told Mary about the animals on his ranch. After hearing about the llamas, guinea pigs, kittens, and goats, Mary was so excited she could barely sit still.

Picking up a plate, Becky rinsed it under the faucet. "Do you enjoy living and working on the ranch?"

Sean took a moment to answer. "It's all I've ever known, so I don't have anything to compare it to. Although I stayed with my oldest brother, Liam, in Vancouver for a few weeks. That was enough to put me off living in a big city."

"What didn't you like about it?"

"It was noisy, crowded, and stressful. When I arrived home, it felt as though I could breathe again. What about you? Do you enjoy living in Montana?"

Leaning against the counter, she thought about the changes in her life since she'd left Ireland. "I've enjoyed it since the first day I stepped off the plane in Kalispell. Everyone was so warm and friendly and eager to help me find my place."

“Your place?”

Becky smiled at the frown on Sean’s face. “Where I belong. I left Ireland with a battered suitcase and a heart full of dreams. My granny once fell in love with a rancher from Montana. From when I was little, she filled my head with stories about cowboys and a sky that ran into forever. When I was ready to travel, Montana was the only place I wanted to see.”

“Why Bozeman?”

“It was a spur-of-the-moment decision. The first bus leaving the airport was heading here. I found a small apartment close to town and eventually opened my flower shop. Molly joined me for a few vacations before our gran died. After that, we were both a little lost, so we made plans for her to move here permanently.”

“Having family around you is important.”

“It is. When Mary’s parents died, Molly and I wanted her to be part of the magic we’ve found here.”

Sean added another glass to the dishwasher. “How did they die?”

“They were in a car accident. Many years ago, I was engaged to Mary’s father. Jamie was a fine man, but we realized we were better friends than anything else. After I moved here, I went back to Ireland for his wedding and, when Mary was born, Jamie and his wife asked me to be her godmother and legal guardian.” Becky took a deep breath. The next words would always be the hardest. “Jamie and Sophia died just before Mary turned five. They asked me to look after her if anything happened to them, so here we are.”

Sean's eyes widened. "You made it sound so easy. Does Mary have any other relatives?"

"Her grandma lives in Milwaukee, but Jamie didn't want his mom looking after her. Mary and I have had our ups and downs, but we're learning to live together. Molly and Jacob have been amazing. I couldn't have spent as much time with Mary and continued to work at Happy Petals without them."

There was so much more she could have told him, but it wasn't the time or the place. She had a feeling Sean, more than most men, would understand the promise she'd made to Mary's parents and the impact it would have on everyone's life.

"What about you?" Becky asked. "What's it like being a twin?"

Sean grinned. "Annoying, comforting, and crazy. Matthew is the most disorganized person I know, but I wouldn't change anything about him." Looking over her shoulder, he lowered his voice. "I have some news about the wedding. Pastor Steven can marry Ashley and Matthew on July 16."

"That's wonderful. Do you want Happy Petals to provide the flowers?"

Sean nodded. "I'll choose a package from the options you sent me."

Becky leaned toward him. "You won't be disappointed. If there's anything else you need, just ask."

Sean started to say something, then stopped. He looked so worried that Becky wondered what had happened. "Tell me what you need before Mary comes looking for dessert."

"Matthew thinks the scrapbook is all I need to organize the wedding, but I don't know what I'm doing. I know you're

busy, but if there's any way you could help, I'd appreciate it."

Becky thought about Ashley's book, the ideas that had filled the bride-to-be's mind for months. "What about your sister? Sally is already married and knows what needs to be done."

"Ashley and Sally are friends. If my sister knows what's happening, she'll eventually say something she shouldn't."

With everything that was happening in her life, organizing a wedding was low on her list of priorities. But, with a sinking heart, she realized she might not have a choice. Ashley was so excited when she'd explained what she wanted for her wedding. If Sean was struggling now, the wedding could be a disaster. And, if there was one thing Becky was good at, it was making sure no one was disappointed.

"It's just as well I'm a kind-hearted soul," she told him. "I'll agree to help on one condition."

Sean's shoulders sagged in relief. "I'll do anything. What would you like?"

"A guided tour of the animals on your ranch. And if Mary can feed the llamas, it would make her day."

With a smile that made her toes curl, Sean held out his hand. "It's a deal. You don't know how grateful I am."

She shook his hand and sighed. "I just hope Ashley is happy with the choices we make. There's a lot that could go wrong with Matthew's surprise wedding."

"And a lot that could go right."

Becky forgot to breathe as she looked into Sean's eyes. Her gran would be telling her to throw caution to the wind and see where these feelings would take her. But she had a

business to manage, a little girl who depended on her, and a life that didn't leave a lot of time for socializing.

Building any type of relationship with Sean would be impossible.



THE FOLLOWING EVENING, Sean parked his truck outside a small cottage four blocks from Happy Petals. Becky's front door was surrounded by large containers filled with flowers. They softened the wooden siding, matching the bright orange trim around the windows and the yellow mailbox perched above the white picket fence.

Her home made him feel lighter, less weighed down by his brother's expectations and his own insecurities. Organizing anyone's wedding was a huge responsibility. When it was your twin's, it was worse. He knew Matthew better than anyone else. Even if his brother was disorganized and leaped from one idea to the next, he'd do whatever it took to make him happy.

Tonight, with Becky's help, they would take the first step in creating a day no one would forget. With a folder full of notes, Ashley's scrapbook, and a plate of cookies, he stepped onto the veranda and pushed the doorbell.

Within seconds, the front door swung open. Mary's grinning face beamed up at him.

"Hi, Mr. Gray."

"Hi, Mary. Is Becky here?"

"She's in the garden getting rid of the weeds."

"That's a good thing to do."

“That’s what Becky said.”

The woman in question hurried down the hallway toward them. With a baseball cap pushed to the back of her head and a smile on her face, she looked more relaxed and carefree than she had yesterday.

“Hi, Sean. Welcome to our home.” She saw the chocolate chip cookies and smiled. “You’ve been baking?”

He shook his head. “Not this time. I bought them from Angel Wings Café.”

“They look delicious. Come into the kitchen. Would you like a cup of coffee, tea, or something cold to drink?”

“Something cold would be great.”

“Orange juice?”

“Perfect.”

Mary walked beside him. “Did you bring your llamas with you?”

She was looking at him so hopefully he didn’t want to tell her they weren’t here. “They’re having dinner at the ranch.”

“Do they like cookies?”

“Cookies would give them a tummy ache. Their favorite food is grass. Sometimes, when they’re extra good, we give them blackberries and dandelions.”

Mary’s eyes widened. “We’ve got dandelions.” With an excited gleam in her eyes, she rushed past Becky and tore down the hallway.

Becky laughed. “I have a feeling you’ll be going home with a bag of weeds.”

“I don’t mind,” Sean said softly. “Mary reminds me of my brother’s two children. Toby and Catherine would do the same thing.”

“Do they live on the ranch, too?”

He stepped into the living room and studied the colorful assortment of furniture and art. “They do. We have two houses on the ranch. Nathan moved into my parents’ house after he married Amy. Mom and Dad moved to Florida a few years ago, so it worked out well. Matthew and I share our grandparents’ house. Did Molly take these photos?”

Becky nodded. “Some are from her travels in America, but others were taken overseas.”

He studied the photo of a large, outdoor market. “Is that the Grand Bazaar?”

“It is. Have you been there?”

“I went there a few years ago with some friends. We got lost in the Spice Market.”

“’Tis an easy thing to do. I met Molly in Istanbul when she was taking the photographs for a Vogue cover. We spent two days in the Spice Market and the Grand Bazaar and we still didn’t see everything.” She looked around the room with pride. “After Molly married Jacob, I moved into this cottage to start again. It’s everything Mary and I could ever want.”

“It’s a great home. I’m hoping to start again, too. An architect is working on the concept plans for a new house for me.”

“On the ranch?”

Sean nodded. “I didn’t want to live with my brother and his new wife after they were married. Bringing the wedding

forward means Matthew will live in town with Ashley for a while. After my house is finished, they'll move into my grandparents' home."

"It sounds as though you've thought of everything."

"I hope so." He walked into the kitchen and placed everything he'd brought with him on the counter.

Becky poured each of them a glass of orange juice. "How will it feel to be living on your own for a few months?"

"Nathan's family and the ranch hands will still be living on the property, so it won't be too different. Matthew will be there during the day and Sally visits a few times a week, so I see plenty of people."

"I would have enjoyed having more brothers and sisters, but Gran was the only family we had."

"What happened to your parents?"

"They died in a car accident when I was nine. Our gran took us in and loved us like no other."

Sean frowned. "You must have been devastated when Mary's parents died the same way?"

"It made me realize how important it is for Mary to know she is loved." Sitting at the kitchen table, Becky pulled a laptop close. "I started a project plan for Matthew and Ashley's wedding. We can add more columns as we go, but I thought—" Her eyes connected with Sean's. "What would you be smiling about?"

"You're organized."

She frowned. "'Tis the best way to start a project. If you don't know where you're going, how do you know how to get there?"

“A lot of people would have made a list of what needs to be done and left it at that.”

“Lists are fine, but I like a little more structure, especially when I have a lot of projects happening at once.” Becky turned the laptop toward him. “Have I missed anything?”

Opening one of the folders, Sean compared the tasks on Becky’s spreadsheet to the notes he’d made. “It looks good to me. Here’s a list of some of the venues and caterers I’ve spoken to. I’ll email you an up-to-date list when I get home.”

Becky read the sheet of paper he gave her. “Oh, dear. Are none of the venues available?”

“Not when we need them. Pastor Steven said we could use the main meeting room at the church, but Ashley wants to have her reception in a barn.”

“I’ve made the flowers for a wedding at a pretty barn about fifteen minutes from Bozeman. It’s on the Love Knot Ranch. The owners have everything a bride and groom need for their wedding.”

“I spoke to them yesterday. They’re fully booked for the next ten months.”

“There must be somewhere else we could use.”

The back door opened and Mary hurried into the kitchen clutching a large bunch of dandelions. “I found these for the llamas.” With a delighted grin, she thrust them toward Sean. “Do you think they’ll like them?”

He took the limp flowers and smiled. “They’ll love them. Thank you.”

“What are your llamas names?”

Sean left the flowers on the table and helped Mary pull out the chair beside him. “They’re called Snowflake and Cupid. My sister chose their names.”

“Do they like living on your ranch?”

“I think so. They like munching the grass and saying hello to the ranch hands. When it’s cold, they share the barn with Frank and Mildred, our two pigs.”

Mary’s eyes widened. “You have pigs?”

“They’re round and pink, and love rolling in the mud. You can meet them when you visit the ranch with Becky.”

Mary’s gaze flicked to Becky. “We’re going to the ranch?”

“Only when Mr. Gray and I have finished something we’re working on together.”

The timing of her visit didn’t seem to worry Mary. “Do you think the llamas will talk to me?”

Sean could see the cogs of her brain working overtime. He’d watched *Dr. Doolittle* with his niece and nephew. If Mary had seen the same movie, she might be disappointed when the llamas spoke to her. “Snowflake and Cupid don’t talk like you and me. Instead of using their mouths, their ears move all the time. They like wiggling their tails when they’re happy but, if you hear them humming, it means they’re annoyed.”

Becky placed a sheet of paper and a container of crayons in front of Mary. “While I’m talking to Mr. Gray, why don’t you draw a picture for him? He could take it back to the ranch.”

“To remind him we’re coming to see his llamas and pigs?”

“Something like that.” Becky caught his gaze.

The laughter in her eyes made his breath catch. Regardless of what happened with Matthew's wedding, he knew he'd found something special that could turn into something amazing.

All they had to do was organize his brother's wedding—and find a venue that would seat seventy surprised guests.

CHAPTER 4



“*W*hat do you think?” Sean asked as he opened the doors to the fourth barn they’d looked at today.

“It has potential.” Becky tried to inject some enthusiasm into her voice, but it was difficult. The barn was big, drafty, and full of abandoned machinery. Nothing short of a major overhaul would make this building close to what Ashley wanted for her wedding.

Sean placed his hands on his hips, looking like a man who was seriously considering the merits of the run-down building. “After we get rid of everything, it will look okay.”

It would take a lot more than emptying the barn to make it into a fairytale venue. “You’re underestimating the amount of time and money it would take to improve what we see.”

“It’s not that bad.”

Becky’s eyebrows rose. “I know this is your friend’s barn, but the only things that belong in here are horses and cows.”

“That’s the city girl inside of you talking. We could have the barn cleaned out in next to no time.”

Giving him the benefit of the doubt, Becky ignored the layers of grime and imagined tables filled with sparkling glasses and vases full of flowers. A wagon wheel covered in

white roses could sit behind the bridal table and fairy lights could glisten from the rafters. But, regardless of how many lights and flowers they added, she didn't think this was Ashley's dream wedding venue.

Sean frowned. "You don't look happy."

Just in case she was wrong, Becky took some photos to add to their folder of options. "If this was the only choice we had, I'd still be worried about using this barn."

Sean ran his hand through his hair. "This is the last one on my list. I'm not sure what we'll do now."

"Let me call Molly. She's taken so many photographs of barns she must know about others we've missed."

"I don't know if that's a good idea. Molly's in The Bridesmaids Club with Sally. If she says anything to my sister, everyone will know about the wedding."

"We have to do something." Becky checked her watch, then stepped into the afternoon sunshine. She had to leave in a few minutes and, if they didn't find a suitable barn, they'd be having the reception in Pastor Steven's church. "Molly won't say anything."

Sean was clearly torn between the need to keep his promise to Matthew and finding a barn. "If you're sure, then ask her. We don't have a lot of time."

Breathing a sigh of relief, Becky called her sister. As soon as she explained what was happening, Molly reeled off the location of two more barns they hadn't seen. Listening on speakerphone, Sean wrote down the addresses.

Just as Becky was about to end the call, Molly yelled, "Wait! I know the perfect barn."

Sean glanced at Becky.

“I can’t believe you haven’t thought of this,” Molly chided. “Call Sally and Todd. Their old barn is amazing. They’ve had a wedding there before and it wouldn’t need a lot of work to make it look incredible.”

Becky frowned. She’d completely forgotten about the historic barn at the back of their property. She’d only seen it after she’d delivered the table decorations for the wedding Molly was talking about. It was a lovely venue that would be perfect for Ashley’s French country theme.

Sean frowned. “I didn’t mention it because Todd doesn’t like people visiting his ranch.”

“Would it make a difference if the guests were coming for his brother-in-law’s wedding?”

“It might. I’ll call him now.”

While Sean was pulling out his phone, Becky thought of any reason Todd might say no. “Tell him we’ll clean everything before we leave. And it won’t be a huge wedding.”

Becky held her cell phone to her ear. “Are you still there, Molly?”

“I’m here.”

“Sean’s talking to Todd. I’ll call you back if he says yes.”

“That’s grand, but give Sally a call, too,” she said quietly. “She’ll be happy to have her brother’s wedding reception on the ranch, but make sure she knows it’s a surprise. She can’t tell anyone.”

“And if Todd knows she’s happy, it might make the decision easier for him.”

“Exactly. Would you like me to take the wedding photos?”

Becky loved her sister for asking, but she was still working on the images for her next exhibition. “That’s very sweet, but I know how busy you are.”

“’Tis no problem. I wouldn’t have offered if I didn’t think I could do it.”

If Molly took the photographs, they would be wonderful. “If you’re sure you can do them, that would be grand.”

“I’ll add the wedding to my schedule. Would you like me to pick up Mary from school? I’m only two blocks away.”

Becky breathed a sigh of relief. “Thanks. Can you stay with her for half an hour until I get home?”

“I can do better than that. She can sit with me while I work. If Sean is able to visit Todd’s ranch, go with him. We’ll be okay at my house.”

“I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Molly laughed. “That’s what sisters are for. We’ll see you when you’ve finished.”

After she ended the call, Becky turned to Sean. “Did he say yes?”

“Not yet, but he’s happy for us to look at the barn. Do you have the time to come with me now?”

“I do. Molly’s collecting Mary from school.”

“That’s great. Hopefully, we won’t be too long.” Sean closed the heavy barn doors and walked toward his truck. “If Todd’s barn is as good as Molly told us, it could be perfect for the reception.”

“As long as Sally hasn’t filled it with shelter animals, it will be amazing.” The only thing Becky remembered about the barn was the three-story interior and the gorgeous weather-worn wood. Compared to everything else they’d seen, it would be a beautiful wedding venue.



SEAN OPENED Becky’s door and waved to Todd. When they’d first met, Todd was extremely quiet and kept to himself. After living with the debilitating side effects of PTSD, Todd never thought he’d have a normal life. He’d told Sean that meeting Sally had changed him in ways he never thought possible.

It didn’t take a rocket scientist to work out the same thing could be said for Sally. Sean’s sister was full of energy and never sat still. Todd grounded her. He helped her focus her mind and stay on track. The only thing he hadn’t been able to help her overcome was her obsession with shelter animals.

Volunteering at the shelter wasn’t enough for Sally. Most weeks she brought home an animal that needed somewhere to live. Before their parents moved away from Montana, they’d banned her from bringing any animals onto the family ranch, especially after the llamas arrived.

Max, Todd and Sally’s large Irish Wolfhound, nudged Sean’s pocket. “You won’t find any treats in there,” he told the long-legged dog. Big brown eyes stared reproachfully at him. “I’ll find something for you before I leave.”

Todd joined them. “There are plenty of treats inside.” He shook Sean’s hand and said hello to Becky. “I hear you’re planning a surprise wedding.”

“Sean’s doing most of the work,” Becky told him. “Thanks for letting us look at the barn. We can’t find anything that’s even halfway decent.”

Todd frowned. “Don’t get your hopes up. Nothing has been done to it since the last wedding.” He pointed to two four-wheelers. “It’ll be quicker if we drive.”

Becky glanced at Sean. “I’ll be your passenger. I’ve never driven one of these before.”

“They aren’t difficult.” Sean took the two helmets Todd handed to him. “I could show you what to do.”

Becky shook her head. “Maybe another time, but not today.” Reaching forward, she took one of the helmets and lifted it onto her head. “I’m ready.”

He smiled at the gleam in her eyes. If they were at his family’s ranch, he’d take her for a ride on one of his motorbikes. There was nothing like the feel of the air speeding past you as you tore over the dirt tracks.

“You look to be hatching a mighty plan inside that head of yours,” Becky said with a frown. “We’ll not be racing today.”

Sean almost laughed. “I was thinking about my motorbikes, not this one.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

Todd patted Max’s head. “Go home, boy.” The Irish Wolfhound’s head lifted and he looked pleadingly at Todd. “Home.”

With a soft snort that made Sean smile, Max lumbered across the yard and flopped on the veranda.

With Max safely out of the way, Todd climbed onto his four-wheeler. “Are you ready?”

Becky straightened her helmet and sat behind Sean. “Ready.”

When her arms wrapped around his waist, Sean’s smile widened. “You don’t have to hold on so tight. I won’t go fast.”

“Sorry,” Becky mumbled from behind her helmet.

After starting his bike, Todd glanced over his shoulder at Sean. “Follow me.”

With Becky plastered to his back, he followed his brother-in-law across the open pasture. Hopefully, this would be the barn of Ashley and Matthew’s dreams. But, even if it wasn’t, he was enjoying spending time with Becky.



AS SOON AS she saw the barn, Becky knew it was perfect. It would still need to be cleaned from top to tail, but that was a minor detail. Turning in a slow circle, she absorbed all the small details that would make the barn sparkle for Ashley’s wedding.

“I’m assuming your silence means this could be the one?” Sean asked.

“It is as beautiful as I remember. With flowers and fairy lights, the barn will sprinkle a little magic on Matthew and Ashley’s celebrations.”

Todd ran his hand around the back of his neck. “You sound like Sally. From the moment she stepped inside the barn, she was determined to make another bride’s dream come true. At least you won’t need a forklift to clean it up.”

Molly had warned Becky about the amount of work they’d had to do last time. Thankfully, none of the heavy machinery

they'd moved had made its way back into the barn. "What have you been using the barn for?"

"I'll give you two guesses."

A rustle of hay in the far corner told Becky all she needed. "How many animals has Sally brought here?"

"I've given up counting. When I didn't want to convert it into a wedding venue, she turned it into a retreat for rescued animals." Todd walked toward a stall at the back of the barn. "Meet Carlos, the world's most affectionate goat. He had twelve friends with him last week, but Sally found homes for them. Carlos leaves tomorrow to stay in his forever home. We also adopted another three cats to keep the mouse and rat population under control."

Sean leaned against the rail separating Carlos from the rest of the barn. "If we're going to use the barn, we'd better tell Sally. The last time I spoke to her, she had a family of pigs looking for a temporary home."

"They only stayed one night. Someone from Four Corners took them." Todd pointed to the far wall. "Before the last wedding, we installed a new generator. It's in a shed through that door. The wiring and the roof have been replaced and I fixed some of the siding."

Becky had to look closely to see the improvements Todd had made. The carefully concealed light fixtures looked as old as the barn. "When was it built?"

"About 1910. The Heritage Committee said it's one of the oldest barns in Montana."

Taking out her cell phone, Becky started taking photos. "And you'd be happy for Matthew and Ashley to celebrate their special day here?"

Todd sighed. “Sally wouldn’t talk to me if I said no, but why the rush? I thought Matthew wasn’t getting married until next year.”

Sean cleared his throat. “Try five weeks’ time.”

“Five weeks? That sounds like something Sally would do.”

Becky moved into the center of the barn and focused her phone on the loft. “It’s a surprise for Ashley.”

Todd’s eyebrows rose. “I hope she likes what you’re doing.”

“So do we,” Becky said with a frown. “I have some ideas that will make the barn extra special. Would you like to hear them?”

Sean took a pen and paper out of his pocket. “Go for it. I’ll add the details to our spreadsheet.” He was glad he was a fast writer. As her imagination filled one, then two, pages of his notebook, he began to realize just how creative Becky was. It was no wonder Happy Petals was so popular. If she brought the same amount of enthusiasm to her flower arrangements, no one would go anywhere else.

He glanced at Todd and grinned. Heaven help them both if Sally heard some of these ideas.

The barn wouldn’t continue to be a halfway house for rescue animals—they’d have a fully functioning wedding venue ready to roll as soon as Matthew and Ashley’s wedding was over.

CHAPTER 5



Becky slid two more catalogs onto the kitchen counter before pouring herself a cup of hot chocolate. Mary was in the living room doing her homework and Sean had arrived to book more things for the wedding. Judging by the amount of page-turning, he wasn't finding it as easy as he'd thought.

"I didn't know there are so many lanterns people can rent."

"They have different options depending on the theme and the color palette a bride and groom want." Sitting beside him, Becky pointed to a picture. "I've used those ones before, but they're too big for the tables at Matthew and Ashley's wedding."

Sean pointed at a small white lantern. "What about this one? It looks similar to the pictures in Ashley's scrapbook."

The delicate scrollwork around the top, combined with an LED tealight in the center, made it a great choice. "It's perfect. Let's order fourteen." Becky opened another book. "I spoke to Jake and Doris Stanley from the hardware store. They have a huge amount of fairy lights they decorate their house with each Christmas. They're happy for us to borrow them. I didn't tell them they were for Matthew and Ashley's wedding."

“It’s just as well. Doris is usually at the center of any gossip going around town. What did you say they were for?”

“A wedding venue I’m helping to decorate in Red Deer. The wedding is happening, but it’s still three months away. What about these tablecloths?” She showed Sean the picture in the catalog.

“They look good. How many do we need?”

“We’d better make it twenty. That will give us a few spares.”

Sean wrote down the number, then picked up his cup of coffee. “Matthew and I are emailing everyone their invitations to the ‘engagement’ party tomorrow night. Thanks for making sure there were no spelling mistakes in the text.”

“I didn’t mind. It was good to tick another thing off our list. How is Matthew?”

“Nervous, but he’ll be okay.” Sean looked at the pictures of the flowers Becky was using for the wedding. “Why did you decide to be a florist?”

“My gran raised Molly and me in her flower shop. A single day didn’t go by when we weren’t making a little bouquet or a flower arrangement. I have such happy memories of those times that it made sense to keep going.”

“Molly said you went to college and did a business studies degree?”

Becky’s eyes widened. She hoped that’s all her sister had told him. “Gran’s flower shop barely made enough money to pay her rent and put food on our table. I wanted more, so I needed to know the ins and outs of business.”

“Has what you learned helped?”

Sean's question wasn't as straightforward to answer as he might think. "The principles of marketing, accounting, and contract law were well covered, but it was what I learned outside of college that helped me the most." When he frowned, Becky continued. "I had two part-time jobs while I was at college. Learning how to juggle my studies with my work and making sure Gran and Molly were okay taught me other skills I've never forgotten."

"It must have been difficult."

"No more difficult than running a successful ranch. I hope Molly didn't share too many family secrets with you."

His eyes crinkled at the corners. "Only a few. She said if you get grouchy, I should buy you a plate of blueberry pancakes from Angel Wings Café."

"I like that idea."

"I thought you might. What about tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?"

"Matthew and I aren't sending the invitations until later in the night. I could meet you at the café after you finish work. We still have to decide on a menu for the reception."

"Did Annie say she could do the catering?" If she had, it would make everything so much easier.

"She called me last night. She had a late cancellation. I don't know what happened with the other event, but I'm grateful she could help us."

"So am I. Annie has a gift for making the ordinary seem extraordinary."

Mary walked into the kitchen. "I've finished my homework."

Becky lifted her onto a stool. “Would you like to show us your masterpiece?”

With a proud smile, she placed the picture she’d made on the counter. “It’s Happy Petals.” She pointed to a person standing on the street. “That’s Aunt Molly. She’s taking a photo of the flowers we made.”

Sean leaned forward. “You did a great job. I like the red door.”

“It’s the same as the one at the flower shop.” Mary pointed to the sun she’d drawn. “It’s summer, just like now. What color door does your house have?”

“Blue, like the color of the sky.”

“I like blue, too. Becky’s favorite color is yellow because it makes her happy.”

Sean lifted his eyes to Becky’s. “Is that why you painted the inside of your flower shop yellow?”

“I wanted it to be as pretty as a picture.” She looked down at Mary and smiled. “Mr. Gray and I won’t be too much longer. Do you want to find the story you wrote? You can read it to me soon.”

Mary placed her little hand on Sean’s arm. “Can you listen to it? It’s about rainbows and princesses.”

“Mr. Gray has to go back to his ranch soon,” Becky said. “Maybe he could listen to one of your stories another day?”

“I don’t have to rush back to work. I’d love to listen to Mary’s story.”

Becky wasn’t sure that was a good idea. Mary already thought he was amazing. She hadn’t stopped talking about going to his ranch and seeing his animals. In her mind, he’d

turned into a modern-day Noah, giving refuge to all four-legged creatures.

“Please,” Mary pleaded.

Sean added to the dilemma raging inside of Becky. “My niece and nephew are always reading me their stories.”

What was she to do? A man with a strong sense of family and a little girl who craved a kind male figure in her life were waiting for her decision. “If you’re happy to stay a while, that would be lovely.”

“You could have dinner with us,” Mary added. “We made lots of lasagna last night, so we don’t need to cook anything.”

Before Sean replied, he looked at Becky. Something in her expression must have warned him to be careful. “Thank you for asking, but my brother is making dinner for me.”

“Has he made lasagna?”

Sean shook his head. “We’re having a barbecue.”

Before Mary asked him more questions, Becky lifted her off the stool. “Get your story before Mr. Gray has to leave. You can read it to him at the kitchen table.”

Sean handed Mary her picture. “You can call me Sean, if you like.”

With a happy grin, she said, “Okay.” Wasting no time, she hurried into the living room.

Becky sighed. “I’m sorry if you had other plans.”

“It’s all right,” Sean assured her. “But talking about plans, I almost forgot about the guided tour I promised you and Mary. When do you want to visit the ranch?”

“Are you sure it’s still all right? Matthew’s wedding has probably taken up more time than you thought.”

“My brothers and the ranch hands are keeping ahead of the work that needs to be done. Besides, Mary will enjoy meeting Toby and Catherine. They can be a handful, but they’re good kids.”

“If you’re sure it’s okay, we’d love to come. I could bring Mary after school one day or anytime on Sundays.”

“How about this Sunday at two?”

“That sounds wonderful.” Becky tried not to get too excited about visiting the ranch. It wasn’t like it was a date or something.

“I found my story,” Mary said excitedly as she rushed to the kitchen table.

Sean pulled out two chairs. “I’m looking forward to hearing it.”

Mary looked so excited that Becky turned away before Sean saw the tears in her eyes. Each moment of joy was something to celebrate, especially after Jamie and Sophia died.

With Sean listening to Mary’s story, Becky made a quick salad.

Before Mary arrived, she would have enjoyed getting to know Sean better. But, with everything that was happening, it was the last thing she needed. As soon as the plans for Matthew’s wedding were finished, she’d go back to working in her flower shop and making sure Mary was happy. That was the sensible, responsible thing to do—even if it meant giving up her dream of finding her own happily ever after.



THE FOLLOWING EVENING, Sean was trying hard to be patient. After a great meeting with Becky this afternoon, he was looking forward to sending out the invitations for the wedding. But Matthew was having a meltdown.

“Read the invitation again,” his twin said. “I want to make sure it makes sense.”

“Becky read it twice. We’ve read it three times. It’s perfect.”

“I can’t believe we’re actually doing this.”

“And I can’t believe your finger hasn’t pushed send.” Sean frowned at his brother. “Why are you so stressed? You haven’t changed your mind, have you?”

Matthew shook his head. “This is what I want, but it’s never felt this real before. I can’t believe I’m marrying Ashley in a few weeks.”

“It’s a big step.”

“Life changing.” With his free hand, Matthew wiped his brow. “Did someone check the email addresses? I don’t want Mom and Dad finding out after everyone else.”

“Becky and I checked our family’s last night. Ashley did hers yesterday, too.”

“That’s good.” Taking a deep breath, Matthew focused on the keyboard. “Okay. I’m ready. Count down with me.”

Sean groaned. “We’re not kids anymore.” His brother sent him a look that would have sliced a melon in two. “Fine. Have

it your way. We'll start at number three and on the count of one, send the emails."

Matthew nodded and, in unison, they counted three... two...one. At the push of a key, Ashley and Matthew's closest family and friends were sent an invitation to their 'engagement' party.

Sean kept an eye on the inbox to see how many emails bounced back. So far, so good. "How long do you think it will take Mom to call?"

Matthew checked his watch. "It's eight-thirty at night in Florida. Unless they're out with friends, it will probably take —" His cell phone vibrated into life. Looking down at the caller display, he smiled. "Thirty seconds."

"It must be a world record."

"Not for Mom," Matthew whispered as he answered the call. "Hi, Mom."

Sean carefully listened to the one-sided conversation. His brother was telling a whole lot of half-truths to make the engagement party seem real. Goodness knows what their parents would say if they knew they were actually coming to a wedding.

Grabbing a pen and a sheet of paper he scribbled a message to his brother. Matthew frowned, but told their mom to buy a new dress. In hindsight, it might not have been the right thing to say. From what Sean could make out, their mom was wondering why she couldn't wear the dress she'd worn to Sally's wedding.

She'd always said it was one of the most comfortable dresses she'd ever bought and it looked great. But Sean knew what she'd say if she saw herself wearing the same dress in

Matthew and Ashley's wedding photos. The dress was stylish, but she'd want to know why someone didn't tell her to wear something different.

"Okay, Mom. Tell dad I love him. Yes. He's here. I'll tell him. I'll talk to you tomorrow." After ending the call, Matthew dropped his head to his chest. "I'm having heart palpitations."

Sean slapped him on the shoulder. "You did good."

"I did great considering the amount of stress I'm under. Mom sends her love. She'll call us tomorrow at seven with Dad."

"It's just as well I don't have an exciting social life. How does it feel to be an almost married man?"

Matthew closed his eyes. "Terrifying."

Sean pulled him into a hug. "I hate to tell you this, but it will get worse before it gets better."

"Thanks. Just wait until you find the woman you want to spend the rest of your life with. Then you'll know exactly how I feel."

Sean didn't need to wait for that to happen. He'd already found Becky and he was just as unsettled as Matthew. Especially when there was a little girl's future at stake, too.



MOLLY OPENED THE CUTLERY DRAWER. "I can't believe how much you've done. You've helped Sean organize an entire wedding in the blink of an eye."

Becky dipped her spoon into her slice of cheesecake. "Matthew's wedding isn't like anyone else's. Apart from a few

catering and decorating questions, Sean and I have been making all the decisions. If we had to work with a bridal party, it could have taken a lot longer. I just hope Ashley likes what we've chosen."

"She will be happy to finally be a bride."

Becky was glad her sister felt so positive, but Ashley and Matthew's wedding was still a month away.

Molly leaned her elbows on the kitchen table. "Sean might have a little Irish blarney hidden inside his handsome body. He's called on every favor he's owed to make his brother's wedding a success. I've never seen so many people hold a secret so close to their chests."

"I don't know how much longer we can keep the secret from Ashley. Especially if Doris Stanley sets her mind to discovering what's going on."

"Doris is a gossip, to be sure, but she also has a heart of gold. Have a chat with her to set the story straight." Molly sat beside Becky. "While I was babysitting Mary after school, Jamie's mom called. She wants to come for a visit."

"That's grand. Mary will enjoy seeing her again."

Edith O'Rourke loved Mary dearly, but she wasn't able to look after her. Since they'd returned from Ireland, Becky had done everything she could to make sure Mary had a relationship with her grandmother. They regularly talked to Edith on video calls and sent her emails and photos about what they were doing.

"Coming to Bozeman wasn't the only reason she called." Molly cleared her throat. "Edith sent you an email. She wants Mary to live with her."

Becky's heart plummeted. "I spoke to Edith after we arrived in Montana. She said she couldn't look after Mary."

Molly placed her hand on Becky's arm. "I don't have the ins and outs of her decision, but you need to read her email. She apologized for not speaking to you before she sent it."

No apology could ever make up for how Becky felt. From the moment she'd discussed Mary's care with Edith and her lawyer, they were grateful for the home she could give the anxious five-year-old.

Why would she want to change what was working so well? Never in a million years would Becky stop Edith from seeing her granddaughter. Her relationship with her own gran had been one of the most important in her life. She'd travel across different continents to make sure Mary grew to know her grandma. Edith knew that. But this...this was the last thing she'd expected.

With a sinking heart, Becky opened the email and read the document prepared by Edith's lawyer. "She's petitioning the courts for the removal of my guardianship."

"Why would she do such a foolish thing?"

Becky shook her head in disbelief. "I don't know." As she read the next page of the attachment, her eyes filled with tears. "Before we left Ireland, she said she was happy for Mary to live with me. We did everything to make my guardianship legal in Montana. Mary will be so upset if she has to leave."

"Upsetting her granddaughter is the last thing Edith would want. She knows how much Mary loves you."

"I don't think she does." Turning her laptop to her sister, Becky waited until Molly read the attachment. "What should I do?"

“Edith is a good woman. Her wishes may not be as black and white as the document suggests. Why don’t you call your lawyer? Adam will know what to do.”

“What if she won’t change her mind? She’s Mary’s grandmother and I’m only—”

“There is no such thing as ‘only,’” Molly said sternly. “Jamie and Sophia knew no one would love their little girl as much as you do.” Her hand tightened around Becky’s arm. “They believed in you and so do I. Tomorrow, we will visit Adam and see what he thinks about the letter.”

Becky’s stomach churned. “What if it’s as bad as I think it is?”

“Then we’ll find a solution. *You* are Mary’s legal guardian. It won’t be easy to change what has been set in place.”

Becky bit her bottom lip to stop it from trembling. “I love Mary as if she were my own daughter. I can’t let her go.”

“We’ll do everything we can to keep her here.”

With Molly holding her in a fierce hug, Becky closed her eyes. She didn’t know why Edith wanted to contest her guardianship of Mary. It was cruel and unkind to want her to live in Milwaukee when she was making such good progress.

As if sensing her distress, Molly stood her at arm’s length and brushed a lock of hair from her face. “Remember what Gran taught us. Love doesn’t follow a straight line. There will always be forks in the road and mountains to be climbed. As long as we stand firm on the reason Mary came to live with us, everything will be all right.”

With all her heart, Becky hoped so.

CHAPTER 6



Osborne and Sons was one of the founding legal firms of Bozeman. As Becky stood outside the red-brick exterior of the single-story building, she remembered meeting Adam here a few days after she'd brought Mary home.

Last time, the grief of saying goodbye to two of her best friends and the enormity of what she was about to do had weighed heavily on her mind. Today, she was terrified of what the future might hold.

"I hope you like blueberry muffins," a deep voice said from behind her.

Becky jumped and caught the squeal that rose to her lips. "Adam! For such a tall man, you move far too silently."

Holding two brown paper bags in the air, he sent her a charming smile. "I'm hoping you'll take pity on me and join me for coffee and blueberry muffins."

"My nerves are churning my stomach but, if you have good news for me, I'll gladly join you."

"Let's see what I can do, then." Opening the front door, Adam placed one bag on the counter beside his receptionist, then walked with Becky toward his office. Once they were

inside, he waved her toward a chair. “I read the document you sent through. How well do you know Mary’s grandmother?”

“I know her enough to worry about the intent of her email. She misses her son something fierce. A part of me wonders if she sees Mary as a way of keeping Jamie’s memory alive.”

“Has she told you she’s worried about the way you’re looking after Mary?”

Becky shook her head. “She’s never said she’s concerned. We call Edith twice a week and send her pictures Mary’s made. I don’t know what else I could do to involve her in Mary’s life.”

“Does Mary speak to her when you’re not present?”

“Sometimes. Do you think she said something to her?”

Adam sat back in his chair. “It’s a possibility and something we need to consider. Before we speak to Edith and her lawyer, I’d like to ask a therapist I know to speak to Mary. She might be able to tell us how Mary feels about living with you.”

Becky didn’t know whether that made her feel better or worse. “What if she doesn’t like being here?”

“Do you think it’s a possibility?”

“Most of the time, she is a happy, well-adjusted six-year-old. But, sometimes, she misses her parents terribly and feels lost and alone. We’re finding ways to make those times less traumatic, but it isn’t easy.”

“Mary has been through a lot in her short life. The therapist will understand how she’s feeling. If it’s okay with you, I’ll make an appointment for Mary after we’ve spoken.”

“That’s fine. Do you think Edith will be able to take Mary to live with her?”

“Edith’s lawyer will have to prove she’s better off with her grandmother than you. It won’t be easy or quick.”

“Can I talk to Edith and find out why she isn’t happy?”

Sadly, Adam shook his head. “Now she’s filed the petition, there’s no point trying to come to a compromise. We have no choice but to let the legal process continue.”

The flame of hope inside Becky’s chest began to waver. “Edith wants to visit Mary again. Do you think that’s a good idea?”

“Possibly not, but you don’t want to be seen as restricting her ability to see her granddaughter. We could always organize a supervised visit. If you need someone to act as an impartial observer, the therapist would be my choice.”

“I’m not sure Edith will see it that way, but it’s a good suggestion. Can you ask your friend if they can help me? Otherwise, I’ll find someone else.”

“Sure.” Pulling his keypad closer, Adam typed something on his computer. “I know this is difficult, but I’ll do everything I can to make sure Mary stays with you. Having said that, we need to be prepared for every eventuality. Are you happy to answer some questions about your past and your relationship with Edith’s son?”

Becky nodded. She had nothing to hide. “If it helps the guardianship issue to be resolved faster, I’ll do anything.”

“In that case, let’s make ourselves a hot drink and enjoy the muffins. We could be here for a while.”

Becky checked her watch, then sent a quick text to Molly. Her sister had offered to help Laura in the flower shop if today's meeting lasted more than an hour. And, from the sound of things, it would. Hopefully, by the end of it, Adam would have a much clearer understanding of why Jamie and Sophia chose her as Mary's guardian. And, more sadly, why they hadn't asked Edith.



SEAN PARKED his truck in front of the three-story barn on his family's ranch. He'd spent the day vaccinating and branding calves. Even using the new equipment they'd bought last season, it was back-breaking work.

Opening the barn doors, he walked from stall to stall, grateful someone had fed the animals his sister had rescued. Usually, it was a chore he enjoyed. But, with a handful of things he still had to do for the wedding, it was another thing he didn't have to worry about.

After petting the llamas, he walked across to Frank and Mildred's pen. Their cantankerous pigs weren't eating as well as he'd like. If things didn't improve, he'd ask the vet to take a look at them. Judging by the small amount of food left in their trough, they'd eaten something tonight. He'd take that as a definite step in the right direction.

The last pen held Sally's latest additions. The miniature ponies were cute, even though they were a little on the short side. They wandered toward him for a pat, before heading back to the leafy hay they'd been happily chomping.

With the animals settled for the night, he stepped outside and took a deep breath. An eerie silence had settled across the

land, filling the yard with the presence of everyone who'd gone before him.

His great-grandfather had bought the ranch with dreams of creating a haven for his family. Over the years, the original parcel of land had grown as their neighbors sold their ranches to Sean's family. Some moved to be closer to their families. Others reluctantly left as escalating debt and rising prices crushed their spirit. Whatever their reason, the Gray family had done their best to create a sustainable ranch that would be here for many decades to come.

Nathan walked around the edge of the barn carrying a bucket. "I thought I heard your truck."

"What are you doing? I thought you'd be inside with Catherine and Toby."

"Amy took them into town to visit her mom. She's here for a mini vacation." He held the bucket in the air. "You weren't home, so I thought I'd feed Sally's zoo."

"Thanks. Frank and Mildred looked more settled."

"They ate almost everything I gave them. How are the wedding plans going?"

Sean crossed his arms in front of his chest. "It's supposed to be a secret. When did Matthew tell you?"

"This morning after he almost collided with my truck. If he doesn't get married soon, he'll kill himself on his four-wheeler."

"He's a bunch of nerves. With all the people we've asked to help us, he's worried Ashley will discover what he's doing. If she does, he doesn't know what she'll do."

“She has a good sense of humor. Otherwise, she wouldn’t be marrying him.”

“You can say that again.” Sean nodded toward the barn. “Before I tell you about the wedding, is there anything else I need to do?”

“Not tonight. Catherine and Toby fed the cats before they went into town and Henrietta is behaving herself.”

“That’s a first.” Henrietta was a stubborn goat whose arrival on the ranch was as controversial as the three goats she’d given birth to. “There’s cold beer sitting in my refrigerator if you’d like one?”

Nathan grinned. “I couldn’t think of a better way of ending the night. Matthew said you’ve found a caterer.”

“Annie had a last-minute cancellation. Next time our brother has a great idea, make sure it’s not as crazy as getting married in six weeks.”

Nathan headed toward their grandparents’ old house. “Matthew said Becky O’Donaghue is helping you. How are you finding working with her?”

Sometimes, it paid to think before he spoke around his brothers. Nathan, Matthew, and Liam had been pestering him for months about dating someone. From the hopeful expression on his brother’s face, he’d say he’d put two and two together and come up with ten.

“Unlike me, Becky knows what she’s doing. The only thing we have to confirm is the menu, a cake, and what everyone’s wearing. Matthew’s taking care of the honeymoon.” Sean didn’t like the gleam in his brother’s eyes. “Before you say anything about Becky, she’s helping me with the wedding. Nothing more.”

“What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing. She’s as busy as I am.”

“So was I before I married Amy.”

Sean’s eyebrows rose. “You met Amy when she was a teenager, pretended not to date her when you were, then almost didn’t let her stay on the ranch with Catherine. Being busy was the least of your worries.”

“All that matters is we got together in the end.”

“You almost didn’t.”

Nathan frowned. “I was in a dark place.”

His brother didn’t have to say any more. He’d survived a devastating barn fire and almost died in a snowstorm. If it weren’t for Amy, he could have easily lost his life and his soul.

When they reached Sean’s home, he took two bottles of beer out of the refrigerator. “Has anyone told Mom and Dad about the wedding?”

“They only know about the engagement party. Does Sally know?”

“As of yesterday afternoon, she does. We’re having the wedding reception in her and Todd’s barn.”

“Clever. At least we won’t need to travel far to get there.” Nathan took the cap off his beer. “What are we wearing?”

“Suits?”

“You haven’t organized anything, have you?”

“I’ve had other things on my mind; like where Matthew and Ashley are having their reception. Why don’t you organize what we’re wearing?”

Nathan walked through the French doors and sat outside. “If you’re serious, leave it with me. The company I rented our suits from made it easy.”

“When you speak to them, tell them we need them by July 13 at the latest. The wedding’s three days later.”

“No problem.” Nathan cradled the bottle of beer in his hands. “I have some other news you might be interested in.”

“Have the Sawyer’s sold their ranch?”

“I don’t know. Tom’s holding out for a good price. Hopefully, he’ll get it. This news is closer to home.”

Sean leaned his head against the back of the chair and groaned. “I told Sally we don’t need any more animals. You caved in, didn’t you?”

“Not this time. Amy’s pregnant. In five months, give or take a few days, you’ll be the proud uncle of another little Gray.”

“Congratulations.” Leaving his beer on the deck, he hugged his brother. “How do Catherine and Toby feel about having a new baby in the house?”

“Catherine’s excited, but Toby doesn’t know what all the fuss is about. It will be interesting to see what happens after the baby arrives. If Amy looks a little green, make sure she’s okay. She’s having a hard time with morning sickness.”

“Is she craving peanut butter and pickles again?”

Nathan smiled. “Nope. Butter pecan ice cream. If there’s an emergency, we have enough supplies to feed half of Bozeman.”

“I’ll remember that next time I want dessert.”

“Why don’t you invite Becky out here? She already knows Amy.”

Sean frowned. If his family realized how much he liked Becky, they’d be all over him like a rash, adding their two cents’ worth to something he didn’t want to share.

“She’s bringing Mary here on Sunday.”

Nathan’s eyes widened. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“Because I knew you’d make a big deal out of it. I promised Becky I’d show Mary the animals in the barn in return for the help she’s giving me.”

“If that’s all she’s getting, you’d better throw in a meal. Better yet, come to our house for dinner. I’ll turn on the barbecue and we can have something casual on the back veranda.”

“You don’t need to do that. I’ll cook something at my place.”

“When Amy realizes Becky’s there, she’ll want to say hello. It won’t be long before Catherine and Toby join her and, before you know it, you’ll be cooking for all of us. Why not save yourself the bother and come to our place?”

A vision of all the Gray family siblings arriving for dinner made him more nervous than planning Matthew’s wedding. Becky and Mary would enjoy seeing everyone, but Sean knew what would happen. “Thanks for the offer, but I’ll keep it simple.”

Nathan leaned back in his chair. “Keeping things simple hasn’t worked for any of us. Even Liam has his hands full with what’s happening in Vancouver.”

As Nathan told him about their older brother's latest relationship disaster, Sean could only hope the same thing didn't happen to him. Being single had definite advantages, especially when you came from a family who enjoyed being part of each other's lives.

CHAPTER 7



Becky checked the rearview mirror before turning into Sean’s gravel driveway.

“How far away is Sean’s house?” Mary asked for the tenth time.

“We’ll be there soon. Remember what I said about staying beside me. Sean lives on a real ranch with lots of machinery and animals around him. We need to be careful where we go.”

“I told Tommy I was coming here. His granddad and grandma live on a ranch, too. He knows all about cows and sheep and hay.”

“I’m sure he does.” In the distance, a large homestead rose from the flat pasture surrounding it. Pine and spruce trees clumped together to form a natural shelter from the weather. Farther back, almost hidden behind more trees, was a splash of red that could only be the roof of Sean’s home.

“They’re big cows.”

The amazement in Mary’s voice made Becky smile. “They are big, but they aren’t cows. They’re called bison.”

“They’re scary.”

They definitely weren’t as cute and cuddly as the calves Mary had seen at the school fair. “Do you think they would

look better with a haircut?”

Mary giggled. “Then they would look like cows. We could make flowers for their hair.”

“And tie ribbons around their necks.”

“They would be real pretty.” Mary sat taller in her seat. “Is that Sean’s house?”

The white homestead they were driving toward was surrounded by a garden filled with colorful flowers. “That’s Sean’s brother’s house. Catherine and Toby live there.” Mary had spent time with Catherine at the after school program the church ran. The second best thing about coming here today was visiting her friend.

Thankfully, before they’d left town, Sean had texted Becky with instructions on how to get to the ranch. Even though she’d lived here for years, everything was so spread out in Montana. Trying to find a ranch, especially one that wasn’t well sign-posted, was almost impossible.

“We’re nearly there,” Becky said to Mary. The second two-story house was as pretty as a picture. With its steep gabled roof and stone chimney, it was everything a ranch house should be.

It was easy to see why Sean enjoyed living here. Apart from being close to work, the wide-open spaces and peaceful surroundings were completely different from living in town.

“There’s Sean!” Mary said excitedly.

Becky sighed when she saw him. How anyone could be that handsome and still single was beyond her. It wasn’t as if he had any personality flaws, either. He was an impossibly good-looking, intelligent, and funny person who had a soft

spot for his family and abandoned animals. He was, in one word, perfect.

Mary already had her seatbelt off before Becky opened the back door. “Remember what I said about staying close.”

“I will.”

“I’m glad you didn’t get lost,” Sean said with a smile.

“Your directions were easy to follow.” It had been a rough few days and just being around him made Becky’s heart feel lighter. She really needed to get a grip on her emotions before she said or did something she would regret.

“Becky wrote down the way.” Mary’s eyes were as round as saucers. “We saw some big cows and two horses. Becky said I have to stay close to you in case I get hurt.”

Sean held out his hand. “In that case, we’d better do what Becky said. Would you like to see the animals now?”

Mary held onto Sean’s hand. “Yes, please. Becky said we could get a kitten soon, but we need to buy some proper food and blankets for it. Do you have any kittens?”

“Not at the moment, but we have plenty of cats. They live in the loft.”

“You have a loft? Tommy says his grandma’s cats live in their loft, too. Can I see your cats?”

“We’ll see if they’ll come down and say hello.”

As Mary asked Sean about the other animals on the ranch, Becky followed them toward the barn. It was incredibly high, stretching far above them into the bright blue sky. If you ignored the red walls and white trim, it was similar to the barn where Matthew and Ashley were having their reception.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Sean said as he stopped in front of the doors. “We thought of having the wedding here, but Ashley visits all the time. She’d realized something was happening if we moved the animals and cleared everything away. Come inside and I’ll show you what I mean.”

Stepping inside the barn was like visiting Noah’s Ark. Wooden stalls lined one wall and small pens ran along the other. Each enclosure was filled with at least two animals.

Mary’s mouth dropped open. “Are all these animals yours?”

“My sister works at an animal shelter. These animals were rescued from people who couldn’t look after them.”

Mary stood in front of a pen. “Even your goats?”

“Even them. The mommy goat is called Henrietta. She’s been living with us for about three years. She eats everything in sight, so don’t get too close. Otherwise, she might eat your pretty sun hat.”

Mary’s hands landed on her head. “Would it hurt her tummy?”

“I don’t think so.” Sean picked up a brown paper bag. “I put some kibble in here for you. All the animals will enjoy it.”

Mary bit her bottom lip. “Henrietta and her babies might be sad if they don’t get any. Can I feed them if I give Becky my hat?”

Sean’s eyes filled with laughter. “You sound just like my sister. Henrietta will be your friend for life if you give her some food.”

As quick as a wink, Mary handed her hat to Becky and waited while Sean opened the bag of kibble. After Henrietta

and her kids enjoyed a handful of food, Sean and Mary moved to the next pen. With her eyes wide open and a smile never far from her face, Mary enjoyed every moment.

Watching the friendship between Sean and the small six-year-old beside him was bittersweet. If Edith had her way, Mary would move to Milwaukee to live with her. Jamie and Sophia had done everything in their power to make sure that didn't happen, but it could all be for nothing.

Becky thought involving Edith in Mary's life would bring her comfort, but she was terribly wrong. All it had done was make her even more determined to change who Mary lived with.

"Is everything all right?"

She looked into Sean's eyes and could have wept. He would understand how devastating it would be to lose Mary, but what could she do? "I'll be fine."

His eyebrows rose.

Becky knew he didn't believe her, but she couldn't tell him about the letter she'd received from Edith, not with Mary standing a few feet away. "I'm tired, that's all."

"I don't know much about flower arranging but, if the wedding has put you behind with your other work, I'm happy to help."

The last thing Becky needed was Sean standing in her workroom. Any ounce of concentration she might have had wouldn't last long. "Laura and I will be all right. Mary's enjoying feeding the animals."

"She is. Even Frank and Mildred were happy to eat the kibble."

Becky had no idea who they were, but it didn't matter.

"Uncle Sean!" Toby ran into the barn, throwing himself into his uncle's arms.

"How are you doing, squirt?" Sean lifted the dark-haired five-year-old into the air.

"We made pancakes. What are you doing?"

"I'm showing Becky and Mary our animals. Can you find one of the cats?"

Toby's face lifted to the loft.

"Not up there. I saw Mr. Claws behind the calves we brought here this morning." Sean lowered him to the floor. "If he's not there, we'll look in the other pens."

Becky smiled as Toby ran to the back of the barn. "He's adorable."

"He reminds me of his dad." Sean glanced over Becky's shoulder and smiled. "Catherine's here, too."

After sending Sean a quick wave, she raced across to Mary. It didn't take long for both girls to start giggling.

Family, friends, and a whole lot of love brought tears to Becky's eyes. If Jamie and Sophia could see their little girl now, they'd be incredibly proud.

Sean gently placed his arm around her shoulders. "If you won't tell me what's wrong, come with me. There's nothing like feeding a calf to put your life into perspective."

"I wish it was as easy as that."

"It can be. Come on. Mary will love it."

With the weight of his arm giving her comfort, she followed him to the back of the barn. As they stood watching

the sweet calves with their big brown eyes, she sighed. Sean made her feel cherished and safe, and able to tackle almost anything.

Except Mary's grandmother.



SEAN WAS glad Becky had brought Mary to the ranch. After they'd fed the calves, Mary had spent time with the llamas and hamsters. Even Henrietta had warmed to the two giggling girls visiting her. Instead of nibbling their fingers, the contrary goat ate the kibble out of their hands as if she was the perfect family pet.

By the time they returned from a tour of the ranch, Amy had coffee and a batch of apple and cinnamon muffins waiting for them. Before too long, Nathan and Matthew walked through the door and convinced Becky she needed to stay for dinner.

Sean was surprised by how much Nathan seemed to enjoy talking to Becky. Usually, he was the quiet one of the family, taking everything in and happy to let someone else lead a conversation. But not today.

He didn't blame his brother for being curious about her. He'd kept what they were doing mostly to himself, only discussing the bare essentials with Matthew when a decision had to be made. Looking at the way Becky and Mary fitted into their family, he shouldn't have been worried.

Becky was charming, funny, and intelligent. When she talked about her business, her face lit up. She'd worked hard for what she had and it showed.

Amy refilled their coffee cups. “Everyone can keep themselves amused while Nathan and I tidy up the dishes.”

“Don’t be daft,” Becky said with a smile. “I’ll make sure everything is clean and tidy while you enjoy a drink.”

Before anyone objected, Sean picked up his brother’s dessert bowl. “I’ll show Becky where everything goes.”

“You don’t need to do that,” Amy said quickly to Becky. “You’re our guest.”

“Mary and I didn’t expect to stay for dinner, so this is my way of saying thank you. Besides, you spent the morning working at the hospital. You must be tired.”

Amy gave Becky a quick hug. “I am, so thank you. I don’t think I’ve seen so many patients on a Saturday before. Just make sure Sean doesn’t break too many plates.”

“It was only six and it was weeks ago.”

Becky smiled as she put the plates she was holding in the dishwasher. “How did you break the plates?”

“I was emptying the dishwasher when I collided with Max, Todd’s Irish Wolfhound. By the time the plates landed on the ground, Max was nowhere to be seen.”

“I’ve seen how fast he can move. I’m surprised he didn’t knock you off your feet, too.”

“So was I. Mary’s enjoying herself.”

“She loves playing with Catherine and Toby. Thanks for inviting us to your ranch. We’ve both had a grand time.”

“It was great having you here. What are your plans for next week?”

Picking up the leftover pie, Becky slid it into the refrigerator. “I’m choosing a wedding dress for Ashley on Monday and then I’m off to see Tess at the Bridesmaids Club. At Happy Petals, I have the flowers for two weddings and a wedding anniversary to prepare.” She moved away from the refrigerator and wiped the counter with the dishcloth.

Something wasn’t right. Before he’d mentioned what she was doing next week, she’d been happy. Now, she seemed stressed. “If you don’t have the time to help with the dresses, I can do it.”

“It’s all right. Monday is our quietest day. Laura will be in the shop while I’m looking at the gowns.”

“When we were in the barn you looked sad. You don’t look much better now. What’s wrong?”

Becky’s bottom lip quivered. “I’d rather not talk about it.”

“It might help.” Her face lifted to his and his heart pounded. A lifetime of sadness welled in the tears in her eyes.

“There’s nothing you can do.”

Becky was wrong. He crossed the room and opened his arms. “A hug is better than tears.” She stepped into his embrace and wrapped her arms around his waist. Whatever was wrong had destroyed her spirit and left her shaking.

Tightening his hold, he wanted her to know she wasn’t alone.

When she wasn’t trembling as much, she stepped away. Taking a tissue out of her pocket, she wiped her eyes and blew her nose. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

She wiped her eyes again and took a shaky breath. “Mary’s grandmother wants her to live in Milwaukee with her. She’s asked a legal team to take away my guardianship. I don’t know why she’s doing it, but I have to fight it. I can’t let Mary live with her.”

“Have you spoken to a lawyer?”

Becky nodded. “Adam is working out what we need to do next. Mary’s going to see a therapist to see if she’s happy living with me. We don’t know whether she said something to Edith or if Jamie’s mom is doing the same thing she did after her husband left her.”

“What did she do?”

“She didn’t get custody of Jamie, so she went back to the courts until a judge finally gave her access. He hated staying with her. She was addicted to painkillers and was supposed to go into a program to wean herself off them. She did, but she fell into old habits. One day, she had an accident and nearly killed both of them. She promised she’d try harder, so Jamie went back to live with his dad for a year. But after the painkillers, it was alcohol. His dad died and, by the time he left home, he was completely messed up. It’s a wonder he wasn’t using drugs as well.”

“Does she still have addiction issues?”

“I don’t know. When Jamie was living with her, he said it was hard to know what she was doing. She never looked like an addict. She wore lovely clothes and was always immaculate. It was only when she ran out of drugs or alcohol that she was a different person. What if she hurts Mary?”

“A judge won’t let Mary live with her.”

“Adam said the same thing, but I’m still worried. Edith is coming to Bozeman next weekend. She asked if she could visit before we knew what she was doing.”

“That doesn’t seem right.”

“I thought the same thing, but Adam said it’s better not to stop her. He’s asked the therapist to stay with Mary to make sure she’s okay.”

Becky wiped more tears from her eyes. “Edith is the only biological family Mary has left. I thought if we made an effort to keep in touch with her, she wouldn’t want to take Mary away from me. Jamie and Sophia warned me this might happen, but they weren’t supposed to die.”

His heart broke for her. She was doing everything she could to give Mary a good life and it was all unraveling. “I’m sorry this is happening. Is there anything I can do to help?”

Sadly, Becky shook her head. “I wish it was easy to fix, but it isn’t. The best thing I can do is look after Mary and keep busy. Otherwise, I’ll spend too much time crying.”

Sean placed his arms on her shoulders. “If you need anything, let me know. Okay?”

“I will.” Becky hugged him tight. “Thank you for caring.”

With Becky wrapped in his arms, Sean felt the pull of more than friendship. He was falling in love with her, but he didn’t know what to do about it.

CHAPTER 8



After a long day at work, Becky stepped into her friend Emily's fashion boutique. Along with Happy Petals, it was her favorite store in Bozeman. With its pretty pastel exterior and French bohemian interior, it was as unexpected as it was delightful.

"Good grief. What have you done?" Emily asked. "You look exhausted."

Her friend was also one of the most honest people she knew. "Top of the day to you, too."

Emily waved away her Irish blarney. "Don't distract me with your gorgeous accent. What's happened?"

"Nothing the perfect wedding dress won't cure. Please tell me your business card in the back of Ashley Fisher's scrapbook means something."

"Ashley came to see me a few months ago."

Becky studied Emily's face. The sweet, innocent expression she usually wore gave nothing away. "And?"

Instead of answering, Emily walked to the front door and turned the sign to "Closed". "That's better. At least no one will overhear us. When you told me you're helping to organize a

surprise wedding for Ashley and Matthew, I couldn't believe it."

"It was a spur-of-the-moment decision that could get me into trouble."

"I think it's romantic. What did you want to know about Ashley's visit?"

"Everything. I have no idea what type of gown she favors apart from what I've seen in her scrapbook."

"She showed me those pictures. They were all lovely. We had a very productive discussion."

The silence stretched between them. "You're a cruel and heartless woman to keep me in this much suspense. Did Ashley like any of your bridal gowns?"

Emily grinned. "You know I don't have many in the boutique, but I had some in my workroom. They weren't finished, but she tried them on and I took her measurements."

Becky's legs almost gave way. "You don't know how glad I am to hear that. I've had too many sleepless nights worrying about what Ashley will wear. Was there a design she liked the best?"

Emily crossed her arms in front of her chest. "I'll tell you after I know why you're so tired. And don't tell me it's because of the dress. Is Molly all right?"

"She's in Boston, preparing for her next exhibition. Her photographs are some of the best I've ever seen."

"She has a way of waving a magic wand over the images she captures." The dreamy expression on Emily's face sharpened into concern. "If Molly's happy, it must be Mary. Is she having problems at school?"

“Not in the last few weeks. Tommy has stopped being mean and she’s made some new friends.”

“That’s great, but it doesn’t help me work out what’s wrong.” Emily tapped her foot against the wooden floors. “You’re busy at the flower shop and everyone loves your arrangements, so it must be something else.”

Becky forced a smile. “I’m trying to fit a month’s worth of work into a couple of weeks. Once Matthew’s wedding is over, it will be better.”

“I don’t believe you. You’re always juggling your workload and it’s never been too much. Does it have anything to do with Mary’s grandma? I hope she isn’t taking advantage of you. There aren’t many people who would welcome her into Mary’s life with all the issues she’s had.”

The smile fell from Becky’s face. In a moment of reckless honesty, she’d told Emily about her ex-fiancé and the terrible life he’d had with his mother. “It does involve her, but I can’t talk about it now. I’ll tell you another day when I have more news to share.”

“Will you and Mary be okay?”

“I hope so.”

Emily gave her a big hug. “Promise me whatever you do, you won’t bottle things up inside of you. It isn’t healthy.”

“I’ll cross my heart and promise on Granny’s grave that I won’t. Now tell me about the dresses Ashley tried on.”

“I can do better than tell you. Come with me.”

Becky’s heart pounded. “You still have the gowns?”

“Maybe.” Emily ran lightly up the grand staircase in the center of the room.

Becky followed, eager to at least have an idea about the style of dress Ashley wanted. If she had that, she could talk to Tess at the Bridesmaids Club. If they didn't have any pre-loved bridal gowns similar to Ashley's dream dress, she would scour the Internet, looking for the perfect gown.

"It's over here. I moved it to the back of the rack in case Ashley wanted to see it after I'd added the last beads."

"It's finished?"

Emily reached into the rack and pulled out a gown. "It's more than finished. All I have to do is photograph it for my catalog and it's ready for the store."

Since her engagement to Jamie had ended, Becky had never imagined getting married or wearing a wedding gown. But, if she'd had to describe the type of dress she thought would be perfect, this was it. With its satin bodice, capped sleeves, and full chiffon skirt, it was amazing.

"The crystal beads make it sparkle," Becky said softly. "Does it need any alterations for Ashley?"

"Not one. If there was ever a dress that was made for her, this is it."

Becky tried to find the price tag. There wasn't one. "What would someone pay for the perfect wedding gown?"

"For anyone else, it would cost four thousand dollars. But, if you'll allow me to photograph it and add it to the catalog, I'll halve the price."

"Are you sure?"

"It covers most of my costs. If I can't make a wedding gown for my friend, there's something wrong."

With her heart beating fast, Becky held out her hand. “You’ve got yourself a deal.”

Instead of shaking her hand, Emily gave her another hug. “I hope it makes you sleep a little easier knowing Ashley will love her gown.”

Tears filled Becky’s eyes. “It will. Thank you for discounting the price. I didn’t expect to find a gown for Ashley, let alone one that fits.”

“You came to the right place.” Emily wiped a stray tear off Becky’s cheek. “Do you have time for a cup of tea? I bought a special cranberry and raspberry blend yesterday. You’ll love it.”

“I can’t stay. I told Tess I’d be at the Bridesmaids Club in half an hour.”

“In that case, what would you like to do with the dress? You can leave it here or take it with you.”

Becky pulled out her wallet. “It’s safer here. I’ll ask Sean to pick it up in the next day or two.”

“That sounds great. Don’t pay for it now. Let Sean sort that out when he collects it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. Just do me a favor and try to get more rest. Whatever’s happening won’t go away by not sleeping.”

As Emily added a ‘Sold’ label to the dress hanger, Becky sighed. Only getting an hour’s sleep each night wasn’t good for her health, but it stopped her from dreaming. And when all she could see was Mary being torn from her arms, it was a price she was willing to pay.



BECKY PARKED on the street and walked up the tree-lined path to her friend Tess' house. It was here, in the loft above the enormous garage, that the Bridesmaids Club had set up their headquarters.

She always felt a rush of pleasure when she thought about how the Bridesmaids Club had started. A few years ago, a group of friends decided to donate their old bridesmaids' dresses to a bride-to-be who'd lost all her gowns in a burglary. When the local newspaper ran a story about the donated dresses, women from across the country sent their pre-loved bridesmaids' dresses to Bozeman. They wanted to do something wonderful with their gowns and the Bridesmaids Club could do that for them.

What had started as a way to help one bride had blossomed into a not-for-profit organization that helped hundreds of bridesmaids a year.

Becky just hoped they could help her.

With a quick knock on the door, she walked into the loft. With its tall ceiling and fabulous arched windows, it was the perfect space for matching bridesmaids with stunning gowns.

"Hello. Is anyone here?"

Tess' blond head appeared from behind a clothes rack. "Over here. How did it go with Emily?"

"She had the perfect wedding dress in her workroom."

Tess' smile was as wide as Becky's. "That's awesome. Did you take a photo of it?"

“I did.” Each time Becky saw Tess, she was blown away by her grace and beauty. She might not be a model now, but she could still turn every head in a room. “Emily thought any of the dresses in the Grace Kelly Collection would complement the design.”

The Bridesmaids Club had classified their dresses according to set styles. After seeing many of the dresses, Becky’s favorite was the Cinderella Collection. The fairytale ballgowns were sparkly, gorgeous, and so over-the-top they couldn’t be anything other than perfect.

Tess studied the photo on Becky’s cell phone. “Emily’s right. A classic design will complement the style of Ashley’s dress. Are we still looking for three gowns?”

Becky took Ashley’s scrapbook out of her bag. “Three gowns in sunshine yellow, pale pink, or sky blue. I spoke to the bridesmaids and they sent me their measurements.”

“How soon before the wedding can they arrive in Bozeman?”

“Bonnie is flying in from New York City four days before the wedding. She’ll stay with her family. Maddie and Josie will be here two days before the wedding and they’re staying with Maddie’s family. Bonnie’s mom has offered to do any alterations.”

“Thank goodness. I was worried the dresses wouldn’t fit properly.”

“So was I.” Becky looked at the racks of colorful gowns sitting around the room. “Do you think we’ll find something for them to wear?”

“I’m sure we will. Let’s have a look at the catalog.” Tess walked across to a small kitchenette and opened her laptop.

“Setting up a database of the gowns was such a good idea. It would take us hours to hunt through the racks if we didn’t have this.”

Becky looked over her shoulder as she scrolled through the Grace Kelly Collection. Elegant satin sheaths were followed by empire line, floor-length dresses that shimmered and sparkled. And an array of colors—deep gold, rich burgundy, and purples so deep they were almost black—filled the screen.

“How does anyone choose a dress? They all look divine.”

Tess clicked on a filter. Within seconds, only yellow, pink, and blue dresses appeared on the screen. “It’s a process of elimination. Sometimes it’s quick. At other times, it can take the full hour of each appointment. What do you think of this style?”

A dress in the palest of pink was on the screen. With its simple spaghetti straps and draping bodice, it wouldn’t overpower the gorgeous bridal gown Ashley had fallen in love with. “It’s pretty and feminine, but do you have three of them?”

“I do. What sizes do we need?”

Becky took a sheet of paper out of Ashley’s scrapbook. “I printed this off last night. These are each bridesmaid’s normal dress sizes, their measurements, and a photo of them.”

“Now I know why I like you so much. You’re as organized as I am.”

“I need to be. If I didn’t have lists of things I need to do, my life would fall apart.”

“That sounds familiar.” Tess compared the bridesmaids’ sizes with what was listed on her laptop. “I think we’ll be okay. Bonnie’s dress will be a little too wide in the bodice, but

that's nothing a sewing machine won't fix. Maddie's dress might need an inch or two taken off the hem. Let's look more closely at Josie's measurements." Tess bit her bottom lip as she looked at the sheet of paper and then at the laptop. "Hopefully, Josie's dress will be okay. The bodice could be a little snug but, as long as she doesn't wear a padded bra, she should be okay."

Becky made a note to call Josie and warn her.

While she was doing that, Tess hunted through a rack of dresses. "Ah, here they are."

When she saw the first one, Becky sighed. "Oh, my. They will be the prettiest bridesmaids Bozeman has ever seen." The dresses were everything a bride who wanted a French country-themed wedding would want. Even the color would be perfect against the soft peony rose and daisy bouquets she was creating. "We couldn't have found anything more perfect."

Tess pulled out the other two gowns. "Let's hope Ashley agrees with us. Tell the bridesmaids they can keep the gowns after the wedding or give them to someone else."

"You don't want them returned?"

"Only if they don't have someone else who wants them. We're still getting dresses sent to us each day."

"It must be overwhelming."

"It can be, but having lots of people helping us makes it worthwhile. People forget you can have a lovely wedding without going into masses of debt. All it takes is a little imagination."

"And a lot of friends," Becky added. "Thanks for helping me today. I was worried we wouldn't find any dresses."

“I’m glad, too. If there are any last-minute issues with the dresses, let me know. We can always swap them for other gowns if they can’t be altered.”

“I’m hoping it doesn’t come to that.”

“So am I, but it’s good to know you have options.”

After they’d placed the dresses in white garment bags, Becky said goodbye to Tess and made her way back to her truck. All she had to do was pick up Mary from the after school program and make her way home. And then she’d call Sean and tell him the good news.

CHAPTER 9



Sean didn't need to count down the days before Matthew and Ashley's wedding. It was imprinted on his brain. Each morning, it was the first thing he thought of—before the ranch, before Becky, and before whatever mayhem the rest of his family had created.

This morning, that number had come frighteningly close to giving him a heart attack. In nineteen short days, his brother expected his bride's dream wedding to suddenly materialize. Heaven help them all if Ashley refused to walk down the aisle.

That wasn't the only thing sending him into a mild panic. Doris Stanley had left a message telling him she didn't have all the fairy lights he needed. So, at five-thirty this morning, he'd logged into the Internet to search for anyone who could make a barn look like a country wedding in less than three weeks. It hadn't been easy, but he'd finally tracked down Claire Williams and her event staging company.

As he drove toward Happy Petals, he thought about the conversation he'd just had with Claire. Since she could potentially be their guardian angel, he didn't think it broke the promise he'd made to Matthew not to say anything about the wedding.

He couldn't help smiling when he parked outside Happy Petals. Six months ago, he would have told anyone the chance of him driving into Bozeman to visit a flower shop was remote to none. Now, he couldn't imagine anything better.

Laura, Becky's assistant, was adding flowers to the display in front of the store. She turned around and grinned. "Hi, Sean. Becky's in the workroom."

"Thanks. How did the exam go?" Last time he was here, Laura was practicing a special type of floral arrangement for a big exam.

"It was great. I passed with flying colors."

"Good for you. Before you know it, you'll be opening your own store."

"I hope so." Laura looked down the sidewalk, then stepped closer to him. "It sounds as though Matthew and Ashley's wedding plans are going well," she whispered. "I hope the last few details work out."

"So do I. Keep up the good work with your exams." He walked into the store and admired the changes Becky and Laura had made. They'd moved the pre-made bouquets of flowers to the center of the room. The newly created walkway around the display gave customers even more floral arrangements to choose from.

That wasn't the only change. He stood in front of a wall covered in small pots filled with berries and greenery. Considering all the apartments being built around Bozeman, having something like this would give homeowners a chance to create their own gardens in tiny spaces.

"Do you like our vertical garden?"

Becky stood beside him. The yellow sundress and bright red scarf she was wearing made him realize just how much sunshine she brought into his life. He returned her smile and wondered if this was how Matthew felt about Ashley. There was a sense of rightness, a joy that came from simply being around the person you were falling in love with. “Whoever thought of growing plants and flowers in pots on the wall is a genius.”

“Laura and I designed the frame and the content of the garden. We’ve partnered with Pastor Steven to start a small business initiative. The frame and the pots are made from recycled material and fabricated in Bozeman. And the strawberry plants and greenery are supplied by the church’s garden. We have four plant options customers can choose from, depending on the season.”

“What a great idea.”

“We think so, too. Did you find someone who can supply the fairy lights?”

Sean nodded. Becky was just as worried as he was when Doris told them she couldn’t provide all the lights. “I spoke to Claire Williams. She owns an event staging company and can supply everything we need.”

“Everything?”

“Apart from the bride and groom.”

Becky plucked a rose from a vase. “’Tis a wondrous thing when you crack a joke. This is for you, Sean Gray, for saving your brother’s wedding. Without the lights and the decorations we’ve yet to find, the barn wouldn’t look quite so good.”

He had a feeling his blush was as red as the rose. It had been so long since anyone had given him flowers that he

didn't know what to say.

In the end, it didn't matter. Becky smiled and continued speaking. "I've worked with Claire and her sister on many occasions. I didn't think to ask her because I know how busy she is."

"None of the events she's decorating in mid-July need fairy lights. That's the only reason she can help us."

"I'll update our spreadsheet and add Claire's details. When do we have to tell her what we need?"

"As soon as possible. Do you want to come to the ranch for dinner tonight? Mary could help feed the animals in the barn and, afterward, we could email Claire with a list of what we need."

"I can't. Mary is practicing for a school play. By the time she finishes it will be too late to drive to the ranch. If you want to go through the wedding details tonight, you could come to my house. We'll be back by six-thirty."

"Sounds great. I'll bring dessert."

"It's a date."

Her soft Irish accent made him sigh. He wanted to tell her how he felt about her, how much he was enjoying getting to know her and Mary. But standing in the middle of Happy Petals wasn't the place to do it. Especially as two customers had walked through the front door.

He cleared his throat, hoping no one thought it was odd that he was holding a red rose. "I'll see you tonight. If you need me for anything, just call."

"I will. Thank you for stopping by to tell me about the lights."

With the rose clutched in his hand, he walked out of Happy Petals. He'd visit Becky for far less reasons than the lights, only she didn't know it yet.



BECKY HANDED Mary a plate of spaghetti and meatballs. "Be careful not to spill it on the floor," she warned the very excited little girl.

"I won't. Is Sean bringing his ranch animals with him?"

"I don't think so. His llamas wouldn't fit in his truck."

"But Henrietta would. She's the most beautiful goat I've ever seen."

For some reason, Mary had taken a shine to Sean's goats. From the way Henrietta allowed Mary to feed her, the affection could be mutual. "Next time we visit the ranch, we'll make a special effort to see her. Did you enjoy practicing for the school play?"

"It was okay. Mrs. Graham said our singing was beautiful."

"That's grand. When I was your age, we didn't have school plays, but we used to sing in class all the time. It was the best part about going to school."

Mary slid her plate onto the kitchen table and pulled out a chair. "What about math? Tommy said you need to know your numbers. Otherwise, you can't get a job like his dad's."

Becky had no idea what Tommy's dad did for a living, but it didn't matter. "We all have different things we're good at. Some people are really good at math and other people are

really good at painting pictures. The most important thing is to be happy.”

She sat opposite Mary and thought about the last few weeks. Apart from Edith trying to take her guardianship of Mary away, they had been one of the happiest times of her life. “Do you like living with me, Mary?”

Mary nodded around a mouthful of meatballs. “I miss Mom and Dad, but I like living here. Can we visit Catherine again? She has lots of cats.”

“Of course, we can.”

With a happy nod, Mary continued eating her dinner. The knot inside of Becky’s chest loosened. Maybe they’d be okay. If a judge spoke to Mary, she was sure Edith’s legal battle would be over before it began.

But what if, in all the stress and uncertainty of what was happening, Edith did the unthinkable and managed to revoke her guardianship? There was no way Becky would send her precious girl to stay with Jamie’s mom. The life they were building would be torn apart. The progress Mary had made, the trust that had grown between them, would mean nothing if she went to live in Milwaukee.

Taking a deep breath, Becky focused on the here and now. Tomorrow would take care of itself but, for now, she had Mary beside her.

“Do you want to come to the flower market with me in the morning? If you don’t, it doesn’t matter. Aunt Molly said she would come here to look after you.”

“Yes, please!” Mary said with a grin. “I love going to the market.”

“It will be an early start. We’ll have to leave before the sun rises to buy the flowers I need.”

“That’s okay. Will the man be talking really fast again?”

There were two things Mary enjoyed the most about the auctions; the auctioneer and the warehouse full of flowers. Becky’s gran would have been so proud of Mary. Even at her young age, she loved the color and texture of the blooms. She’d wander from stall to stall with Becky, pointing out the flowers she liked the best and enjoy the hustle and bustle of the early morning purchases.

Mary jumped off her chair when the doorbell rang. “It’s Sean.” Before Becky could stop her, she rushed across the room and opened the door. “Did you bring Henrietta and her babies?”

He kneeled on the floor and shook his head. “Not today, but I have something else you might be interested in.” Reaching for the box he’d brought with him, he showed Mary what was inside.

Her eyes widened. “Is it for me?”

“You can keep it here for a few days. Matthew and I used to play with it when we were your age. Look at this.” From inside the box, he pulled out a tiny plastic goat. “It’s almost as cute as Henrietta.”

Carefully, she took the goat out of Sean’s hands and carried it across to Becky. “It’s Henrietta.”

“So, it is. What else is in the box?”

“Fences and cows and tractors.” Racing back to Sean, she collected the box and showed Becky.

“Wow. You could build your own ranch.”

Mary nodded. "I could make one just like Sean's."

"How about you finish your dinner first? You can take Henrietta and ten other pieces from the set to the table with you."

"Ten?"

Becky nodded. "Sean might help you hold them."

Dipping her hand inside the box, Mary counted ten plastic shapes and gave half of them to Sean. "Will you look after the box while I finish dinner?"

"I'll leave it beside the kitchen counter. It will be safe there."

Mary's eyes followed him as he left the box where she could see it.

"I've got something else for us, too." Before Mary could follow him outside, he collected another box and opened the flap. "It's a chocolate cream pie."

Mary looked pleadingly at Becky.

"After you've finished dinner." She smiled as Mary gave a resigned sigh. "Would you like some spaghetti and meatballs, Sean?"

"It smells delicious, but I'm okay. I ate before I came into town. I could make coffee while you're finishing dinner?"

"That would be grand. We were longer at the school than we thought we'd be."

While Mary told Sean about the play, he poured the coffee, then sat opposite her while she sang him a song.

Becky watched Mary's reaction to Sean, the honesty and vulnerability in her gaze when she didn't think he was

watching her. In Sean, she'd found the father-figure that was missing from her life. At the moment it was fine but, once Matthew's wedding was over, what would happen then?



SEAN WALKED onto the veranda carrying two cups of hot chocolate. After Becky put Mary to bed, she'd made herself comfortable outside, enjoying the last rays of sunshine as they dipped below the horizon. "I can add more milk if your drink is too strong."

She glanced in the cup before smiling. "'Tis fine. It's a treat having someone make me a hot chocolate. Usually, the only company I have after Mary goes to bed is a good book or the television."

"Barbecue night at Nathan's is about as exciting as my life gets."

The soft sound of Becky's laughter drifted across the still night air. "Listen to us. Anyone would think we were eighty-five years old and reminiscing about our younger years."

Sean smiled. "Believe it or not, I used to enjoy going into town with my brothers. But as they found girlfriends and then got married, everything changed."

"You'll miss Matthew once he's married, then. From what Sally has said, he has a wicked sense of humor."

"He does, but he also has a heart of gold and a deep sense of loyalty to the people he loves."

"You could be talking about yourself."

A warmth spread through Sean's chest. It felt good to be here, to share what had been happening in his life with

someone who cared. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It wasn’t meant in any other way. You have a family who love you and friends who would do anything for you. That’s a treasure many people would be pleased to possess.”

“You’ve made a difference in a lot of people’s lives, too.”

“I try to. From when I was a little girl, I saw the difference the gift of a pretty bouquet can make. My gran used to tell us we weren’t in the business of flowers; we were spreading love and kindness. I didn’t realize how right she was until I was older and saw some of the tragedies people live through.”

“I feel the same way about my work in the search and rescue team. When there’s an accident or someone goes missing, our job is to find them and make sure they have the best possible care.”

“I imagine they are extremely grateful for what everyone has done for them.”

Sean knew they were, but it didn’t make the stress of what he saw any easier to bear. “Did you miss Molly when you moved to Montana?”

“More than I thought. Being here without Molly or Gran was difficult. It made me appreciate the friendships I made and the people I worked with. Without them, I would have been even more lonely than I was.”

That surprised Sean. “I can’t imagine you being lonely. You always have something positive to say and a smile for everyone.”

Becky looked across the yard at the pink and purple sky. “Looks can be wickedly deceptive. More than once, I regretted leaving Ireland. I thought living here would be easy, but the

words you use, the food, and the way you think is completely different. Some days, my head spun just taking it all in.”

“How do you feel now?” Sean held his breath while he waited for her reply. He couldn’t leave Montana, not with the ranch and everything that involved. If Becky ever wanted to return to Ireland, he couldn’t go with her.

Her eyes filled with laughter. “I’ll sound like a little old lady, but I feel settled and happy. I can’t imagine living anywhere else, especially with Mary. And speaking of Mary, thank you for bringing the farmyard set with you. She had a grand time building her own ranch.”

“She wasn’t the only one. I enjoyed it, too.” He took a sip from his drink. “How are you finding looking after her?”

“’Tis a lot easier than when she first arrived. I’d never looked after any children let alone a five-year-old who was grieving for her parents and away from all that was familiar to her.”

He could only imagine what it must have been like. “You’re doing an amazing job.”

Becky sighed. “Sometimes, it doesn’t feel like it. Adam, my lawyer, asked me not to tell Mary about what her grandma is doing. As if I could ever tell our little girl she might live somewhere else.”

Reaching out, Sean held her hand. “A judge would be crazy to give Mary’s grandmother guardianship of her.”

“There’s no guarantee she will stay here.”

“Has Mary seen the therapist you were telling me about?”

“She spoke to her this afternoon. Until tonight, I haven’t asked Mary if she enjoys living with me. But she said she

does, so that's all I need to know." She turned in her seat and stared earnestly into his eyes. "You have a wonderful way with Mary. Do you want children of your own?"

"One day. It was hard to think about starting a family when I hadn't met anyone I could fall in love with."

A blush washed across Becky's face. "You were looking in the wrong places."

He tightened his hold on her hand. "The flower shop changed that. I like you, Becky. More than like you. How would you feel about going out to dinner or to a movie together?"

Becky looked at their linked hands. "I'd like to spend more time with you, but I have a complicated life. My first priority has to be Mary."

"I understand and I wouldn't expect you to say anything else."

"But, just so you know, I really like you, too." A smile appeared on her face. "Especially when you bring chocolate cream pie for dessert."

"If I brought pie for dessert each night, would you like me more?"

Becky's smile turned into a dimpled grin. "Of course. And if any of your desserts include cupcakes, Mary will be your friend for life."

"I like that idea." Lifting his hand to the side of her face, he stared into her eyes. "I'm thirty-five years old, Becky. I've never met anyone I want to spend more time with than you. You're beautiful, amazing, and so perfect I never want to leave after we've spent time together. I can't believe we didn't meet sooner."

“Between your life on the ranch and my business, it was a miracle we met when we did.” Becky leaned closer and gently kissed him. “I am far from perfect but, if you’re willing to take what’s happening between us slowly, I would be pleased to spend more time with you.”

“We’ll go as slow as you need.” And he kissed Becky again, deepening the kiss until they were both breathless.

He had no control of the future, but he knew what he felt for Becky would last a lifetime.

CHAPTER 10



Sean opened the door to Emily's Boutique and looked over his shoulder. If anyone saw him, they'd wonder why he was coming into a woman's clothing store. That could lead to a lot of other questions he didn't want to answer.

Ashley had surprised everyone by arriving home yesterday. With some quick thinking and a few white lies, Matthew told her he was driving to Livingston today to pick up some important ranch supplies. He'd invited her along for the ride and, unsurprisingly, she'd gone with him.

Instead of coming straight back, he was taking Ashley to a café Sally had recommended. The idea was to keep her out of Bozeman for at least two hours. That would give Sean enough time to collect her wedding dress and finalize a few other details before she arrived home.

He only hoped his brother didn't say anything about the wedding.

"Hi. You're on time," Emily said when she came downstairs.

"I didn't want to be late. Matthew's keeping Ashley occupied and I need to get the dress back to the ranch before they get back."

“In that case, I’ll go and get it.”

While Emily was gone, he looked around the boutique. He could see why his sister liked shopping here. With the deep red walls and large gilt-framed mirrors, it looked nothing like the other stores in Bozeman. Not that he’d been into many women’s clothing stores.

Apart from the colorful racks of clothes, he was impressed with the building. He never thought anyone would be able to transform it into something so special. After starting its life as a public library, it fell into disrepair and had sat empty for years. When it caught fire, there was talk about knocking it down but, when Emily saw the building, she’d bought it straightaway.

He wasn’t the only person who’d thought she was crazy, but what she’d done to it was incredible. According to Sally, not only was the building a good investment, but Emily’s business was one of the reasons women came from far and wide to visit Bozeman.

“Found it! After you get home, leave the dress in this white bag. It will protect the fabric and keep any dust and dirt off it.”

Sean lifted the enormous bag out of Emily’s arms. It felt as soft as a parachute and just as awkward to carry.

“Don’t worry about crushing the dress. As long as you hang it up, it should be fine. When I spoke to Matthew on the phone, I told him to give Ashley the dress at least four hours before the wedding. That way, I can make any adjustments she needs before they get married.”

“Thanks. We really appreciate everything you’ve done.”

“It was no problem. I’m thankful Ashley came into the boutique. Without knowing what style of dress she likes, it would have been impossible to find something for her.”

“I’m glad she saw you, too. Has the money gone into your bank account for the dress?”

“It was there this morning.” Emily looked at him with an amused gleam in her eyes. “Becky was great to work with. You’re lucky she’s helping you.”

“I realized that from the moment I stepped into Happy Petals. She’s one of the most organized people I’ve met.”

“And one of the nicest people you’ll ever meet.”

Sean’s eyebrows rose. “You wouldn’t be matchmaking, would you?”

Emily laughed. “You’re standing in the middle of a fashion boutique holding a bride’s wedding dress. It’s the best time to be a matchmaker.” She glanced at the large grandfather clock on the opposite side of the room. “Where did you park your truck?”

With a groan, Sean realized he should have left his truck around the back of the building. Anyone walking along the sidewalk would see him holding the bag. “It’s directly outside the front door.”

She hurried toward the front window. “Is it the blue truck?”

“That’s the one.”

Emily stood in the entrance and looked both ways. “Can you unlock it from here?”

Using one hand, he found his keys and pushed the button. “Done.”

“Don’t move.” After a few seconds, Emily waved him toward him the sidewalk. “It’s safe to leave.”

Flipping the bag in half, he stepped onto the sidewalk and hurried toward his truck. “Thanks again.”

“You’re welcome. If you need anything else, call me.”

“I will.” Before anyone saw him, he slid the dress into the truck, reversed out of the parking space, and drove out of town. There was one more stop he had to make before he went home. Luckily, Claire Williams’ business was based on a property that was almost as secluded as his ranch.

Which meant the chance of anyone seeing him there was almost zero.



TWO DAYS LATER, Becky paced back and forth in Happy Petals’ workroom. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t sit still for long enough to help Molly. “I don’t know why Adam didn’t want me to go to the hotel. Edith will twist whatever Mary says in circles and make the therapist believe I’m the person with problems. I’m Mary’s legal guardian, for goodness’ sake.”

“You’re also emotionally invested in what happens,” Molly said in an infuriatingly calm voice. “’Tis better to step back and let the professionals take the lead.”

“We’re not discussing ballroom dancing. We’re talking about our little girl.”

“Mary is being watched over by a lovely young woman who knows what she’s doing.”

“Does she? Adam might not know—”

Molly dropped the bouquet she was making on the wide bench. “By all that is holy, stop talking and take a deep breath. The good Lord gave you a brain, so use it.”

Becky’s mouth dropped open, then closed.

“Edith is a sad woman who is incapable of giving Mary what she needs. You are more than she could ever be. Jamie and Sophia made you Mary’s guardian. If a judge wants to take that away, we’ll take our case to a higher court.”

She slumped against the counter. “It could be a long and expensive process.”

“Our girl is worth it.”

Hot tears stung Becky’s eyes. “What if the judge doesn’t think *I’m* worth it? I’m single and running my own business. I don’t have a lot of spare time or money.”

“Now you’re feeling sorry for yourself. No one is saying a single woman can’t be a mother figure to Mary. If Gran can raise two young girls to become successful women, you can do the same.”

“Gran didn’t have a choice.”

“Are you saying you do?”

That wasn’t what Becky was saying, but everything was getting jumbled and coming out the wrong way. “I’m sorry. I’m panicking and thinking the worst.”

“Have a little faith.”

Becky touched the small silver cross at her neck. “Did Gran have the same problem when we went to live with her?”

Molly sighed. “No one cared enough to fight for us. We were extra baggage no one could afford to keep. If it weren’t

for Gran, we would have been taken to a foster home and left to our own devices.”

“Was it that bad?”

“I’m surprised you don’t remember the heated discussions in Gran’s kitchen. Everyone had an opinion about our living arrangements. ’Twas worse than you could imagine.”

Becky picked up a flower and some greenery to begin another bouquet. “I’m glad Gran wanted us.”

“We were family. Her tender heart wouldn’t allow her to turn her back on us anymore than you could with Mary.”

Just thinking about the sacrifices their gran had made for them made Becky sad. “I wonder what her life would have been like without us living with her.”

“I asked her the same question before she died. Her reply was that a sorrier life there wouldn’t have been. Before we arrived, she was sad and lonely. We filled the void when Granddad and our parents died, then made our own impression on her heart. Even with all our faults and fears, she loved us with a depth that could overcome anything.”

“She would have loved Mary. They share the same thirst for knowledge, the same love of all creatures, great and small.”

“Would you be referring to Henrietta?”

Becky smiled. “Mary’s told you about her?”

“She drew me a picture of the goat and her kids. You should be grateful you live in town. Otherwise, your garage would be full of adopted animals in need of a little love.”

Molly looked over Becky’s shoulder. “Good morning, Sean. We were just talking about your menagerie of animals.”

“And, if Sally has her way, it will only get bigger. How was your exhibition in Boston?”

“Fabulous. All the photographs were sold and at least a dozen people want me to work on private commissions.”

“That’s amazing. I’m glad it went well.” Sean wrapped his arm around Becky’s waist and handed her a yellow rose. “This is for you. I thought it might make you feel better.”

She kissed his cheek, grateful for his thoughtfulness. “Thank you.”

“Do you know how Mary’s meeting with Edith is going?”

Becky shook her head. “I’ve not heard a thing.”

“’Tis too soon to be worried,” Molly said as she checked her watch. “Edith was permitted to spend two hours with Mary. It’s barely gone midday.”

Sean’s arm tightened around Becky. “Laura’s in the shop. How about I take you and Molly out to lunch?”

“Thank you for the invitation,” Molly said with regret. “But I’ll stay here. Jacob is meeting a landowner about a property. He’s picking me up from here as soon as he’s finished.”

Becky sighed. “I’d better stay, too. Saturdays are one of our busiest days. It can go from quiet to frantic in the blink of an eye.”

Molly reached for a sprig of lavender. “Jacob could be another hour. Why don’t you go with Sean? I’ll stay here with Laura and text you when I’m about to leave.”

“We could have lunch at Angel Wings Café,” Sean said quickly. “It would only take a minute or two to get back.”

Becky looked at the flowers sitting in buckets across the table.

“Don’t you be worrying about the other bouquets. I can make them before I leave.”

“Are you sure?”

Molly stuck her hands on her hips. “Of course, I’m sure. Laura and I will be okay.”

Becky picked up her bag. “Call me if you hear anything from Adam or the therapist.”

“I will. Now off with you before my husband arrives.”

Sean held her hand and led her toward the front of the store. “Tess has bacon and maple syrup waffles on today’s menu.”

The thought of all that sugar made Becky feel queasy. And being queasy made her think of Matthew’s wedding. “Has Nathan contacted the suit rental—” She looked at the person walking into Happy Petals and froze. “Ashley?”

The petite blond with sparkling blue eyes grinned. “Surprise! It seems like ages since I’ve been home.”

Becky’s mind went blank. All she could think of was not saying anything about the wedding.

“How was New York City?” Sean asked.

“Still as noisy and smelly as ever, but I miss it. As well as writing the story my editor wants, I spent time with Bonnie and Harry. It was good to see them.”

Becky glanced at the front counter in case Ashley’s scrapbook was sitting there. She breathed a sigh of relief when she couldn’t see it. “Did you go to a show on Broadway?”

“Not this time. I’m trying to talk Matthew into spending a long weekend in Manhattan, but he’s so busy it’s hard to go anywhere.”

Becky nodded, trying to think of something intelligent to say. “Sean and I are going to Angel Wings Café for lunch. Would you like to join us?”

Ashley shook her head. “Thanks for the invite, but I’m meeting my cousin soon. I want to buy her some flowers for her birthday.”

Becky looked across the store. Laura was walking toward them. “That’s a lovely thing to do. Laura will help you. We made some pretty bouquets this morning.”

“I’ll have a look. Enjoy lunch.”

“We will. Bye.” As soon as the door closed behind them, Becky tightened her grip on Sean’s hand. “That was close.”

“Too close. Ashley didn’t say anything about the wedding, so Matthew’s secret must still be safe.”

“I hope so. I never thought I’d say this, but I can’t wait for their wedding to be over.”

Sean laughed and pulled her into a hug. “Do you want to know another secret? I feel the same way, too.”

CHAPTER 11



Sean had a theory about the stomach-churning, heart-thumping side effects of stress. If you ate ice cream, they went away. By the time Mary returned from the visit with her grandma, Becky was more than happy to test his theory.

So, after dinner, he'd driven back into town to take Becky and Mary to his favorite dessert destination.

"You didn't tell me they have more than twenty different ice cream flavors," Becky said in awe. "I can't believe I haven't been here before."

"It only opened last year." As far as he was concerned, the Cold Stone Creamery should be included in the list of modern-day wonders of the world. It had almost every ice cream flavor you could imagine, along with homemade candies, and an impressive range of hot chocolate options. For anyone wanting to de-stress, this was heaven.

Mary stood on a platform designed especially for children. With an excited grin, she pointed to a large tub of ice cream. "Can I have the red one with gumdrops in it?"

"That looks delicious," Becky said from beside her. "I'm going to try the chocolate and peppermint cream flavor."

"It's green."

“That’s the peppermint,” Becky explained. “Would you like some?”

Mary scrunched up her nose. “No, thanks.”

Sean smiled. After sharing a few meals with her, encouraging Mary to eat anything green was pointless. To make their meals healthier, Becky had resorted to grating, finely chopping, and pulverizing as many vegetables into their meals as she could.

The sales assistant handed Mary a sample of the raspberry gumdrop ice cream and Becky tried the peppermint cream.

With more confidence than Sean would have managed at the same age, Mary licked the spoon clean, then dropped the wooden stick into the trash.

“That was yummy.”

“Would you like some more?” Becky asked.

Mary nodded and waited patiently for their bowls of ice cream.

Choosing which flavor he wanted wasn’t difficult. Chocolate fudge ripple was his go-to ice cream. With his dessert in his hand, he sat with Becky and Mary in one of the booths. “How is the ice cream?”

“Yummy,” Mary said around a mouthful of her sweet dessert.

“Totally delicious,” Becky agreed. “We’re definitely coming back with Molly and Jacob.”

“And Sean,” Mary said in a hurry. “Could Grandma come, too?”

Becky's troubled gaze shot to him. Although they'd spent the last two hours together, he didn't know what had happened at the hotel this morning. Neither, he suspected, did Becky.

"Your grandma doesn't come to Bozeman very often," Becky explained. "But, the next time she's here, we'll tell her about the creamery."

"Grandma said I can live with her if I want." Mary's innocent words sounded like a large metal bell dropping from the ceiling. "She has a pink bedroom, all ready for me."

Becky's mouth fell open. With her bowl of ice cream pushed to one side, she asked Mary if that's what she wanted to do.

"Not really. I have to go to school 'cos Mrs. Graham said we'll miss out on being in the play if we aren't in class. Tommy said we have to listen to her 'cos she's our teacher."

Sean was grateful to Mary's classmate, even if Becky looked as though she was lost for words. "When's your next practice for the school play?"

Mary looked at Becky.

"It's on Tuesday," she said flatly.

"I told Grandma about the play. She said my dad enjoyed being on the stage, too. Did you know he had a wonderful voice? Grandma said he sung in front of lots of people."

"He did." Becky's voice was unusually quiet. "He used to play in a band called the Four Brothers—except they weren't brothers, they were friends. They toured from County Derry in the north to County Cork in the south. They had a grand time, spinning their tales and singing original ballads to their fans."

"What's a fan?"

Becky tucked a stray strand of hair behind Mary's ear. "Someone who likes what you do. Whenever I could, I'd travel to where the band was playing. They always had a crowd of people listening to their songs."

"Do I sound like Daddy when I sing?"

Becky's eyes clouded with tears.

Sean could see how difficult it was for her to talk about Mary's father.

"Your voice is strong and true, just like your dad's. He couldn't have left you with a better gift."

Mary picked up her dessert spoon and ate another mouthful of ice cream. "Sally gave Sean and Matthew lots of gifts, except they were animals. Do you think she could bring some to our house? We have plenty of room."

"It's hard for us to have pets," Becky explained. "I'm not home during the day and you go to school."

"What about a kitten? Catherine and Toby said they play all by themselves when they're at school."

"How about we think about it?"

"That's what you said last time."

Becky took a deep breath. "'Tis a big commitment to provide a forever home to an animal."

Mary's bottom lip quivered. "Grandma said I could have two kittens at her house."

With eyes full of worry, Becky glanced at Sean before returning her attention to Mary. "What else did Grandma say?"

"That she loves me. Why was she sad when she said that?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe she misses your dad."

“Do you?”

Becky nodded. “Your mom and dad were two of the nicest people in the world. They were strong and courageous, and loved you and each other very much.”

Mary sighed. “I wish they didn’t have to go away.”

With more strength than Sean could have managed, Becky reached out and held Mary’s hand. “So do I.”

His heart pounded as he looked at Becky’s pale face. The grief of losing two of her closest friends was still too raw to overcome with a kind word or a special memory.

He only hoped Mary’s grandma didn’t make everyone’s life harder by taking Mary away.



GOING for an early Sunday morning run with Molly was something Becky usually looked forward to. This morning was different. She’d had to drag herself out of bed and stumble down the hallway. Going to sleep earlier would have helped but, after they’d arrived home from the creamery, Sean had stayed for coffee and they’d talked until the small hours of the morning.

Her heart felt less heavy after he left, but the rest of her body was a disaster.

By the time she’d made it to the kitchen, Mary was already up and dressed, and eating Corn Flakes at the kitchen table.

“I made you some breakfast. It’s beside the kettle.”

Becky kissed the top of her head and smiled at the two slices of toast covered in a thick layer of apricot jam. “Thank

you. It looks lovely.” Mary enjoyed their Sunday morning ritual of riding her bicycle beside her and Molly, chatting away about anything and everything that was happening. They’d often have to slow down or stop because they were laughing so hard.

She wasn’t sure there would be much laughter this morning. Not after Edith’s visit.

Mary’s therapist wouldn’t tell her what had been said, but it didn’t matter. From what Mary had told them, Edith’s main objective was to convince her to move to Milwaukee.

“Have you thought about getting a kitten?”

Becky rubbed her temples. A lack of sleep combined with a massive dose of stress had given her a headache. “Not yet. Can we talk about it tomorrow?”

“Okay.” Mary pulled out a kitchen chair and opened Becky’s laptop. “Aunt Molly said if you want something real bad you need to make a list and figure out a plan for getting it.” With a worried frown creasing her brow, she lifted her eyes to Becky. “I made my plan.”

Becky was impressed and worried. If Mary had deleted any of the other files on her laptop, Happy Petals would be a lot harder to manage. And that paled in comparison to any conversations she’d need to have with her accountant if her financial records had disappeared.

With a sense of dread, she studied the document Mary had opened. It wasn’t bad for a six-year-old. “How did you learn to do this?”

“Aunt Molly showed me. She knows everything about computers.”

Becky smelled a rat—a pretty, dark-haired variety who took great photos—but a rat all the same. Molly thought Becky’s reluctance to get a kitten was based on things that didn’t matter. But she had sound, practical reasons for why it wasn’t a good idea.

“Sally said she can give us a water bowl, some kitten food, and some toys. All we have to do is teach it how to go potty.”

“That sounds easy.”

Mary’s eyes widened. “We can get one?”

“No...I mean, not yet.” The excitement on Mary’s face disappeared. “I have a really bad headache. We’ll talk about it after lunch.”

“But that’s ages away.”

“It’s only a few hours. Why don’t you tell me about the document you made?”

Reluctantly, Mary kneeled on the chair and pointed to the screen. “That’s some pictures of the kittens I like. I copied all the things they said about them on the animal shelter’s website. It tells you what they like doing and if they’re good with little children. Aunt Molly said that’s important ’cos I’m still little even though I’m six.”

“Did I hear my name?” Molly stood in the doorway wearing bright green Lycra leggings and a pink T-shirt.

Becky squinted to lessen the glare from her sister’s outfit. “Did you wear those clothes to make my headache worse?”

Molly grinned. “It looks as though someone doesn’t appreciate my sense of style. What do you think, Mary?”

“You look great. I’ve got pink shoelaces.” Mary jumped off the chair and showed Molly her sneakers.

“We match. Just wait until we get to the park. Everyone will wonder who the fashion divas are.”

Becky picked up half a slice of toast and headed toward the mudroom. “While you’re comparing outfits, I need to find my shoes. Do you have your helmet, Mary?”

“It’s in the garage.” Mary ran past Becky, hopefully to get her helmet.

Picking up the last slice of toast, Molly wandered across to the laptop. “It looks as though you’ve seen Mary’s document.”

“Thanks to you,” she grumbled. “I wish you wouldn’t encourage her to get a kitten from the animal shelter.”

“Someone got out of bed on the wrong side. Don’t you remember Duddly? I pestered Gran for months about getting a kitten. You didn’t want anything to do with a pet. Then, after he came to live with us, you wouldn’t leave him alone.”

Becky yanked her lace tight. “I was ten years old. It’s not the same.”

“Of course, it is. Duddly was never any bother. He didn’t even pee on the floor.”

“That’s because he was potty trained before we got him.”

“Well, then. Choose a cat that already knows how to stay clean.”

Mary skidded to a stop in front of Molly. “I showed Becky the pictures of the kittens.”

“How did it go?”

“I don’t know, but Becky read all about them.”

Molly launched into her super-bendy stretching routine she always did before a run. “I’ll keep my fingers crossed for

you.”

Becky clicked Mary’s bicycle helmet into place and then glared at her sister. “We’d best be heading out before you inspire Mary to adopt an elephant.”

“I’m not that bad,” Molly said with a chuckle. “Although I can see the advantages. Especially when you don’t want to talk about the most obvious issues we’d be dealing with.”

“That could be any number of things.”

“Including Sean,” Molly said cheekily. “I’m looking forward to the full story once Mary is playing at the park.”

Becky picked up the house keys. “You might be waiting a lot longer than that.”



AFTER A SPRINT TOWARD THE PLAYGROUND, Becky placed her hands on her knees and sucked in an enormous lungful of air.

Molly collapsed onto the seat beside her. “I need to do more exercise.”

“I’ll be on the swing,” Mary said as she leaped off her bicycle and unclipped her helmet.

Becky nodded and caught the helmet as it flew through the air. “We’ll be here.” She looked at her sister and sighed. “We’re getting old.”

“Some days I’d be inclined to believe you, but not today.” Molly lifted her arms above her head and started stretching. “It’s been a rotten week, what with Edith wanting to take Mary away, then flying across the country to spend time with our

baby girl. At least Adam is doing all he can to limit Edith's contact with Mary."

"It shouldn't have to be that way. She's Mary's grandma and she deserves a place in her life, but not the way she would like."

"Don't feel guilty. She doesn't deserve it. Where is Edith now?"

"Hopefully, on her way home." Becky sat on the wooden seat. "I want it to be over. I want Mary to know her place in our lives and for Edith to abide by Jamie and Sophia's wishes."

"She probably thinks they were pressured into appointing you as Mary's guardian."

"I don't know why. It was the last thing I expected."

Pushing herself upright, Molly placed her left leg on the seat and stretched her hamstrings. "If we're to be discussing the unexpected, how are the wedding plans going?"

"Almost finished. Matthew is taking his brothers for their suit fittings soon. Apart from decorating the barn, we're finished." She looked across the playground at Mary. She was happily swinging high in the air, her pale gold hair spread out behind her like a glowing halo. Just thinking about Mary not being here brought tears to her eyes.

Molly stopped stretching and leaned over to Becky, wrapping both arms around her. "It won't come to that."

"We don't know what will happen."

"Thinking the worst doesn't help anyone. Tell me about the pretend engagement party. Is everyone able to come?"

Taking a deep breath, Becky pushed her sad thoughts to one side. “So far, most of the people Matthew and Ashley invited are coming. It will be a wonderful day.”

“Are you enjoying spending time with Sean?”

“I am.” Placing her hands on her hips, Becky stretched sideways. “How did you know Jacob was the man for you?”

“He swept me off my feet so fast I don’t remember a time when I didn’t love him.” Molly sighed. “Each time I look into his eyes, I see a million possibilities. There’s kindness and strength, love and trust, to be sure. But something more than words can never explain.”

“Gran would have called it magic,” Becky said softly.

“Or the luck of the Irish. Jacob’s my pot of gold at the end of a rainbow.”

Becky watched Mary run to the slide and fearlessly climb the ladder. After knowing Sean for such a short time, she had a strong suspicion he could be her pot of gold, too.

CHAPTER 12



Becky was unloading the flowers she'd bought at the market when someone walked across the gravel parking lot behind her.

Thinking Laura must have decided to start work early, she turned and smiled. Then froze. Edith stood uncertainly beside Becky's truck. She looked tired, and the lines etched into each side of her mouth seemed deeper than when they'd last seen each other.

"I know I didn't call beforehand, but I wanted to see you before I go home."

To stop herself from saying something she would regret, Becky grabbed the first bunch of flowers she put her hands on. "I have a lot of work to be doing."

"I don't mind helping," Edith said quickly.

Taking a deep breath, Becky turned and stared at the woman who'd turned her world upside down. "I'll not be wanting your help. I don't even want to see you."

"I know you must be upset. I—"

"'Tis not about you!" Becky dropped her voice. Her gran would tell her to be gracious in the face of adversity—even if it was one of the hardest things she'd ever had to do. "None of

this is about you. ‘Tis about a little girl who’s trying to find her place in the world after her mommy and daddy died.”

“You don’t think I know that? Mary isn’t the only person whose life changed when Jamie and Sophia died. I care about Mary and only want what’s best for her.”

Becky’s hands tightened around the stems of the flowers. “If you cared about Mary, you wouldn’t try to take her away. You know the struggles we’ve been through but, now, when she’s finally settled, you want her to live with you.”

“I’m her grandmother. She’ll be just as happy with me.”

Becky opened the back door of the flower shop and left the roses on the workroom table.

Edith followed her inside. “You can’t keep her forever. Jamie wouldn’t have wanted that.”

“Did it occur to you there was a reason Jamie and Sophia asked me to be Mary’s guardian?”

“Jamie always took the easy way out of any situation. You were engaged to him. He thought you were the best person to look after Mary, but he was wrong.”

“Sophia and Jamie weren’t wrong.”

“You’re a single woman who owns a flower shop in the middle of nowhere. What kind of life will Mary have with you? I have enough money to send her to the best schools, to become part of a society she could only aspire to with you.”

Becky thought of her gran, but even her spirit couldn’t calm the rage building inside of her. “Your money means nothing. I own a successful business in the middle of the fourth-largest city in Montana. My marital status makes no

difference to how much love and support I can give Mary.” Striding past Edith, she picked up another box of flowers.

“Jamie never had aspirations. He ran away to Ireland to hide from what he could become. That’s not the life I want for Mary.”

“It doesn’t matter what you want.”

Edith’s brittle laugh made the hairs on the back of Becky’s neck stand on end. “You don’t know how wrong you are. I have employed the best legal team in Milwaukee to revoke your guardianship.” She took a step toward Becky and pointed her finger at her chest. “She *will* be coming to live with me, whether you want her to or not.”

Jamie had warned her about his mom’s mood changes, but she’d never seen what had terrified him so much. But, now, seeing the anger seething below the surface of Edith’s face, she understood what he’d been so worried about.

“If you’ve said what you came to say, I’ll ask you to leave. If you want to communicate with me in the future, have your expensive legal team contact my lawyer.”

Edith’s fingers curled into tight fists. “A judge will set the record straight. And then you’ll never see Mary again.”

Jamie’s mom left as quickly as she’d arrived, leaving Becky trembling with anger, regret, and sadness for a little boy who could never be enough for his mother.

Instead of taking the rest of the flowers inside, she stumbled into the workroom and turned on the kettle. She needed a hot cup of tea and a good cry. Then, after she felt calmer, she’d call her lawyer and tell him to expect more correspondence from Edith’s lawyers.



SEAN STUDIED the vases in the antiques store. He wanted to buy Becky a gift, but he'd struggled to find anything that would have a special meaning for her.

“Are you sure you want to buy her an old vase?” Matthew asked. “It’s not very romantic.”

He glanced at his brother. For someone who'd wanted to surprise his fiancée with a secret wedding, he could be incredibly dense. “Becky’s gran collected vases. As soon as Becky started working, she did the same thing. They’re important to her.”

“And I thought Ashley’s collection of old typewriters was weird.”

Sean choked back a laugh. “I wouldn’t tell your fiancée what you think. It might lead to a lot of things that don’t include a wedding.”

“My opinion about her typewriter obsession won’t change how she feels about me.”

“Just keep it to yourself. Once you’ve been married for forty years, break the news gently.” His gaze settled on a vase sitting on a shelf behind his brother. “I’ve found it.”

“Thank goodness. I thought we’d be here for hours.” Matthew followed Sean to the shelf. “It’s blue.”

“You never fail to amaze me with your intelligence.”

A woman walked toward them with a smile on her face. “Hi, I’m Kelly. I own the antiques store. Can I help you?”

Sean pointed to the vase before his brother said something dumb. “Can you tell us about the vase?”

“Of course, I can. It’s a vintage art deco ball vase from the 1930s. It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

Matthew frowned. “Is it made from glass?”

“It is.” Kelly pointed to the raised pattern. “It’s a lovely example of opalescent pressed glass with soft blue reflections. It only has a diameter of seven inches, so it’s perfect for a shelving unit or a coffee table.”

Carefully, Sean picked it up. He was surprised at how light it was. Most of Becky’s vases were ceramic or porcelain. She’d love this one because it was different. “I’ll take it.”

Matthew coughed into his hand. “Don’t you want to know the price first?”

“Not really.”

“Don’t worry,” Kelly assured Matthew. “It’s half the price of what you’d pay for something similar in a large city.”

That didn’t seem to reassure Matthew.

“It’s one hundred twenty dollars,” Sean told his brother. “I saw the sticker on the base.”

Matthew’s eyes widened, but he didn’t say anything.

After they left the store with the gift-wrapped vase, Matthew broke his silence. “I wonder how much Ashley’s typewriters are worth. There was one in the antiques store that was selling for two hundred bucks.”

“They’ll be worth a lot more to her.”

“You’re probably right. Next time I want to buy Ashley something, I’ll come to you. Have you made any headway on

the dating front with Becky?”

“We’ve been out a few times.”

“On your own?”

“If you’re meaning Molly, she hasn’t come with us.” Sean opened the back door of his truck and placed the vase on the floor, on top of a blanket. Hopefully, the extra padding stopped it from moving around.

Matthew frowned. “Have you thought through the whole ready-made family thing? It’s a big deal having to consider a child whenever you want to do something.”

“I don’t have to think about it. Mary lives with Becky. They’re a package deal.” Sean’s heart sank. With what was happening with Edith, that could change over the next few months.

“Are you ready for parenthood?”

“As ready as Nathan was when he married Amy.”

“That’s different. Catherine was a baby when Amy came home.”

Sean opened the driver’s door. “The only difference is that Catherine was too young to remember what her life was like before she lived with Amy. Mary is still dealing with a lot of grief after her parents died.”

Matthew rubbed his forehead. “I’m sorry. I just don’t want you to get hurt or taken for a ride.”

As much as Sean loved his brother, he was starting to annoy him. “I know what I’m getting into and, even if I didn’t, it’s my life.”

“I can’t argue with that.” Matthew read the text that came through on his phone. “Nathan’s picked up Liam from the airport and they’re waiting for us at the suit rental company. Are you ready to go?”

Sean started the truck. “I can’t believe we’ve been in town this long. We’d better leave before we miss our appointment.”

Matthew grinned. “That’s what you get for wanting the perfect gift.”

No. That’s what he got for wanting to make Becky happy. And knowing how upset she was about Mary’s guardianship made him even more determined to show her how much he cared.

CHAPTER 13



*M*atthew opened the changing room curtain and grinned at his brothers. “If I say so myself, Ashley will be bowled over by how I look.”

Sean groaned. “It’s a shame you’re not more self-confident.”

Nathan adjusted the lapel of Matthew’s jacket. “Hold still, Romeo. This jacket needs to be bigger. You’ve put on weight since I got married.”

“It’s not fat, it’s muscle,” their brother said, undeterred by everyone’s laser-point stare at his bulging biceps. “I’ve been working out.”

“Yeah, at the restaurants around town,” Sean said as he straightened his own jacket. Standing sideways, he studied his profile in the full-length mirror. “I think my trousers are too big. What does everyone else think?”

Liam, their oldest brother, squinted at the seat of Sean’s trousers. “Are they the same size as the ones you wore for Nathan’s wedding?”

“Yep.”

“Go down a size.”

Matthew lifted the back of Sean's jacket. "You need to tone those glutes. Otherwise, by the time you're seventy, you'll be all legs and no shape."

"By the time I'm seventy, I won't care."

Liam high-fived Sean. "I couldn't agree more."

When all four brothers stood in front of the mirror with their gold vests peeping above the lapels of their jackets, Matthew grinned. "There's no doubt about it. We're hot."

Sometimes, Sean wondered if they were really twins. "Is everyone happy with their suits?"

Nathan stood taller. "I'm happy I still fit the same-sized suit. I've put on at least ten pounds since I got married."

Liam frowned. "That's one reason not to get hitched. What about you, Sean? Will we be confirmed bachelors or is your lady-love pushing you toward the slippery slope of matrimony?"

"I've only been dating Becky for a few weeks. How do you know about her?"

"Matthew's worse than Doris Stanley for gossip. I might be living in Vancouver, but he keeps me up to date with what everyone's doing."

Sean looked at his twin.

"I was only doing my brotherly duty. Liam needs something to keep his mind off his tragic love life."

"It's hardly a tragedy," Liam said indignantly. "My girlfriend left me for someone else. It happens all the time."

Matthew opened his mouth to say something, but Sean cut him off. "Time to get changed. We have to be back at the

ranch in an hour. Otherwise, Ashley will get suspicious when we're not there for the family barbecue."

That was enough to supercharge everyone into action. The last thing they wanted was to spoil Matthew's wedding day surprise. Even if he had managed to insult most of them at some point this afternoon.



THE CLOSER BECKY drove to the Gray family ranch, the more nervous she became. The unexpected invitation from Amy had sent her into a tailspin of uncertainty. It wasn't as if she hadn't met most of Sean's family before; she'd even met his mom and dad a few times when they'd come into Happy Petals or helped at the fundraisers for the animal shelter.

She tried to pinpoint what was worrying her, but nothing made sense.

"Are we nearly there?" Mary asked from the back seat.

"It won't be too much longer."

"Do you think Sean will let me feed the animals in the barn?"

"You'll have to ask him when we arrive. Catherine and Toby might have already done it."

"I hope not."

Becky glanced in the rearview mirror. Mary had turned her head to look through the side window. In profile, she looked so much like Jamie. They both had the same small, turned-up nose and the same stubborn chin. Just thinking about him made an image of his mother fill her with dread.

She hadn't heard from Edith since Monday. Adam was sympathetic when she'd told him about the unexpected visit, but he hadn't offered her any comforting advice. As much as Becky could work out, if she stood in the way of Edith visiting her granddaughter, it could make Becky's case a lot more difficult to support.

So, for now, she'd keep Mary close, warn her school not to let anyone apart from herself and Molly pick her up, and ignore any requests from Edith for school play tickets.

Turning on her indicator, she slowly drove into the Gray family ranch. It felt good to be here, good to put her issues to one side for the night.

As they passed the bison grazing in the pasture, she was tempted to remind Mary not to say anything about a wedding. But, if she mentioned it, it might make her more likely to say something. "There's Sean's red barn."

The excitement inside the truck ratcheted up a notch. "I can't wait to see Henrietta. Do you think her baby goats are still with her?"

"Sean didn't say they'd been moved to another ranch."

"I'll ask, just in case."

For such a young child, Mary could be incredibly determined. "Sean's mom and dad will be here."

"Will Sally be here, too?"

"She will." Sean's sister had taken on superhero status since Mary discovered she volunteered at the animal shelter. It was just as well Mary was only six. If she were older, she'd probably want to be a volunteer, too.

Becky parked in front of Nathan and Amy's home and turned off the engine.

The screen door flew open and Catherine and Toby ran down the veranda steps. "Mary!" they cried in unison. "Come and see Frank and Mildred."

In two seconds flat, Mary threw off her seatbelt and was out of the truck.

"Don't climb into the loft," Becky said.

"I won't." Without a backward glance, Mary raced after her friends.

So much for keeping her close. At least when she was with Catherine and Toby, she wouldn't be talking about any wedding discussions she might have overheard.

"You made it." Sean came down the steps and held her door open.

"I'm sorry we're late. I had a couple of things I had to do at work before I left."

"It doesn't matter."

When he wrapped her in a hug, Becky sighed. "You smell like an emerald glen on a misty winter's morning."

Sean's chest rumbled as he laughed. "I don't know what that means, but I'll take it as a compliment."

"'Twas meant as one. How are your parents?"

"Happy we're all together. I'm surprised they came to see us so soon before Matthew's wedding."

"Engagement party," she whispered.

"That, too," he said with a smile. "No one else is outside, so we won't be giving anything away."

“I might not have a large family, but I’ve spent time with friends who have ten siblings. Someone is always just around the corner.” As if to prove her point, Sally opened the screen door and walked outside.

“Becky!” Sally’s excited voice rang across the yard. “Come and say hello to Mom and Dad. They’ve been looking forward to talking to you.”

Becky groaned. “I have a confession,” she said quietly to Sean. “I’m not a good liar.”

“Think of it as making up a bedtime story for Mary.” He held her hand and walked toward Sally. “Don’t worry. I’ll be with you the whole time.”

When she saw the living room full of people, she gulped. Staying together might not be as easy as Sean thought.



SEAN WATCHED Becky share a joke with Liam. With her head tilted back, laughing at something his brother had said, she looked like part of their family. As if she belonged to the loud, opinionated group of adults who were fast outgrowing the amount of space inside Nathan’s home.

Matthew sat beside him. “You haven’t taken your eyes off Becky all night.”

“I promised I’d look after her. When our family gets together, we can be a little intimidating.”

“You think?”

Sean’s gaze moved Ashley. She was sitting at the opposite side of the room. With her head bent close to his mom’s, he hoped they weren’t talking about the engagement party.

He turned to Matthew. “You haven’t said anything to Ashley or Mom, have you?”

His brother looked affronted that he’d even asked. “The only things they know are the location, the date, and the time of the engagement party.”

“Good.” Sean was still worried about Ashley discovering what was happening, but what could he do?

“If you want to be a knight in shining armor, I’d think about rescuing Becky about now. If Liam starts interrogating her, she’ll never come back.”

“He isn’t that bad.”

“You should speak to Ashley. She said his interview technique would give the most hardened reporters a run for their money.”

Coming from Ashley, the queen of investigative journalism, that was high praise indeed. Not wanting to risk their new relationship to the whim of his brother, Sean moved across the room and sat beside Becky.

“I was just asking Becky about Happy Petals,” Liam said to him. “I bought Mom some flowers from there the last time I was home.”

Sean’s eyebrows rose. “That was very thoughtful of you.”

“Mom appreciated the gesture.”

“I’m sure she did. Didn’t your last girlfriend complain that you don’t have a romantic bone in your body?”

Liam snorted. “Buying Mom flowers hardly counts as a romantic gesture.”

“I think it was a very sweet gesture,” Becky told him. “My gran used to tell Molly and me to look at how a man treats his mom and gran. If he treasures them, he will treat his wife the same way.”

Sean wondered how he stacked up against such high expectations.

“Don’t worry,” she whispered. “You’ve done just fine.”

“Can you always read my mind?”

“Only when it counts. So, tell me, Liam. What do you do in Vancouver?”

“I’m a lawyer for a non-profit organization.”

Sean had always admired what his brother was doing, even if it had cost him each relationship he’d stumbled into. “Some of his clients’ stories are heartbreaking.”

“They’re lucky they have you,” Becky told Liam. “I occasionally volunteer at the church. A lot of people come to see us when they have nowhere else to go. It makes me thankful for all I’ve been given. Would you ever consider moving back to Bozeman?”

“Maybe in a few years. There are a lot more people who need my help.”

Sean had a feeling there always would be.

When Mary came and sat in Becky’s lap, something inside of his chest moved and expanded. Becky was giving Mary a chance at a better life. She loved her unconditionally and only wanted the best for her.

A sense of rightness, the need to nurture what Becky had already started, filled him with determination.

Regardless of what any judge said, Becky and Mary belonged together. And, one day, he hoped they'd feel the same way about him.

CHAPTER 14



Becky leaned against the red-brick exterior of Osborne and Sons. Her meeting with Adam had been a lot worse than she expected.

“Are you all right?” Molly asked.

“I don’t know if I’ll ever be okay again. How do people become so mean that they refuse to see anything from someone else’s perspective?”

“Addictions can take the sting out of anyone’s conscience. Edith only cares about herself.”

“But Mary’s only six years old. She deserves more from her grandma than being forced to live with her.”

“Edith doesn’t see it that way and she never will. I don’t know about you, but I need a cup of tea.”

“That sounds perfect. Would you mind if we go to Angel Wings Café? I have a message for Tess.”

“Angel Wings Café it is.” Molly linked her hand around Becky’s arm and started walking. “Someone once told me there’s nowt so queer as folk. They could have been talking about Edith.”

“It’s more than that.” While Adam was warning them about Edith’s increasingly erratic behavior, Becky was

recalling the warnings Jamie had given her about his mom. “I’m worried Edith might do something foolish.”

“Like move to Bozeman?”

Becky’s head spun toward her sister. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“She has a warped and twisted mind. And what’s worse, a selective memory. Moving here would make perfect sense to her.”

As they crossed Main Street, the sense of dread in her stomach grew heavier. “I can’t sit around and wait for a judge to tell me if Mary’s staying or leaving.”

Molly’s arm tightened in warning. “You don’t have a choice. Adam told you how long it could take. His advice was sound. Forget about Edith and live your life to the fullest. At the moment, she can’t take Mary anywhere without your permission.”

“Edith has never done anything anyone expected of her.”

Molly stopped outside the café. “What would you be saying?”

Taking a deep breath, Becky gathered her dark thoughts. “I’m worried Edith might do something daft like take Mary to Milwaukee.”

“Edith is a tortured spirit, to be sure. But why would she be so foolish as to break the law?”

“She took Jamie away from his dad while they were going through a bitter divorce. Why wouldn’t she do the same thing to our little girl?”

“Does Adam know of your concerns?”

Becky nodded. “I told him everything.”

“He must know what he’s doing. It won’t be the first time he’s dealt with someone who has a warped and twisted mind.”

“I hope not.” Opening the door of the café, she breathed in the delicious scent of roasted nuts, fresh coffee, and rich chocolate. “I wonder if Tess sells ice cream.”

Molly’s eyebrows rose. “Since when have you ever eaten ice cream at ten o’clock in the morning?”

“Since a handsome cowboy showed me how good it tastes when you’re stressed.”

“We’d best be ordering two bowls, then.”

Ten minutes later, with their cups of tea forgotten, they began eating two bowls of raspberry ripple and lemon sorbet ice cream.

Molly sighed. “Tell your handsome cowboy he’s right. I feel better already.”

With a mouthful of sweet berry ice cream sliding down her throat, so did Becky.



“SORRY I’M LATE.” Sean hurried into Todd and Sally’s barn. He was supposed to be here an hour ago, but a callout with the search and rescue team had taken longer than he’d thought. “How can I help?”

Matthew consulted his clipboard. “Nathan needs a hand with the hay but, be warned, there’s lots of it.”

“That’s probably because it’s a barn,” Sean joked.

Matthew's lips didn't move. "Not funny. We're already running behind schedule and two of our helpers have had to leave. At this rate, we'll still be here on the morning of the wedding."

Sean placed his hands on his brother's shoulders. "Take a deep breath and relax. We allowed ourselves an extra day to get everything ready. It will be okay."

"But Liam said—"

"Don't listen to our brother. He's a lawyer. What does he know about decorating a barn?"

"About as much as you do," Liam said from behind Matthew.

Sean's eyebrows rose. The last time he'd seen Liam wearing jeans and a T-shirt was after he was drenched in a downpour last spring. "Where are your pressed trousers and pin-striped shirt?"

"I'm dressing for the occasion." Taking a baseball cap out of his back pocket, he pulled it on and turned to Matthew. "The sheep are in Todd's other barn. What can I do next?"

"You moved the sheep?"

Liam wasn't amused. It looked as though Matthew's nerves were rubbing off on everyone. "It hasn't been that long since I did some work around the ranch."

Matthew cleared his throat. "Both of you can find Nathan. We need the rest of the hay bales moved to Todd's truck."

As they made their way toward Nathan, Sean was still having a hard time imagining his brother herding the sheep. Even when he came home for vacations, he preferred to keep away from the daily running of the ranch.

“What was the callout?” Liam asked.

“Someone rolled their truck. It was more of a medical assist than an extrication. Have you seen Becky?”

“She’s unloading the decorations from her truck and putting them in a shipping container at the back of the barn.”

Sean nodded and took a careful look at what they’d achieved since they’d started. It didn’t seem like much, but they were slowly getting there. For most of yesterday, they’d focused on the loft and the larger pieces of equipment that had made their way into the barn. It was dirty, dusty work, but it felt good to be making progress.

He turned around when he heard the rattle of an engine behind them.

“I’m using a tractor to move the hay,” Nathan yelled from the driver’s seat. “Otherwise, we’ll still be here at Christmas.”

Sean took his leather gloves out of his back pocket. “Make sure no one gets in Nathan’s way,” he told Liam. “Some of the people here haven’t worked around a tractor.”

“Where will you be?”

“Up front, doing the same thing.”

Liam’s gaze roamed around the dusty barn. “Do you think we’ll get it done in time?”

“We have to.” And with a final wave to his brother, he made sure Nathan had a clear path to the back of the barn.



LATER THE FOLLOWING AFTERNOON, Becky studied the rickety old ladder leaning against the loft. With everyone enjoying a

cold drink, it was the first chance she'd had all day of being in the barn without other people around her.

Perched high above the hay-covered floor, the loft might provide other possibilities for the decorations. Without second-guessing herself, she placed her hands on the rungs of the ladder.

“What are you doing?” Sean yelled from the main doors.

“I want to see if we can hang some decorations from the rail that runs along the edge of the loft.”

“It's too high.”

“I've been climbing ladders since I was a few years old.” Wasting no time, she quickly moved halfway up the ladder. “See. Easy peasy.”

“Don't go any higher.”

Sean's voice sounded closer. She looked down at him and smiled. “My gran used to say I was born with wings under my feet. There wasn't anywhere I couldn't climb.”

“You aren't ten years old anymore.” Sean grabbed hold of the ladder as it gave a nervous wobble. “You should come down before you fall down.”

“Matthew and Nathan were climbing up and down the ladder yesterday. If they can do it, so can I.”

She stepped even higher and surveyed the view below. “'Tis a marvel a barn of this age hasn't twisted and warped beyond repair.”

“They knew what they were doing.” Sean's face seemed a little pale. “No one will care if there aren't any decorations hanging from the loft, so you might as well come down.”

“I saw a picture of some large chandeliers we can rent if we have power outlets up here. They would look spectacular dangling from the edge of the loft.”

“Come down, Becky. Who will help me decorate the barn if you break your stubborn neck?” As if to prove his point, the wood under her foot cracked and the rung gave way.

As her foot slipped, Sean lunged forward, stopping the ladder from tipping backward.

With a pounding heart, she stuck her foot on another rung and held on tight. Dear Lord. She’d almost plunged to her death in a barn that was still covered in grime.

“Maybe you’re right,” she mumbled. Taking more care, she made her way down the ladder. She glanced at Sean, hoping he wasn’t the type of man to tell her ‘I told you so’.

One look at his face had her more worried about him than what he would say.

“Are you all right?” His eyes had turned a deep, dark, emerald green and he looked as though he was about to be sick.

“I’m not good with heights, especially when someone I love does an idiotic thing like climbing into a loft.”

“It’s not idiotic to want to...wait...did you say you love me?”

He leaned forward, bracing his hands against his knees. “I did.”

Becky frowned. “Would you like me to get you a bowl or a bucket?”

“I’ll be okay.”

She wasn't sure he would. Placing her hand against his brow, she frowned. "You're cold and clammy. You should sit on the floor before you faint."

"I won't faint. I just need..."

Becky grabbed his arm as he swayed sideways. "On the floor, Sean Gray."

As soon as his bottom hit the ground, she pulled out her phone and called Matthew.

Within a few seconds, Sean had a bucket beside him and a curious audience of onlookers giving him advice.

Matthew cleared his throat. "Okay, everyone. We have a barn to clean. Sean will be perfectly okay where he is. The buckets, brooms, and brushes are where we left them. We've only got two hours to make everything spotless."

After a few grumbles from Liam, everyone moved away to focus on their area of the barn.

Everyone except Becky and Matthew.

"He's afraid of heights," Matthew said in the way of an explanation. "And I'm not talking a little afraid. He'll do everything he can to avoid high places. Even if he's with someone else, if they climb too high, he feels sick."

"How does he manage in the search and rescue team?"

"I have no idea. Somehow, he stays focused and doesn't let it worry him."

"I'm not deaf," Sean muttered from between them. "I can hear everything you're saying."

"'Tis only because we care." Becky kneeled on the floor and checked his pulse. "How are you feeling?"

“Like a fool.”

“No one thinks less highly of you because you have an issue with heights. But, just so you know, I’ll not be climbing that ladder again.”

Sean looked into her eyes. “I’m glad.”

While he took another few minutes to compose himself, Becky pulled out her phone. “Todd went into town to collect some supplies. He might know if there are power outlets in the loft.”

“You don’t give up, do you?”

She kissed Sean’s cheek. “Not usually. Is that such a bad thing?”

“Only when you want to climb ladders.”

Matthew sighed. “It’s something you get used to. Ashley’s just as stubborn.”

“There you go,” Becky said. “If Matthew can learn to love what makes his fiancée special, maybe you can learn to love what makes me special.”

“I already do. Especially if you promise to keep your feet firmly on the ground.”

“I’ll try.”

With a tender smile that warmed her heart, Sean said, “That’s all I need. Now, let’s clean the barn. We have a shipping container full of decorations and one day to put them up.”

With a hand that wasn’t quite steady, he led Becky to the entrance of the barn.

After speaking to Todd, she couldn't have been happier. With two power outlets and a hoist in the loft, all she had to do was get the chandeliers to the barn before Matthew's wedding.

With everything they'd done so far, she was determined to see them hanging from the rafters. Even if it meant collecting them from the rental company herself.

CHAPTER 15



*B*y Friday, every muscle in Becky's body ached from cleaning and decorating the barn. When Sean wasn't there, she'd climbed the ladders Todd had brought, hung heavy, green garlands from the rafters, strung fairy lights along the walls, and prayed the pretty chandeliers she'd ordered would arrive in time.

Now here she was with Molly, making the table decorations in Happy Petals for the wedding.

"These will be grand with the white lanterns and candles you've chosen," Molly said.

"I think so, too." Becky finished another centerpiece and placed it in the refrigerator. "That's another one finished. I'll pop out to the shop and see how Laura is coping. Do you need anything while I'm there?"

Molly checked the buckets of flowers on the workbench. "No, we're okay for now."

With a smile, Becky pushed open the workroom door and stepped into the store. Laura was helping a customer choose a bouquet, so she tidied a vase of red and orange snapdragons.

"Aren't they gorgeous," Ashley said as she walked into the store. "The colors are stunning."

Becky's eyes widened. "They are, aren't they? I didn't expect to see you today. Is everything all right?"

"It's wonderful." The dimpled smile on Ashley's face was full of joy. "My stepmom has finally decided the wedding gown I want to buy is perfect. You know what that means, don't you?"

Becky hoped it didn't mean what she thought it did.

Ashley held her hands. "I'm going wedding dress shopping! I'm so excited. I just hope the dress I saw is still available. Emily is such a wonderful designer that nothing lasts for long."

This wasn't good. Somehow, she had to make sure Ashley didn't visit the boutique until next week. By then, she wouldn't need a wedding dress. The only thing she'd have to buy was a bikini for her honeymoon.

Becky checked her watch. "Oops. I was supposed to tell Molly something. Can you wait here for a few seconds? I'd love to hear more about the dress."

Ashley smiled so broadly she could have been standing in a bubble of happiness. "I'll be right here, admiring the flowers."

Becky hoped she didn't admire them too much. She'd already included snapdragons in their flower palette when she designed the centerpieces. If Ashley wanted to take some home, they could be a little short of stems for the reception.

"I'll be back soon." After making sure Laura was okay, she hurried into the workroom. It was all well and good being discreet when you were six weeks away from organizing a secret wedding. It was something else when the bride-to-be

stood in your flower shop the day before she was getting married.

“I need your help, Molly.”

Her sister looked up from what she was doing. “What do you need?”

“Can you call Emily and tell her Ashley is coming to see her. She’ll be wanting to try on the dress she fell in love with.”

“The one hanging in Sean’s closet?”

Becky nodded. “If it’s not in the boutique, she’ll be devastated. If she buys a different one, we’re in trouble. I’ll stall her here for as long as I can.”

“What do you want Emily to do?”

“She usually closes the boutique for lunch. If she could lock the front door a little earlier, it would stop Ashley from seeing her. Whatever she does, we can’t let Ashley know we’ve already bought the dress.”

Molly picked up her phone and then checked the time. “No one’s answering. Either Emily’s busy or she’s already closed for lunch.”

Becky didn’t have time to find out which option it was. “Keep trying.” Before her sister could reply, she was already heading back in the shop. “Thanks for waiting, Ashley.”

“I could stay here all day. How do you find so many lovely flowers?”

“I buy them from the market in Polson. The suppliers do a fine job of bringing the best blooms to us. What are you working on at the moment?”

“Believe it or not, I’m writing a story about the top ten things *not* to do when you’re planning a wedding. At the top of the list is listening to other people’s advice on what you should wear.”

“Your stepmom has been difficult.”

“That’s like saying Matthew’s barbecue sauce is mild when it makes your taste buds stand on end. Trisha has a very clear idea about what she wants for my wedding. Unfortunately, her ideas and mine don’t match.”

“That must make your life incredibly stressful.”

“You’re right.” Ashley gave a dramatic sigh. “Take the wedding gown I want to wear. It’s the most gorgeous dress I’ve ever seen. Trisha wants me to buy a sleek, satin sheath. It’s so tight I can barely sit in it. I don’t want Dad to get upset because I’m not agreeing with Trisha, but she hasn’t been prepared to compromise on anything. Then, all of a sudden, she told me I should wear something that makes me feel comfortable.”

Becky glanced at the clock on the wall. Hopefully, Molly had spoken to Emily by now. “That must make you feel better?”

“It does. But I didn’t come here to talk about my dress or my family.”

“You didn’t?”

Ashley shook her head. “This is almost as important as both of those things. When I talked to you about the flowers for my wedding, did I leave my scrapbook here?”

Becky frowned. With everything else that had happened, she’d forgotten to return the wedding scrapbook to Matthew. It

was sitting on her desk in the workroom, filled with Post-it notes and little scraps of colored paper.

“Umm...I don’t think so. What does it look like?” Her nose twitched. She was sure it had grown at least an inch with all the lies she’d been telling.

“It’s about this big.” Ashley made a rectangular shape with her hands. “It has a white cover with a picture of two wedding rings on the outside. There are lots of photos and magazine clippings on the inside.”

“Let me check.” Becky pretended to hunt behind the front counter for the book. After the wedding was over, no one would believe a word she said about anything. “It doesn’t look as though it’s here. When Laura has finished helping her customer, I’ll ask her.”

“That would be wonderful. If she knows where it is, just call me.”

“I will. Good luck at Emily’s.”

“Thanks. I can’t wait to see my favorite dress again.” And on a cloud of happy hormones, Ashley left the store.

Becky hoped Emily was able to close the boutique. If not, she’d need to have her wits about her. Standing between a bride and her perfect dress could be dangerous for your health.



ON FRIDAY NIGHT, Sean sat on Becky’s sofa and handed her a bowl of ice cream. “Mary loved her bedtime story.”

“I thought she might. She enjoys stories about animals, especially if they’re about kittens.”

He dipped his spoon into the latest flavor to hit the Cold Stone Creamery. After the hours they'd worked, they deserved a double helping of salted caramel truffle ice cream.

Becky sighed. "This is divine. Whoever created this ice cream deserves a medal."

"I agree. How do you feel after our marathon effort in the barn?"

"We've transformed it into a venue worthy of a princess. Ashley will love it."

He hoped so. Even with the volunteers from the church, it had still taken an extra day to get everything ready. "We're lucky Pastor Steven is organizing the church. Do you need a hand with the flower arrangements tomorrow?"

"Molly and Laura are helping me, so we should be fine. Sally and Amy are on standby if something unexpected happens."

"If you need me, I'm only a phone call away." He picked up the spreadsheet Becky had printed before she left work.

"Don't be concerned," Becky said around a mouthful of ice cream. "It looks worse than it is."

Sean didn't mind what it looked like. He'd walk over hot coals to make sure his brother had a day he'd always remember. "I'm driving Matthew into town at six-thirty in the morning. By seven-fifteen, Ashley will know about the wedding. At eight o'clock, the bride and her bridesmaids will arrive at Emily's Boutique and any adjustments on the dresses will happen there. After that, it's hair and makeup for Ashley and her friends, and suits for us. By one o'clock in the afternoon—"

“Matthew will tell his lovely guests they’re in Bozeman for a wedding and not the engagement party they’ve come for.”

Becky’s sweet smile took away some of the sadness he was feeling. “And at one-thirty, Ashley will walk down the aisle toward Matthew.” He held the schedule in his hands, staring at all the things that weren’t on the list.

“Tell me what’s wrong.”

Her softly spoken words tore at something deep inside him. “It’s nothing.”

“’Tis not nothing when it leaves you looking so sad.”

Taking a deep breath, he thought about his life with his twin; the bond that tied them so closely together. “From the moment Matthew and I were conceived, we’ve done everything together. And now...” His voice dropped into silence as a knot of grief clogged his throat.

“Now it’s all changing.”

Sean nodded. “It feels like someone’s about to tear a piece of my heart away and there’s nothing I can do to fix it.”

“Did you feel this way when Matthew asked Ashley to marry him?”

“It was easier, then. The wedding was supposed to be at least eighteen months away. We were busy on the ranch and life mostly continued on as normal. It wasn’t until this week that everything hit me. After he marries Ashley, he won’t be at the ranch when I wake up, or eat us out of house and home the day after we’ve bought groceries. I’ll even miss the toothbrush he refuses to put away.” He cleared his throat, hoping Becky didn’t think there was something wrong with him. “I’m thirty-five and upset because my twin’s getting married.”

“You love him. There’s no shame in showing your emotions. Have you spoken to Matthew about how you’re feeling?”

“He’s stressed enough as it is. He doesn’t need my problems on top of worrying about whether Ashley will marry him.”

She placed her bowl of ice cream on the coffee table. “Has it occurred to you that he might be feeling the same way?”

Sean frowned. “He’s looking forward to marrying Ashley.”

“Of course, he is. But with marriage comes the same sense of loss you’re feeling.” Her hand closed around his. “Talk to him. Right now. Tell him what you’ve said to me and all the things only the two of you will understand.”

“He’ll think I’m crazy.”

“You might be surprised.”

He took a deep breath, then pulled out his cell phone. “He’s having dinner with Mom and Dad. If he’s doesn’t answer, I’ll go and—” Sean frowned. “I must have called your number by mistake.”

Becky turned toward the entryway. “’Tis not my phone.”

Sean was already at the front door when the bell rang. Matthew couldn’t be here. He yanked open the door and stared at his twin.

“You called?” And with tears in his eyes, Matthew wrapped Sean in a fierce hug. “I’ll miss you.”

The choked-out words brought tears to Sean’s eyes, too. He hugged his brother for what they’d miss and the changes that were coming.

By the time they walked into Becky's living room, she was dabbing her eyes with a tissue. "You'd best go home and fill your hearts with each other. Tomorrow is only a stone's throw away."

"Are you sure?" Sean asked. "We were supposed to go through the list of wedding photos Molly's taking. Matthew could help us."

"'Tis not important. Go with your brother and take the tub of ice cream with you. Matthew's sweet tooth will thank me for it."

Matthew wrapped Becky in a hug. "Thank you for looking after Sean."

"You're welcome. Enjoy your time together."

Before they left, Sean gave Becky a hug. "I'll call you in the morning."

"Make sure you do. Good luck for tomorrow, Matthew."

"I hope we don't need it."

And with those words ringing in his ears, Sean left Becky's home with his brother. He didn't know what he'd do with Matthew, but it didn't matter. Spending time together was all he needed.



ON THE DAY of the wedding, Becky reached for the metal chain at the top of a chandelier. "Would you be sure this will hold? I'd not be wanting Matthew and Ashley's guests to be crushed if it fell."

Pastor Steven rubbed his hand along his jaw. “It should be okay. We’ve followed the directions and reinforced the beam the bolts are attached to.”

“Your words are not inspiring confidence in me.”

“We could always add another anchor point.” He pointed to one of the rafters not far from the edge of the loft. “That way, if one bolt fails, we’ll have a backup.”

Becky looked at the three chandeliers she’d rented for the wedding reception. They were such a darling set that it would be a shame not to hang them. But if they couldn’t make them safe, she wouldn’t use them.

“What are your thoughts, Laura?”

“My dad worked in construction for years. Why don’t I give him a call and see if he’ll give us some advice?”

Becky checked her watch. “We won’t have time to wait for him to drive here.”

“We don’t need to wait.” Laura pulled out her cell phone and tapped on the screen. “We can talk to him on a video call. If it looks too dangerous, he’ll know how we can fix it or if it isn’t worth it.”

With the help of modern technology, they had their answer a few minutes later.

“You were right,” she told Pastor Steven with a relieved smile. “An anchor point for each chandelier will give us the extra assurance we need. Do you have time to fix the hooks to the beam?”

“I’ll make the time. If I don’t, you’ll be up the ladder before I’ve finished speaking.”

“Being high in the air has never worried me. And I’m handy with most electric tools when the need arises.”

Pastor Steven picked up a drill and some heavy metal bolts. “I’ve noticed.”

Becky held the bottom of the ladder, while Laura unpacked the other chandeliers.

After an early breakfast, they’d traveled to Sally and Todd’s ranch with Molly to place all the flowers in the barn. With delicate posies on each table, large centerpieces on the cake table and at the entranceway, and a jaw-dropping arch of white roses, they’d completed a French country theme worthy of any bride and groom. But it was the chandeliers that would sparkle and shine, adding a touch of glamor to the day’s celebrations.

“One down, two to go,” Pastor Steven said as he stepped off the ladder.

Becky checked her watch. “You’ll be needing to leave soon.”

“There’s plenty of time. I don’t have to be back in Bozeman until midday.”

“I’m very grateful for the time you are giving me. I know you’re a busy man.”

“I’m enjoying helping you. It reminds me of when I was in the army.”

Becky frowned. “Would you be saying I’m bossy?”

Pastor Steven picked up the next bolt. “I’d call it being confident and assertive.”

Laura broke into a fit of giggles.

“Do you think I’m bossy, too?”

“You have a lovely way about you,” Laura said with a grin. “Your accent softens your words, but the intent is still there.”

Pastor Steven coughed and disappeared up the ladder.

“I’m a stickler for my schedule, to be sure. And I like things done right the first time, but doesn’t everyone? And I’m not terribly good at taking people’s criticisms. It does my head in to know I haven’t met their expectations. But that doesn’t make me bossy, does it?”

“It makes you Becky O’Donaghue,” Laura said as she placed another set of bolts beside the ladder. “And the best florist in the world.”

Becky had a feeling her part-time assistant was trying to make her feel better, but she’d take the compliment as it was intended.

By the time they’d gathered three ranch hands to help them hoist the chandeliers into place, Becky was glad they’d added another special element to the barn.

“I’m turning on all the light switches,” Laura yelled from the main doors.

Becky looked up at the rafters. “Let’s see the magic,” she whispered.

Suddenly, every minute they’d spent worrying about the decorations was worth it. This was the dream Ashley had described on her first visit to Happy Petals. The glamor and gloss, the sense of something special happening between two people who loved each other.

The chandeliers and fairy lights sparkled from beneath the wooden ceiling, casting a soft glow over the flowers, the lace-covered tables, and the pretty decorations. It was a glorious sight to behold and one she was immensely proud of.

“It looks incredible,” Laura said quietly from beside her.

“That it does.” With one last look at the chandeliers, and a word of thanks to Pastor Steven, she ticked off the last task on her checklist.

Against all odds, the barn was ready to host Ashley and Matthew’s reception. Now all she had to do was get ready for the wedding.

CHAPTER 16



Sean stood in his living room watching the chaos around him. Nathan and Liam were taking everything in their stride, but Matthew was incredibly nervous. It wasn't surprising considering what had happened this morning.

When Matthew told Ashley about the surprise wedding, her mouth had dropped open and she hadn't said a word. Once the shock of the unexpected announcement had worn off, the breakfast they'd planned had turned into a stream of questions Matthew didn't want to answer.

After Ashley's bridesmaids arrived, the enormity of what was happening galvanized them into action.

When Sean and Matthew left the bridal party, they were sitting around the kitchen table, eating the pastries Matthew had bought from the bakery, and reading the schedule for the day.

Sean just hoped Ashley turned up for the wedding.

Reaching into a box, he handed Matthew a bow tie in the same deep gold color of their vests. "Don't ask me how to tie it. I had to watch a YouTube video to do mine."

Nathan sighed. “Matthew should be okay. I spent hours teaching him how to wear a tie.”

“That was years ago,” Matthew mumbled as he attempted to recreate Sean’s bow.

Liam cleared his throat. “If you want a demo, I can teach you.” He waved his hand in front of his perfectly symmetrical bow tie.

Nathan’s eyebrows rose. “Don’t tell me you wear them to work.”

“Not to work, but I like to wear one when I’m going to the opera.”

Sean smiled at the surprise on his brothers’ faces. No one knew Liam liked opera, let alone enough to sit through a full production. “It’s time you came back to Montana. We don’t recognize the cultured, new-age hippy you’re turning into.”

“His fascination with opera could be because he’s getting old.” A cushion struck Matthew in the chest. “Hey. I’m only stating the obvious.”

“The obvious isn’t appreciated. I’m only three years older than you are.”

Sally hurried into the room. She took one look at Matthew’s feeble attempts to create a bow tie and sighed. “You’d better hurry. Molly said Mom and Dad are on their way to the church. Most of the guests have arrived, too. They still think they’re there for an engagement party.”

Sean checked his watch. “They aren’t supposed to be there for another half hour.”

“You know our relatives. They love a party, especially when it’s in Montana.”

Nathan pulled on his shoes. “We need to leave. Even if we hurry, it’s a fifteen-minute ride into town from here.”

“I’ll call Becky,” Sean said as he took out his phone. “In case any guests arrived early, Pastor Steven organized light refreshments for everyone. All they need to do is go down to the church’s cafeteria.”

Nathan grabbed the keys to his truck. “Good idea.”

Liam turned Matthew around and created a bow tie at record-breaking speed. “There. At least you’ll look presentable for your bride.”

Matthew looked more nervous than he’d ever been. “What if Ashley has changed her mind? She couldn’t speak when I told her we were getting married today.”

“Stop worrying. She won’t change her mind.” Nathan placed his hand on Matthew’s arm. “You love her *and* you bought her the perfect dress. What more could she want?”

Sally groaned. “I can’t believe you said that. Ashley has a choice and, if she chooses not to—”

“Time to get in the car, short-stuff.” Sean threw her over his shoulder and hurried toward the front door.

“Let me go you big oaf!”

“I will when you stop talking. Have you put on weight?” That earned him an elbow in his ribs.

“Oops, sorry. My arm must have slipped.”

Sean could put up with his annoying little sister as long as she didn’t upset Matthew. “Be careful what you say,” he whispered. “Matthew still has to tell everyone they’re here for a wedding.”

Sally stopped wiggling. “You can put me down now.” When her four-inch heels were squarely on the floor, she sighed. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said what I did to Matthew, but you’re still a big oaf.”

Sean grinned. “But I’m *your* oaf.”

“That’s true. Every girl needs a brother who acts like an idiot every now and then.”

Nathan strode past them. “I’ll start my truck. Sally, you take Sean with you.”

Sally grinned. “Yes, sir!”

Liam came out of the house with Matthew and headed straight to Nathan’s truck.

Sean sighed. The schedule might have been brought forward by twenty minutes, but at least they were on their way into town.



BECKY CHECKED HER WATCH, then looked down the street for Nathan and Sally’s trucks.

“They’ll be here soon,” Molly assured her.

“I texted Sean a few minutes ago. They’re driving down Main Street.”

“’Tis just as well Pastor Steven asked the hospitality class to provide light refreshments. He must have known everyone would arrive a few minutes early.”

Becky smiled at her sister. “Thanks for moving everyone into the cafeteria.”

“They were a little perplexed as to why they weren’t going into the room where the engagement party is being held, but the sight of the coffee and cakes distracted them.”

Becky took two steps farther into the blazing sun and looked down the street. “I can see their trucks.”

“Hallelujah,” Molly mumbled. “I’ll get my camera ready and meet you inside. Was Matthew happy to make the announcement in the cafeteria?”

“He thought it was better than moving everyone back into the foyer.”

“Especially with the number of guests who are here. I’ll see you soon.” Molly looked down the street, then hurried into the church.

When Matthew stepped out of his brother’s truck, he looked extremely pale.

“Come inside out of this heat,” Becky told him. “You look very handsome in your suit.”

“Thanks. I think.”

Becky cast a quick look around the foyer and waved to Pastor Steven. Somehow, he’d managed to stop the wedding guests from leaving the cafeteria. “Would you like a sip of orange juice or water?” she asked Matthew.

Her heart beat faster when Sean kissed her lightly on her cheek. He was as handsome a man as she’d ever seen in his charcoal gray suit and gold bow tie.

Hurrying across to the jug of juice, Sean poured some into a glass and handed it to Matthew. “Drink.”

Obediently, he did as he was told. “I’ll be okay.”

“Of course, you will,” Sally said from beside him. “You can do this.”

Matthew ran his hand around the collar of his shirt. “Is it hot in here or is it just me?”

“It’s nerves,” Liam told him. He glanced at his watch, then looked at his brother.

Matthew took a deep breath. “Sally’s right. I can do this. Is everyone ready?”

Liam, Sean, and Nathan nodded.

“I’ll be waiting beside Mom and Dad,” Sally said as she gave Matthew a hug. “Good luck.”

Becky was proud of Matthew and his siblings. They shared a love for each other that was strong and true. They’d all helped to make this day special, and it showed in the way everything had come together.

Now, after six weeks of planning, all they had to do was support their brother as he began a new journey that would change his life forever.



SEAN STAYED CLOSE TO MATTHEW. His twin might be an extrovert who was always getting into trouble, but he hated giving speeches. When he was younger, he’d break out in hives if he even thought about talking in front of a crowd of people. Hopefully, that wouldn’t happen today.

As soon as the cafeteria doors opened, a hush fell across the room. Sean didn’t know whether it was because all four brothers had arrived together, wearing their dark suits and

shiny shoes, or because they were so serious. It was probably a combination of both.

As soon as the initial shock subsided, most of the guests seemed to realize what was happening. Their surprised expressions turned to smiles, and there were even a few sighs.

Sean found his parents in the sea of faces. He hoped they were taking today's turn of events in their stride.

His dad's wink made him feel a hundred times better. His mom had her hand over her mouth and was trying to hold back her tears. He smiled when he saw the new light purple dress she was wearing. She looked beautiful, even if she was about to burst into tears.

He glanced at Matthew. He didn't look as though he was about to faint, so that was a good start.

Not far from where their parents were standing was a raised platform. Leading Matthew there was the best he could do to make his brother more comfortable.

Liam and Nathan joined them. As they stood beside each other, Sean understood just how hard this must be for Matthew. Even though his brother knew most of the guests, the number of people looking at him must be intimidating.

"You'll be fine," he whispered. "Look at Mom and Dad if it makes it easier."

Matthew had practiced his speech at least a dozen times in front of Sean, but this was different.

Taking another deep breath, Matthew opened the sheet of paper he'd brought with him and cleared his throat. "Thank you for coming here to celebrate what you thought was an engagement party. As you've probably guessed by now, it's not an engagement party, but a wedding we'll be celebrating."

Matthew glanced nervously at everyone before dropping his head back to the sheet of paper. If he'd kept his head raised a little longer, he would have seen the empathy in the faces around them. Everyone could see how difficult this was for him. They were right here, supporting him with each word he spoke.

"You're doing great," Sean whispered.

The anxious glance he sent him made Sean move a little closer to his brother.

"Six weeks ago, I asked my twin brother, Sean, if he would organize a surprise wedding for Ashley. Until this morning, she didn't know what was happening. I'm pleased to tell you she still agreed to marry me."

Everyone in the room laughed.

"I love Ashley more than words could ever describe and —" Matthew's voice trembled and tears filled his eyes. "I can't imagine a more beautiful way to celebrate all she means to me than to give her the gift of a wedding. I hope she likes it."

Sean looked at Matthew and Ashley's family and friends. More than one person had tissues in their hand, wiping their eyes. Their dad had wrapped his arm around their mom's waist, holding her close as Matthew spoke to the people around them.

"And, for everyone here, thank you for who you are. For being part of our lives and making us into the people we are today. I'm looking forward to starting an amazing life with Ashley and sharing many more wonderful days with her. If you're wondering what comes next, Sean will tell you what the plan is for the rest of the day."

Sean stepped forward, giving Matthew a chance to relax after his nerve-wracking speech. As he told everyone about the wedding and the arrangements they'd made to get everyone to Sally and Todd's ranch, Nathan and Liam moved closer to Matthew.

Through thick and thin, wedding speeches and hives, they would always be there for each other. And, as he looked at Becky's gentle smile, he knew she would always be there for him, too.

CHAPTER 17



Twenty minutes later, Becky sat at the back of the church with Mary. “Do you like the flower arrangements Aunt Molly and I made?”

“They’re pretty. Why is Sean standing at the front of the church?”

“He’s looking after Matthew with Liam and Nathan.”

Mary frowned. “Is Matthew sick?”

“No, but he’s nervous.” Becky had never seen Sean’s twin so stressed. Every few seconds he fidgeted with his collar, and then he’d run his hands down his jacket. The poor man looked as though he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

Sean’s emerald green eyes caught hers. When he smiled, the butterflies dancing inside her tummy leaped to attention. Unlike Matthew, he seemed completely comfortable in the three-piece suit they’d chosen to wear. He stood tall and proud, and ready to support his twin as he married the woman of his dreams.

She sighed as Liam said something to Sean. Each of the Gray brothers was tall and handsome. Nathan was the only one who had blond hair and blue eyes. His siblings took after their

mom, with dark hair and stunning green eyes. If Sean ever had children, it would be interesting to see what they looked like.

“Who are you smiling at?” Mary asked.

A blush hit Becky’s cheeks. That would teach her for daydreaming. “I’m smiling at Sean. Doesn’t he look like the handsomest man in all of Montana?”

Mary tilted her head to the side. “He looks like Sean. Is Amy feeding Henrietta and the other animals tonight?”

Becky shook her head. “Amy’s sitting behind us with Catherine and Toby. They’ve asked a neighbor to feed the animals.”

“I hope they eat their food.” Mary turned around and waved to Catherine. “Toby’s mom has a baby in her tummy.”

“I know. It’s very exciting.” Becky checked her watch. Ashley should be walking down the aisle soon.

“Toby said you could have a baby, too. Just like his mom.”

Another blush heated Becky’s cheeks. It had never occurred to her Mary would be curious about Amy’s pregnancy or that she’d want Becky to have a baby, too. “Having a baby is a big decision. It’s not one I’m ready to make yet.”

“What about a kitten?” Mary said hopefully. “One of Toby and Catherine’s cats is having babies. We could have one of those.”

“’Tis better than a baby,” she whispered in Mary’s ear.

Her little mouth dropped open. “We can have a kitten?”

A lady beside them smiled.

Becky nodded. “As long as you promise to give it its food and look after it.”

Mary kneeled on the seat and threw her arms around Becky’s shoulders. “I can’t wait.” A few seconds later, her arms fell away and she sunk into her chair like a deflated balloon.

“What’s wrong?”

“If the kitten stays with us, it will miss its mommy and daddy.”

Becky wrapped her arm around Mary. Her gran would say this was a time when a heart could have a learning experience or become even more damaged. “We could take the kitten to visit its parents at Catherine and Toby’s ranch.”

“We could?”

“Do you think the kitten would like that?”

Mary’s nod was firm and sure. “It would like it very much.”

The music swelled and Becky looked over her shoulder. The first bridesmaid stood in a halo of light, waiting to walk down the aisle. “Ashley’s coming,” she whispered.

With Mary’s hand firmly in hers, Becky thought about Sean, about babies, and a little kitten who would go home to spend time with its parents. And a little girl who wished she could do the same.



LATER THAT NIGHT, Sean turned Becky in a slow circle on the dance floor. “I think we can say the wedding was a complete

success.”

“I think you’d be right,” Becky replied dreamily. “Where did a rancher from Montana learn to waltz like Fred Astaire?”

“You can thank my mom for that. She made us practice each week until we had the steps sorted.”

“She sounds like a woman after my own heart.”

“Or a desperate mom trying to instill a little culture in her hyperactive children.”

Becky lifted her head off his shoulder and looked around the room.

“If you’re looking for Mary, she’s still with Catherine and Toby.” He nodded toward a table on the far side of the barn. “She’s happy.”

“Did she tell you she’s getting a kitten?”

Sean smiled. “She did. I heard about the baby option, too.”

Becky stumbled. “’Tis a wicked man who would bring that up when we’re dancing.”

“From my perspective, it’s perfect. It’s hard for either of us to evade tough questions when we’re standing so close to each other.”

“I told Mary having a baby is a big decision.”

“It is.”

“And one I’m not ready to make.”

Sean nodded. “That’s understandable.”

Becky frowned. “I was expecting a different response.”

“You thought I’d try to convince you to have ten children, a guinea pig, and three llamas?”

“You forgot about the kitten.”

“I didn’t want to overwhelm you with the pitter-patter of too many feet.”

Becky sighed. “You could never overwhelm me.”

That sounded promising. Because, despite what she thought, he did have an ulterior motive when he’d asked her to dance. “Are you able to come to the family barbecue tomorrow?”

“I didn’t know I was invited.”

“I thought you knew about it?”

Becky lifted her hand to his jaw and ran her fingertips along his skin. “I do, but it’s nice to be asked if I want to go. Have I told you how nice you smell?”

Sean laughed. “I’ll tell Matthew. I borrowed his aftershave.”

“He has good taste.”

“Ashley chose it for him.” The tight feeling in his chest became worse. Breathing deeply, he pushed his sense of loss aside. Matthew would eventually return to the ranch. He’d live beside Sean’s new home, for goodness’ sake. You couldn’t get much better than that.

“I’m pleased to see you’re trying to see the bright side in all of this.”

“I have to keep reminding myself I’ve gained a sister-in-law, not lost my twin.”

The song they were dancing to came to an end and Becky sighed. “That’s the way of the world. Nothing is ever lost, just different.”

A new song started and Sean was grateful it was a slow ballad. “How has Mary been?”

“Much better. She’s learning how to live without Jamie and Sophia, but it will take time.”

“What about her grandmother? Has she called off her legal team?”

“No.” Becky’s whole body tensed. “I don’t expect anything less than a full investigation into my suitability as Mary’s guardian.”

“They won’t find anything.”

“’Tis not the outcome I fear, but the intrusion. Knowing a stranger will be looking for anything that makes me a bad person is unsettling.”

Pulling her close, Sean kissed the top of her head. “It will be okay. When it’s all finished, you won’t have to worry about Jamie’s mom again.”

“I hope so.”

“I know so,” he whispered in her ear. “I know something else, too.”

Becky relaxed. “You’ve had two thoughts on this fine night. It must be a world record.”

When he whispered his second thought in her ear, Becky’s blush made his toes curl.

He’d fallen in love with a woman who made each day more special than the last. And he couldn’t be any happier.



BECKY SAT at a table on the far side of the barn with Mary on her lap. “Are you enjoying yourself?” she asked the sleepy six-year-old.

“It’s fun. I liked the birdie dance.”

“It was a sight to behold,” Becky said with a smile. Everyone in the barn had flapped their arms and waved their hands as they’d boogied to the music. Even Liam, who was the most reserved of Sean’s brothers, seemed to enjoy himself.

Amy, Sean’s sister-in-law, made her way toward them. “You’ve chosen the best table in the barn. It’s far enough from the music that you can have a conversation and close to the portable bathrooms.”

“Mary’s a little sleepy, so we thought this would be a nice place to rest. How are you feeling?”

“Exhausted, but it’s been a busy day.” Amy rubbed her tummy. “I’ve been more tired with this baby than I was with Toby.”

“This might help.” Nathan joined them and handed his wife a slice of wedding cake. “Mom said it’s the best cake she’s tasted in a long time.”

Amy bit into the light fruit cake and sighed. “It’s delicious. Are Toby and Catherine still with your dad?”

Nathan nodded and pointed to the dance floor. “They haven’t stopped dancing since we finished dessert.” His gaze drifted around the barn. “I can’t believe everything looks so good. You and Sean did a great job, Becky.”

“It was a team effort. Claire Williams and her event staging company provided a lot of the decorations, Pastor Steven coordinated a team of volunteers, and Todd’s ranch hands helped with the lighting.”

“The flowers are gorgeous,” Amy said softly. “What are you doing with them after today?”

“Matthew and Ashley spoke to Tess. The Bridesmaids’ Club has provided gowns for two weddings tomorrow. The families can’t afford to buy any flowers apart from the brides’ bouquets, so we called them. They said they’d love to have whatever we can give them.”

Nathan’s eyebrows rose. “It will be a big job getting them to the other couples.”

“It’s not too bad, although the summer heat has made it more complicated. After everyone’s gone home, Sean will take most of the vases of flowers back to the refrigerators in my store. Tomorrow morning, the families who want the flowers will meet me here. They’ll load the remaining arrangements into their trucks and collect the others from Happy Petals.”

“Do you want me to help you tomorrow? I’m not far away.”

Becky smiled. “We’re okay for tomorrow, but if you could help Sean tonight, I’d be grateful. Mary and I won’t be staying the whole night and I feel guilty asking him to look after the flowers on his own.”

“Consider it done. What about the tables and chairs?”

“The families who are taking the flowers will return them to the church. It’s a lovely thing that we’re helping each other.”

Mary stirred in her arms. She must have seen Matthew and Ashley weaving between the tables, talking to their guests.

“Can I see Ashley’s dress?” Mary asked softly.

“Of course, you can.”

Mary slid off Becky's lap and smiled when Ashley stopped beside her.

"Are you enjoying yourself, Mary?"

With a quick nod, she moved closer to Ashley. "You look pretty."

"Thank you. I like your dress, too. Do you want to know what I'm doing next?"

Mary nodded. Her big, brown eyes grew rounder as Ashley knelt on the floor beside her.

"I'm going to walk around the barn and offer everyone a slice of wedding cake. Would you like to help me?"

Suddenly, the sleepy six-year-old from a few minutes ago was alert and excited. "Can I help Ashley?" she asked Becky.

"'Tis more than okay. Just come back here after you've finished."

"Don't worry," Ashley assured her. "I'll make sure she's all right." And with Mary clutching her hand, they made their way through the crowded dance floor.

"She's a wonderful little girl," Amy said. "You must be very proud of her."

"She's a delight to be around. I can't imagine my life—" Becky's cell phone rang. "I'm sorry. I thought I'd turned off my phone."

"You can answer it if you like. It doesn't matter."

She glanced at the screen to see who was calling and frowned. "'Tis Mary's grandmother."

Amy didn't say anything. She knew about Edith's efforts to take Mary away and how Becky felt about her.

“I’ll leave it to go to voicemail,” Becky said quietly.

“It will be okay. Mary’s grandma can’t do anything until the courts decide what’s the best thing for Mary. From what you’ve said, Edith will never be awarded guardianship of her granddaughter.”

“I’m grateful for your support, but I’m still worried.”

“That’s understandable. Mary’s lucky she has you.”

Becky glanced down at the phone. She wouldn’t be able to enjoy the rest of the night if she didn’t listen to the message. “Would you mind if I checked my phone?”

“Of course, I don’t mind. Find somewhere a little quieter,” Amy suggested. “You won’t hear anything over the song they’ve started to play. I’ll look after Mary if she arrives back before you do.”

“Thank you.” With her heart pounding, Becky walked toward the entrance to the barn. After the last conversation she’d had with Edith, she wasn’t looking forward to hearing what she had to say.

CHAPTER 18



Becky found a wooden seat not far from the barn. She wasn't the only person enjoying the cool evening air. A group of people on the other side of the yard had pulled some tables and chairs together and were enjoying a quiet drink away from the music.

Before she listened to Edith's message, she took a moment to close her eyes and center herself. The smell of pine and spruce trees reminded her of Christmas. The music reminded her of the parties Molly had dragged her to when she was living in Ireland. And the gentle murmur of voices reminded her of the evenings spent with Jamie and Sophia before they died.

She'd had so many grand conversations with them inside their living room. They'd talked about politics, art, and education, and compared housing prices in each of the countries they called home.

Becky sighed. Although she'd lived in Montana for years, her home would always be in Ireland. Even now, after nine years of building the life she'd dreamed about, she felt the pull of the Emerald Isle; of a life as familiar to her as the freckles on her face.

Slowly, she opened her eyes and held onto the sense of peace for dear life.

“Is everything all right?”

She jumped. Her phone flew through the air, landing with a thud on the gravel.

“I’ll get it.” Sean picked it up and wiped the screen. “It looks okay.”

With an unsteady hand, she took the phone from him. “You gave me a fright. I thought you would be dancing the night away with your mom.”

“She’s helping to cut the cake so Ashley can offer it to the guests. Amy said Mary’s grandmother called?”

Becky nodded. “I have no idea what she wants. The last time she was here, I told her to speak to my lawyer and not me.”

Sean sat beside her. “It makes sense she wouldn’t listen.”

“I suppose it does.” Becky looked down at the phone. “I’m not sure I want to know what she said.”

Sean wrapped his arm around her. “You don’t have to listen to it.”

Taking a deep breath, she looked into his eyes. “Regardless of the message, I’m worried about Edith. Jamie said his mom’s mood swings could be unpredictable, but I never expected it to be so bad. She needs help.”

“Does she have any other family?”

“Jamie once told me she had a sister, but I don’t know what’s happened to her.”

“Talk to your lawyer. If he thinks it’s a good idea to find another family member to reach out to, do that. Otherwise, there isn’t a lot you can do.”

“Apart from listen to the message.” Becky still wasn’t sure this was a good idea, but she went into her voicemail and replayed the call.

After the first few words, she knew something was desperately wrong. Edith’s message was garbled and incoherent. In between a stream of slurred words, she talked about Jamie and how she felt betrayed when he married Sophia. Becky had no idea why she was telling her any of this.

More slurred words gave way to tears and bouts of confusion. By the end of the message, Becky was even more worried about her.

“She needs help, Sean. Would you like to listen to the message?”

He nodded and Becky handed him the phone.

During the recording, he sat as still as a stone. It wasn’t until the end, when Edith’s tears turned to anger, that he looked truly concerned. “In different circumstances, I’d suggest calling Edith. But, considering what she’s doing, I’d definitely call Adam. He can contact her lawyers. There might be something they can do.”

“It’s after nine o’clock.”

“He won’t mind.”

Becky dialed his number and waited for him to answer.

Edith was still struggling with the loss of her son and, possibly, other things as well. Hopefully, she wouldn’t do anything foolish before someone could help her.



SEAN STAYED at Sally and Todd’s barn long after their guests had gone home. With help from his brothers, they stacked the tables and chairs on one side of the barn. The tablecloths, lanterns, and other decorations were packed into boxes, and the flowers he was taking into Happy Petals were in a trailer.

The only things left to remove were the fairy lights and garlands strung around the rafters—and the three chandeliers Becky loved.

“You did an amazing job to pull everything together,” Nathan told him as they carried another table toward the wall.

“Becky was incredible. Her color-coded spreadsheet was as impressive as the scrapbook.”

“It sounds like you could be a perfect match.”

“I hope so.” Sean was glad the only response from his brother was a raised eyebrow. Mary’s grandmother’s message had rattled him more than Becky realized. Edith had sounded as though she was either drunk or on drugs. Either way, he was worried about what she’d do next.

“Did Becky get home okay?”

Sean picked up a basket of peony roses and left them beside the barn door. “She did. Mary slept the whole way.”

“That’s good. It’s been a long day for them.”

Sean could only nod. It had been a long day for everyone and it wasn’t over yet.

“Come and have a hot drink. Liam might be hopeless on the ranch, but he knows how to make good coffee.”

“I can’t believe he brought a coffee machine with him.”

Nathan laughed. “You’re forgetting the ground coffee beans, raw sugar, milk, and cookies.”

Together, they walked across to the only table still standing. Liam had always had a gift for making something out of nothing. Earlier in the night, he’d created a menu on the back of a cardboard box and placed a selection of cookies at the end of the table. After borrowing one of the caterer’s aprons, he’d set himself up as a post-dessert barista.

Word soon spread of his prowess with the coffee machine and their families and friends, eager to test his capabilities, had thrown all kinds of orders his way.

The menu had long disappeared, but the coffee machine was still plugged in and ready to go.

Liam walked out of the tack room holding a box. “If you want a dairy or soy coffee, you’re out of luck. I only have almond milk.”

“Make it two—three if you want to join us.”

Leaving the box on the table, Liam picked up a container of ground coffee beans. “You’re lucky I’m so obliging. I just spent twenty minutes cleaning the machine.”

Sean watched his brother’s hands move with practiced ease over the machine. “Why did you decide to make everyone coffee?”

“The coffee machine is my wedding gift to Ashley and Matthew. When I was talking to Matthew yesterday, he told me he doesn’t know how to use one. While I’m here, I thought I’d give them an in-person demo.”

“Did they work out how to use it?”

“Ashley was happy to watch, but Matthew had a go. He’s not too bad, either. If he didn’t have to leave with Ashley, we could have perfected his technique.”

Nathan grinned. “It’s just as well he didn’t stay. It doesn’t pay to annoy the bride on her wedding night.”

“And that’s why you’re married and Sean and I are still single.” With a final flourish, Liam poured hot milk into the cup, leaving a heart shape in the froth. “Voila! One down, two to go.”

Sean sipped the drink. “Not bad for an amateur.”

“I’ll have you know I spent six weeks training as a barista to make coffee this good.”

“You’re a lawyer. Why on earth—” Sean’s pager beeped. He checked the message, then handed Nathan his coffee. “I have to go. The search and rescue team has been called out to a missing person. I’ll be back at seven tomorrow morning.”

“What about the flowers?” Nathan asked.

Sean grabbed the keys to Happy Petals out of his pocket and gave them to his brother. “Can you take the flowers to the shop? The refrigerator is in the workroom and the alarm isn’t on.”

“No problem. Be careful on the road.”

Sean waved and sprinted toward his truck. If he’d had his way, he would have gone home with Becky and Mary, and slept on their sofa. It was hard enough being a single mom without having a woman with addiction issues harassing her.

No matter which way he looked at it, Edith was trouble and Becky was standing in the way of what she wanted.

CHAPTER 19



The following morning, Becky stood with her hands on her hips, surveying the barn's interior. She'd thought they'd have to dismantle the tables and remove the decorations, but a group of fairy godmothers had been here before she arrived.

Behind her, the families of the two bridal parties were packing the last of the flowers into their trucks. They'd been so thankful for Ashley and Matthew's generosity, it brought tears to Becky's eyes.

"It looks as though you could do with a snack."

She turned and smiled at Sean. "What are you doing here? I thought you'd still be at home."

"I planned on being here at seven, but I had a callout last night. Nathan took the flower arrangements you wanted me to move back to Happy Petals."

"That was kind of him. What time did you get to sleep?"

"A little after two. We found the missing teenager, so it was worth it."

"That's grand. Mary slept through the night, so I'll count that as a win, too."

Sean looked around the barn. "Where's Mary?"

“Molly’s looking after her. I didn’t bring her with me because I thought there’d be a lot more work to do than there was. The volunteers Pastor Steven organized only took an hour and a half to take down the garlands and lights.”

“Did they remember to put Claire’s fairy lights and other decorations in a separate area?”

“I hope so. I thought I’d visit the church before I go home to make sure they’re where Claire expects to find them.” She sniffed the air and sighed. “What did you bring with you?”

“Huckleberry muffins drizzled with milk chocolate. Emily gave them to us yesterday morning, but we didn’t eat them. I thought you might like to share some with me.”

“That sounds wonderful.” She pointed to an old wooden seat leaning against the barn wall. “Let’s sit there. Did you have anything to do with the barn being so tidy?”

“I did, but it was a team effort. The last people to leave helped us stack the chairs and move the tables. Liam, Nathan, and I did the rest.”

Becky took the muffin Sean held toward her. “Thanks. It made a huge difference having everything ready to go.”

“We were hoping it would. Have you heard from Adam?”

“He called just before I went to bed. It sounds as though Edith’s sister died a couple of years ago. That could have made her issues worse. Adam was hoping her legal team would check on her or at least send the police.”

“It can’t be easy having an addiction issue, but she shouldn’t harass you.”

Becky swallowed the first delicious bite of the muffin. “I know this sounds daft, but seeing Edith like that makes it

easier to understand her. She's a sick woman."

"A dangerous woman."

"That, too. I sent Adam a copy of Edith's voicemail message. He's confident it will stop the guardianship issue going before a judge."

"How does that make you feel?"

Becky sighed. "I should be relieved, but I won't believe it until it happens. What's to stop another relative coming out of the woodwork and doing the same thing?"

Sean held her hand. "I don't know, but you're the person Jamie and Sophia chose to look after Mary. They trusted you and no one else. That has to count for something."

"It counts for a lot." Becky looked over Sean's shoulder and smiled. The father of one of the brides was walking toward them.

"We're off now," he announced. "We'll leave the tables and chairs at the church before going to Happy Petals. Thanks again for flowers."

"You're welcome. I'll text Laura and she'll meet you at the store. I hope both families have lovely weddings."

"Thank you. If you ever need anything, just ask."

"I will."

The families sent Becky and Sean a friendly wave before leaving the barn.

When the sound of their engines receded into the distance, Becky leaned against the wall. "Less than twelve hours ago, the barn looked like a French castle. Now it looks like an ordinary barn."

Sean grinned. “We could always hold themed dances out here and dazzle everyone with our decorating technique.”

“I’m not sure Todd would survive having random strangers wandering around his ranch.”

“Or Sally. The noise would keep her awake and she’d be grumpy.”

Becky looked at where the chandeliers had hung. She could still see their gorgeous brilliance filling the barn with light. “Would you help someone else plan another wedding with a six-week timeframe?”

“If *you* were helping me, I would. But I wouldn’t do it with anyone else.”

Becky kissed his cheek. “’Tis a charming thing to say.”

“It’s true. We’re a good team.”

“A good team who like muffins drizzled in chocolate.”

“And picnics in the sunshine.”

Becky frowned. “We haven’t gone on any picnics.”

“But we could. If Mary’s staying with Molly, we could pick up a picnic lunch and have it with her beside Emerald Lake.”

“Molly came into town to look after Mary, so we don’t need to go near the lake. If you’d be willing to have a picnic under an old oak tree, we could go to the park? ‘Tis not far from my home.”

Sean’s smile made Becky pleased he was here. “It’s a date. I’ll stop by the supermarket on my way into town.”

“And I’ll go to the church before I meet you at home. Claire will be disappointed if the things she let us borrow are

not where they should be.”

Becky’s cell phone rang. “’Tis Molly. She probably wants me to pick up some decorations for the cookies she’s baking.” Holding the phone to her ear, she smiled. “Would it be pink candy stars or yellow sprinkles you’d be after?”

“Are you still at Todd’s ranch?”

Her eyes widened at the panic in Molly’s voice. “I am. What’s wrong?”

“Mary’s gone and I don’t know where she is.”

Becky’s heart pounded against her chest. “What do you mean, gone?”

“I don’t know where she is. I ran to the houses close to your cottage and asked if anyone had seen her. I even searched the park. Is there anywhere else she could have gone?”

“She never leaves home without me. Have you called the police?”

Sean grabbed Becky’s hand and strode toward the barn doors.

“They’re sending some officers around now.”

“Tell them about Edith. There’s a photo of her beside Mary’s bed. We’ll be back soon.”

As soon as she ended the call, they ran toward their trucks.

“We can take mine,” Sean said as he opened the passenger door. “How long has Mary been missing?”

“I don’t know. Molly’s called the police and they’re on their way.” Becky wiped her eyes, trying to see through the fog of her tears. “I’ll call Adam. He might have more

information about Edith. What will we do if she's kidnapped her?"

Sean's knuckles turned white around the steering wheel. "Pray she doesn't get far."

And, in a shower of gravel, they sped away from the barn.



THE NEXT THREE hours were some of the worst in Becky's life. The police officers were waiting at her house when she arrived home. After gathering the information they needed, an AMBER Alert was sent to other law enforcement organizations and the media. Text messages, electronic highway signs, and Internet sites all broadcasted information about Mary.

No one could find Edith or any sign of the vehicle she had rented. Her legal team was working with the Milwaukee Police Department, trying to find anything that might tell them where she was.

While the local police went door-to-door looking for any security videos of vehicle movement along the street, Becky called the parents of Mary's friends. While she was doing that, Sean joined the search and rescue team to look for Mary.

Molly placed a cup of tea in front of her. "Have you heard anything?"

"Nothing." Becky dropped her head into her hands. "Someone must have seen Mary leave. If she was on foot, she couldn't have gone far."

"I'm so sorry." Molly's face crumpled and tears streamed down her face. "I shouldn't have left her here. I should have

taken her with me.”

Becky wrapped her sister in a fierce hug. “’Tis okay. You didn’t know this would happen.”

“I should have been more careful.”

Molly was baking cookies with Mary when she went missing. With no lemon zest to add to the frosting, Molly did what Becky always did. She went next door and asked their neighbor if she could take a lemon from his tree. When Molly left the house, Mary was sitting at the kitchen counter, cutting out cookie dough shapes. In the few minutes it took to walk back, Mary was gone.

Taking a deep breath, Becky wiped the tears off her face. “Mary is strong and resourceful. Our little girl will ask someone for help if she is lost. If Edith has her...” Becky tried not to think the worst. “If Edith has her, she will be safe.”

Molly held Becky’s hand. The fear in her eyes matched how she was feeling. “What if Edith didn’t take her? She could be halfway to Idaho or Wyoming by now. Or she could —”

“Don’t think such things. We have to have faith,” Becky told her sister. “Mary will be all right, we just need to find her.”

A police officer walked into the living room and Becky searched his face. The slight shake of his head added to the weight in her heart. The last thing she wanted to do was sit here waiting for news of their little girl. But, with half of Bozeman searching every property and creek in the area, the police needed her here in case they had any questions or new leads.

Closing her eyes, Becky prayed with all her might Mary was safe. Because Molly was right. If Edith didn't have her, who did?



AFTER HE MADE sure Molly would stay with Becky, Sean joined his team. In a coordinated pattern, they were searching the drains and waterways close to Becky's house. So far, they'd found nothing.

When Mary went missing, she was wearing a pink T-shirt, a purple skirt, and white sneakers. If there was something positive to hold onto it was that the day was warm. It gave them time to find her before the cool night air added another layer of danger to a heartbreaking situation.

"How are you doing?" Jacob, Molly's husband, asked.

"Better than Becky and Molly will be. Has anyone seen any sign of Mary?"

Jacob shook his head. "Grant called a few minutes ago. His team has searched Bogert Park and the Bozeman Creek. There was nothing there."

Sean took a deep breath and studied the people spread across the land. Members of their team and other volunteers were walking carefully through the tall grass, searching for any clues to Mary's disappearance. Other people were searching in grids spanning the entire radius of where she could have gone, but no one had found anything. Even if Mary was running, she couldn't have gone farther than they were looking.

"Has anyone found Mary's grandmother?" Sean asked.

“Not that I’ve heard.”

“If Edith flew here, she’d need some way of getting around. Hopefully, the police have been able to locate the rental vehicle—” Sean’s two-way radio crackled at his waist. A rented SUV had been involved in a one-vehicle accident on the I-90 two miles east of Logan. The police and the Manhattan Fire Department were on their way to the scene.

When the dispatcher said there was an elderly female driver and a young passenger in the vehicle, Sean and Jacob exchanged glances and sprinted toward the parking lot.

Jake Stanley was standing beside the deputy who was coordinating this area of the search. “Take my vehicle. The passenger is a little girl.”

While they followed Jake to his vehicle, Sean let the command center know where they were going.

“It will take about fifteen minutes to get there,” Jacob said. “Do you want to tell Becky?”

Sean shook his head. The last thing she needed was false hope. “The police will tell her if they think it’s Edith and Mary.”

And as he threw on his seatbelt, he prayed to God it was.

CHAPTER 20



Becky poured hot water into two mugs and lifted the tea bags up and down. It seemed all they'd done was make one hot drink after another. But at least it gave them something to do while they waited for news of Mary.

"It's nearly lunchtime. I'll make you something to eat."

She glanced over her shoulder at Molly. "I couldn't eat a thing. My stomach feels as though it's tied in knots. Did the police officers enjoy the cookies?"

"They did." Molly sat on a kitchen stool. "Has Adam heard anything from the lawyers in Milwaukee?"

"He has. A neighbor of Edith's took her to the airport two days ago. He was using her car while she was gone. He doesn't know what rental company she used when she arrived here."

"Hopefully, the police do by now." Molly tapped her fingers against the counter. "Jacob isn't answering his phone."

"Neither is Sean. They must be busy." Becky's gaze connected with Molly's.

A part of her didn't want to know what they were doing. A few weeks ago, Sean had told her about some of the accidents and missing people incidents they'd attended. As a highly

trained group of volunteers, there hadn't been any callouts they couldn't help with. But what they did could be physically and emotionally draining. Until now, Becky hadn't appreciated just how bad it could get.

A police officer hurried into the kitchen. "They've found Mary. She's fine."

Becky stood utterly still, then burst into tears.

Molly wrapped her arms around her. "'Tis okay. Our little girl is all right."

Wiping her eyes, Becky tried to pull herself together. "Where is she?"

"At Bozeman Deaconess Hospital. She was taken there as a precautionary measure, but she's all right. Sean Gray and Jacob Green are with her."

Becky and Molly looked at each other.

"How could they not tell us?" Becky said.

"Don't worry about that now," Molly said as she took a set of keys off the counter. "We need to see Mary."

"What happened?" Becky asked the police officer.

"Her grandmother hired a vehicle when she arrived in Bozeman and waited until Mary was on her own before kidnapping her. After spending some time in town, they headed west toward Logan. She was driving too fast and the SUV left the road and flipped at least twice before coming to a standstill. It was found by another passing vehicle. Mary was buckled into a car seat with a five-point harness. Without that, she could have been seriously injured."

Molly frowned. "Where's Edith?"

“In the hospital being treated for a head injury.”

Becky grabbed the backpack she'd filled with Mary's favorite toys and storybooks. “Let's go. Our little girl needs us.” All she wanted to do was wrap Mary in a hug and tell her how much she loved her.

As she hurried out of the house, Becky said a prayer of thanks. At least with Sean and Jacob at the hospital, Mary would have familiar faces around her.



WHEN THEY ARRIVED at the hospital, Mary was sitting on a sofa beside Sean, listening to him tell her a story. Jacob was leaning against the windowsill, watching the traffic far below in the parking lot.

All Becky wanted to do was rush across to Mary and give her a huge hug. But the doctor had warned them to take things slowly. The more anxious Becky and Molly were, the more traumatic it would be for Mary.

So, for a moment, Becky stood in the doorway with her heart pounding, watching the sweet scene between the two people she loved beyond measure. Every now and then, Mary pointed to one of the pages and smiled. Sean would look down at her and say something that made both of them grin.

Her eyes filled with tears as she imagined what could have happened.

When Mary saw Becky it was as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred. “Hi, Becky. Sean's reading me a story.”

“It sounds like a great one.”

“It’s about a kitten,” she looked up at Sean with a cheeky smile. “It gets into all kinds of trouble. But it’s a really good kitten,” Mary added quickly. “And her name is Tinkerbelle and she doesn’t need to be looked after.”

“She sounds like a lovely cat.”

Mary nodded. “Did you finish cleaning the barn?”

Becky felt as though she’d dropped into an alternate universe. For the last three-and-a-half hours she’d worried herself silly about Mary. She’d forgotten about the barn, about anything to do with the beautiful wedding they’d organized for Matthew and Ashley.

She stepped closer to the sofa and sat beside her little girl. “The barn is sparkling, but it wasn’t my doing. Sean and his brothers stayed long after we left last night and did most of the work.”

“That’s good. Sean said we can have ice cream on the way home.”

Becky’s eyes connected with Sean’s. “Would it be your sweet tooth that’s inspiring your plans?”

“My sweet tooth and you and Mary,” he replied. “Jacob’s taking Molly to an art gallery to look at a new exhibition.”

Becky smiled at Molly’s soft exclamation of delight.

“Are you meaning the exhibition that will bore you beyond belief?” Molly asked her husband.

“I might have been a little hasty.”

Molly kissed Jacob on the lips. “That’s to thank you for your haste. But, after we leave the hospital, I’d like a word with you about another matter.”

“Is Jacob in trouble?” Mary asked.

Molly walked across the room and kissed Mary’s cheek. “I wouldn’t say trouble, but he does have some explaining to do.” She glanced at Sean before giving Becky a hug. “Take care of Mary. I’ll see you after we’ve spent a good two hours at the gallery.”

Jacob groaned.

“It will not be the end of you,” Molly said joyfully. “Natalie Armstrong has exhibited at galleries around the world. ‘Tis a treat to see her work so close to home.”

“I’ll take Jake’s truck back to him,” Jacob said to Sean. “Are you okay catching a ride with Becky?”

“Of course, he is,” Molly said as she handed Becky the keys to her truck. Then, with her arm linked around her husband’s, she blew Mary a kiss and left the room.

As soon as they were gone, Becky opened her arms and hugged Mary close. “I love you.”

“I love you, too. When can we leave?”

“The doctor told me whenever you like.”

“Yeah! Can Grandma come to the ice cream store, too?”

Becky looked at Sean. Even if she was okay with Mary seeing her, which she wasn’t, Edith was on a separate ward and not allowed visitors. The police hadn’t charged her with anything yet. But, when they did, she wouldn’t see her granddaughter for a long time.

“Your grandma has a sore head,” Sean said softly. “She needs to stay in the hospital for a while longer.”

Mary frowned. “Will she be okay?”

“I think so.”

Becky picked up the backpack she'd left on the floor. “I brought some clean clothes and Mr. Cuddles with me. Do you want to get changed before we leave?”

Reaching for the backpack, Mary took out the honey-colored bear who'd traveled with her from Ireland. “Mr. Cuddles is all I need,” she said as she hugged him close.

Becky kissed the top of her head. “In that case, how about we find Sean's favorite ice cream store?”

With a dimpled grin, Mary jumped to her feet. “The police lady said my car seat stopped me from getting a sore head. Grandma bought it for me from the store.”

“Before you went for a drive with her?” Becky asked.

Mary nodded. “We went to lots of stores until we found the one that was just right. Can I have the same flavor ice cream Sean likes?”

“Chocolate fudge ripple is a great choice,” he said to her.

With Mary nodding enthusiastically, they spoke to one of the nurses and left the hospital.

Becky wasn't sure what the future held, but at least they were safe and together.



TWO DAYS LATER, Sean paced back and forth, worried about the decision Becky had made. “What if this backfires? Adam might be right. Edith's legal team could say you're coercing her into dropping the guardianship case.”

“’Tis no such thing. And they can say what they will. Edith invited me to a meeting.”

“It’s her word against yours.”

Becky frowned. “After her outburst on the telephone and kidnapping her granddaughter, no judge will let her look after a child.”

He stood in front of Becky, hoping she realized the importance of what she was doing. “You’re probably right, but I still don’t think you should be going anywhere near her.”

“Whichever way I turn, someone won’t be happy.” She sent him a scorching look. “I thought you would be glad I’m finding some resolution to this mess.”

“Resolution doesn’t have to involve visiting Edith and listening to her side of what happened.” The first day after Mary returned, Becky was furious at what Edith had done. But, by the next night, something changed and she wasn’t so angry. When Edith asked her to meet her at the hospital, Becky had thought it was a good thing.

The last thing Edith deserved was for anyone to listen to her. She’d taken Mary without Becky’s permission and could have killed her if the accident had been worse.

“You’ll not be changing my mind.”

Sometimes, Becky could be incredibly stubborn. “I don’t want to change your mind. I just want you to think this meeting through properly.”

“And to see your way of thinking?” Her turned-up nose told him exactly what she thought of that idea. “A granny is one of the most important people in a child’s life. Even if she has issues, and we know there are a lot of them, Edith deserves to have her story listened to.”

“You’re biased because of the relationship you had with your gran.”

“What of it? Did you not have a loving relationship with your gran?”

Sean thought of the wonderful times he’d spent with both his grandmas. They always had cookies and cake waiting for him when he visited and never stopped giving him lots of hugs and kisses. “My grandmas were amazing, but they weren’t addicted to drugs and alcohol. Edith’s brain will be a mess after years of substance abuse. She isn’t the type of person you should want Mary to have a relationship with.”

Becky’s eyebrows nearly lifted off her face. “You’d be telling me now who Mary should love?”

“I want to look after you and Mary.”

Becky sighed. “We don’t need looking after. What everyone needs is to be more compassionate and understanding of people who are worse off than them. And it starts inside our hearts for the people who are closest to us. I’m not a silly teenager who doesn’t know the ins and outs of the world. I would never put Mary in harm’s way, but I cannot forbid her to see her grandma. It will only be for a few minutes and only after I’ve spoken to Edith.”

Sean crossed his arms in front of his chest. “Promise me you’ll be careful. I wouldn’t trust one word that comes out of her mouth.”

“I need to see her. If not for Mary, then for Jamie. She meant something to him and, for that, I’ll listen to what she has to say.”

Even though he wanted to stop Becky from seeing Edith, he opened his arms. “I think you’re wrong, but I love you

beyond words. If this is what you want, I'll be waiting here with Mary. If you'd like her to see Edith after you've spoken to her, call me. I'll drive her straight to the hospital."

Becky hugged him tight. "I don't know if this is the right thing to do, but I can only go with my heart. And my heart is telling me love is stronger than what Edith has done."

For Becky and Mary's sake, Sean hoped she was right.

CHAPTER 21



Becky stood outside the door to Edith's room. In the corridor, nurses moved with ease between each room, checking on patients who were suffering from the same ailment as Mary's grandmother. But it wasn't the head trauma that had sent her to this ward.

In one of the many tests the doctors had ordered, they'd discovered two large tumors on Edith's lungs. A biopsy had delivered the news that brought Becky to her side. Edith had terminal cancer.

"Can I help you?"

Becky turned to the nurse who'd stopped beside her. "I'm here to see Edith O'Rourke."

"You can go in, but the doctor's increased her pain medication. She might be a little sleepy."

"That's fine. I'll not be here for long."

"If you need anything while you're visiting Edith, push the red button beside the bed."

"Thanks. I will." Taking a deep breath, Becky opened the door.

The frail woman sitting in the bed was nothing like the angry woman she'd last seen. With a blue hospital gown

covering her body, she was a shell of the person who'd once been a formidable force in her son's life.

“Edith? Would you be wanting a visitor?”

Slowly, she turned her head. “I should have known you'd be here today. Jamie always said you were quick to make up your mind.”

“Jamie is one of the reasons I'm here. He loved you when no one else would, so I owe him at least this visit. The nurse said you'll be tired. Tell me what it is you want to say and then I'll be off.”

Edith's eyes left Becky's. “Don't stand in the doorway like a ticket collector. Take a seat and let me look at you.”

Becky did as she was asked. “You've looked at me on more than one occasion.”

“Not in person. Not since Jamie brought you home and introduced you to me.”

She remembered the visit as clearly as if it were yesterday. Edith had been overbearing, oppressive, and everything Jamie had told her she would be. Even now, a shiver raced down her spine as she thought about the intense scrutiny she'd been under.

“You never thought I was good enough for Jamie.” The words were said without malice and Edith seemed to take them as such.

“No one would have been good enough for my boy. He was my world, my everything. And you were keeping him in Ireland, away from the only person who ever understood him.”

There was so much Becky wanted to say, but she kept her mouth closed. It would be easy to be angry, to pull Edith apart,

piece by piece, as she had done to Becky all those years ago. But what good would come of it? Jamie was gone and nothing anyone said or did would bring him back.

“You’ve learned the art of silence.” Edith seemed impressed.

“My gran used to say if you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all.”

A smile pulled at the dry skin around Edith’s mouth. “The princess has a sting in her tail. Maybe I was wrong. I could have grown to like you.”

“Why didn’t you come to Jamie and Sophia’s funeral?”

“I drowned my grief in heroin. By the time I knew what day of the week it was, it was over. Does that shock you?”

“Jamie told me about his childhood. Nothing you say will shock me.”

“I was a terrible mother, but I loved Jamie.” A hacking cough bent her body in half.

“Are you all right?”

Edith waved away her concern. “I’m dying. The best I can hope for is a quick end.” Reaching for a tissue, she dabbed her mouth, then lay back against the crisp cotton sheets. “I didn’t know Mary existed until you sent me photos of her. I was upset Jamie hadn’t told me.”

Becky wanted her to know Jamie hadn’t said anything because he was worried about Mary’s safety. But what good would sharing that information do?

Edith frowned. “Mary looks like Jamie around the eyes. Even her nose is the same. When I saw her on the Zoom meetings, it was like having my son here all over again.” She

took a deep, wheezy breath. “After I spoke to Mary, I tried to wean myself off the alcohol and drugs, I really did. I wanted to be sober for her, to show myself I could make a difference in someone’s life. But I couldn’t do it. I’m addicted to everything that’s bad for me and now I’m dying.”

“I’m Mary’s legal guardian. Why did you want to stop me from looking after her?”

“Because I’m greedy. Jamie wasn’t coming back, but Mary was here. I have enough money to make her life everything it will never be with you. But you wanted to keep her to yourself.”

“I was happy for you to visit us and talk to Mary over Zoom.”

“That wasn’t enough.”

Becky had a feeling nothing would ever be enough for Edith. “And kidnapping her? Would taking her away from everything and everyone she loves have achieved anything?”

“I’m Mary’s grandmother. I can’t kidnap what’s already mine.” Another hacking cough racked her body.

Instead of offering her comfort, Becky waited for it to end. “Jamie and Sophia wanted me to look after Mary because you’re not able to look after yourself, let alone a child.”

Edith’s jaw clenched. “I’m sorry.”

Becky’s eyes widened.

“That’s right. I apologize. I was wrong to take Mary away, to think I could be a good mother to her. I ruined my ex-husband’s life and Jamie’s, and now I’m dying. “

Becky didn’t know what to say.

“I’ve instructed my legal team to drop the issue of your guardianship of Mary. When I die, a sum of money will be put aside for you to spend on Mary as you see fit. The rest will be placed in a trust with Mary as the sole beneficiary. It’s to be used for her education and a house. A woman should be independent and not rely on a man to give her a roof over her head.”

Edith paused, took a deep breath, and continued. “Whatever’s left over will be available for her to withdraw when she turns twenty-eight. By that time, as long as she listens to you, she should have some common sense between her ears and a backbone that will give her a safe path through life.”

Becky was shocked. “Why?”

“I can’t take my money with me, but I can make it count for something. I only ask that when you tell Mary about me, tell her I loved her. She makes me laugh. She makes me proud of Jamie and ashamed I wasn’t the type of person he needed in his life.” Edith’s sad eyes focused intently on Becky. “Tell Mary to live a good life. Tell her to be kind to those she loves. Life is short and I’ve made a mess of the time I had.”

“I’ll tell her.”

Edith pointed to the bedside cabinet. “There are three envelopes in the top drawer. Take them. One is for you and the other is for Mary. Don’t open them until after I’m gone. The third is a copy of my will and the trust documents. My legal team will contact you after I die.”

Becky was having a hard time taking in everything Edith was telling her. But, for Mary’s sake, she was doing her best.

“I would appreciate it if you would drop the kidnapping charges. The doctors told me I only have a few months at most to live. I would prefer not to die in prison.”

Even when talking about her death, Edith had a stubborn tilt to her chin. “I’ll talk to the police.”

“Good. I’m tired now. Thank you for coming.”

Becky’s eyebrows rose. “You’re telling me to leave?”

“I am. As soon as you drop the charges I’ll be transferred back to Milwaukee. The doctors told me I’ll be in hospice care before too long. The free drugs are something to look forward to.” She glanced at Becky and smiled. “I’m joking.”

“At least you still have your sense of humor.”

The smile left Edith’s face. “I wish I’d seen the funny side of life a lot earlier. Goodbye, Becky. Have a good life.”

“Do you want to see Mary again?”

Edith shook her head sadly. “I’ll talk to her on Zoom. It will be too hard to see her in person. Is she upset about the accident?”

“She thinks it was a big adventure. She’s worried about your head, though.”

“Tell her it feels better.”

“I will.” Becky stood, then hesitated. “Mary loves you. She enjoys talking to you and drawing pictures for you. You’ve made a difference in her life.”

Tears filled Edith’s eyes. “Thank you.”

And with a heavier heart than she thought possible, Becky left Edith’s room.

CHAPTER 22



Two days later, Sean stood outside the animal shelter with Becky and Mary. Originally, Mary was going to adopt one of the kittens in his family's barn. But, after worrying about the kitten's parents missing their baby, she'd decided it was best to go to the animal shelter.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

Mary jumped up and down. "Yes, yes, yes!"

"Okay, but there are at least ten cute-as-pie kittens inside. It won't be easy choosing one."

With a dimpled grin, Mary stood as tall as she could. "I can do it. Molly said to wait until a kitten comes to me. That's when I'll know it's the right one."

Becky opened the door to the shelter. "It sounds as though you have a good plan."

After washing their hands, they walked into the kitten room. Mary admired each feline as it came to investigate the little girl with honey-gold hair in pigtails.

Sean wasn't sure how Mary's strategy was supposed to work. When she sat in the middle of the floor, seven kittens pounced on her, each begging to be cuddled.

Becky watched what was happening with a smile. For someone who wasn't sure she wanted a kitten, she was awfully relaxed about the implications of what she was seeing.

Mary didn't move from the center of the room. Once the novelty of having her there had worn off, two of the kittens jumped on each other and played happily on their own. While more kittens snoozed, the last two made themselves at home on Mary's lap.

"What are their names?" Mary asked quietly.

Sean found their photos on the cards slotted into the outside of the cages. "The black and white one is called Daisy. The white one is Snowflake. They're sisters."

"Snowflake has the same name as your llama," Mary said excitedly. "We could have two Snowflakes." She giggled at her joke and rubbed the two kittens under their chin. "But what about Daisy? We can't take her sister home and leave her here."

Sean was leaving this discussion to Becky. As someone who had more animals than most people saw in a lifetime, he was the last person to speak to about taking only one kitten home.

Becky sat on the floor beside Mary.

Sean silently cheered as Snowflake and Daisy jumped into Becky's lap.

"They love you, too," Mary cooed.

Becky looked up at Sean and he shrugged. The slight narrowing of her eyes told him his message had come through loud and clear.

Becky patted the kittens. “We talked about how many kittens we can take home. We don’t have room for two.”

“But they’re only small. And look how much they love you.”

Mary was right. The two kittens were rolling around on Becky’s lap, encouraging her to scratch them under their chins. Go Snowflake and Daisy!

“I don’t know. Looking after two kittens will be a lot of work.”

“I can do it,” Mary said firmly. “We just need another food bowl, that’s all.”

The indecision on Becky’s face was a sight to behold. For someone who always had a clear idea of where she was going and how she would get there, this was something she wasn’t used to.

She looked down at the balls of fluff rolling around and sighed. “Okay. I don’t want to split up the kittens, either. We’ll take them both home.”

Mary launched herself across the short distance between them. “Thank you, Becky. I promise to look after them so you won’t have to do anything.”

With those words ringing in everyone’s ears, Becky and Mary went to the office to see how they went about adopting the kittens.

While they were gone, Sean sat on the floor and cuddled the kittens. “I hope you guys are ready for what’s ahead. Mary will want to spend every single minute with you.”

And with a loud purr of contentment, the kittens climbed onto his lap and fell asleep.



FOUR WEEKS after Snowflake and Daisy joined them, Becky felt as though they'd always been part of their family. Mary was doing everything she'd promised and the kittens returned the favor by being cute and cuddly, and not peeing on the floor.

Sean wasn't quite so happy with them, especially when Daisy ate the corner of his house plans.

"It was only a small piece of paper," Becky told him. "And it didn't include any of the actual drawings."

"It looks scruffy."

"You could photocopy the sheet of paper," Mary suggested. "Then you wouldn't have a chewed bit."

He lifted his eyebrows. "When did you get to be so smart?"

"When I turned six," Mary said proudly. "Mrs. Graham photocopies everything at school. Tommy said it's her superpower."

Becky held back a smile.

"Well, I think it's a great idea," Sean said approvingly.

The architect had finally finished the concept plans for the new house Sean was going to build on his family's ranch. Becky had expected a small home with all the latest gadgets known to mankind. But Sean had surprised her. The five-bedroom, four-bathroom home was big enough to fit a basketball team inside.

Mary leaned forward and studied the plans. “Where’s my bedroom?”

Becky’s face flamed hotter than the sun. “It’s Sean’s house, not ours.”

A mischievous smile lit his face. “You can choose any room you want, except this one.” He pointed to the master suite. “That’s mine.”

With its sleeping and sitting areas, two huge walk-in closets, and a bathroom that was bigger than Becky’s entire kitchen *and* dining room, it was more like an apartment than a bedroom.

Mary held her finger to her lips. “I’ll have...this one.” She pointed to a bedroom beside Sean’s. “Can it be pink?”

“It can be whatever color you want.”

It was all very well for Sean to play make-believe with Mary, but she had a memory like an elephant. When his house was built, she’d expect to move in with him, and then he’d have some serious explaining to do.

“What about you, Becky? What has your eagle-eye picked up that needs to change?”

“’Tis not my home, so I won’t say. It looks very big and full of everything you’ll ever need, though.”

“It’s got a media room,” Sean said proudly.

Becky nodded. “I’ve seen the way you and your brothers enjoy a large screen television. I won’t ask what size you’ll be mounting because it will be big.”

“Ninety inches,” he whispered. “Surround sound speakers, automatic sensor-controlled power, and ultra-high definition.”

“Sounds impressive. Can it cook your meals and wash your dirty clothes, too?”

“Not quite, but who needs food and clean undies when you can have a huge TV?”

Mary giggled. “We could have movie nights.”

“And karaoke competitions.”

Before they got too carried away, Becky cleared her throat. “I have an announcement.”

Mary bit her bottom lip. “Has Sally asked you about Rufus?”

“Who?”

“Rufus. He’s a dog someone left at the shelter. He needs a forever home and Sally said we would be perfect.”

Becky would have to speak to her friend. “No, my news isn’t about Rufus.” She picked up the magazine that was under Sean’s house plans. “A wedding I did the floral arrangements for made the cover of *Your Home and Garden* magazine.” She held the magazine in the air for Sean and Mary to see.

Sean’s eyes widened. “That’s amazing. You must be really pleased.”

“It’s a huge honor.”

Mary admired the photo. “The flowers look so pretty.”

“They were lovely.” She’d worked hard with Laura to meet their client’s requests, even if it had meant transporting the off-season blooms from flower warehouses around the country. “We’ve already noticed more people calling and asking us to provide the flowers for their events. If it continues, I’ll need to hire another florist.”

“Then you’ll have time to go fishing with Sean and me?”

“I’ll have the time to go fishing,” she said happily.

Sean picked up a box he’d left under the table. “We should celebrate your success with lunch in town. But, before we leave, can you look at these kitchen samples? The architect needs to know which counter I want, but I don’t have any idea.”

“I’m not sure I’m the best person to ask,” Becky said quickly. “I still have the same green counter that was in my house when I bought it.”

“I’d appreciate any advice you could give me.”

Becky sighed. “You know this is my secret fantasy, don’t you?”

Sean placed his hands over Mary’s ears. “If this is going to be an X-rated conversation, we should be careful. Mary listens to everything *really* carefully.”

“I heard you,” she giggled.

“It’s not X-rated. I’ve always wanted to build a house and choose all the colors and materials. I’m addicted to any home renovation show on television.”

“I’ve noticed.”

From his smile, it didn’t look as though Sean minded watching all the fixer-upper programs she chose. “Okay. If you want my help, that’s fine. But don’t be surprised if I spend way too much time at your new house. It will feel like my own home if I choose the kitchen counter.”

“That’s what I’m hoping.”

Becky frowned. What did he mean?

Sean took the lid off the box and handed her a piece of gorgeous stone. “This is what my architect suggested. What do you think?”

“I love it. The milky-white color is soft and elegant. You could put any color on the cupboards and it would look amazing.”

Sean cleared his throat. “I like brass handles, what do you think about this shape?”

Becky took the next box and opened the lid. Instead of a brass handle, it contained another box. A much smaller black box that looked remarkably like it might contain a ring.

Then he lowered himself to one knee.

When she saw the tenderness and longing in his eyes, her heart pounded.

“I love you, Becky. I’ve loved you almost since the first day I met you. You’re clever and kind, and you make me happy. When I met Mary, I knew we could be a family and find our own happy ever after. Will you marry me?”

Becky eyes filled with tears. “I don’t know what to say. I love you, too. But I didn’t expect you to...I didn’t expect anyone to ever ask me to marry them,” she admitted softly.

Sean stood and pulled her into his warm embrace. “You’re the most amazing woman I’ve ever met. I’m just thankful no one else found you and Mary before I did.”

He let go of her and opened the little black box. “I saw this ring a few days after Edith went home. I thought it must be a good omen.”

Becky grinned. Although Edith’s health had deteriorated, she’d rediscovered a sense of humor that was getting her

through the tough times. She spoke to Mary often, eager to fill her days with tales of her granddaughter's life.

Mary looked over Becky's shoulder at the beautiful solitaire diamond ring. "Grandma said you should marry Sean. She said he's good for you."

"She did?"

"Yep. I asked her about me, too. She said you and Sean should adopt me. Just like Snowflake and Daisy."

Sean took some papers out of the box holding his kitchen samples. "These are the documents my lawyer drew up. He said it will be easier to adopt Mary once we're married. So, I thought we could get married in six weeks."

"Six?" Becky's mouth dropped open.

"We've done it before."

"But that was for Matthew and Ashley's wedding."

"It's the same principle. I know a florist who will be more than happy to squeeze us in."

Becky had gone from being overwhelmed to shocked in the space of a few minutes.

Sean's smile disappeared. "If you don't want to marry me now, I could ask you again in a few months' time."

"It won't make any difference." Becky took a deep breath and pulled Sean into the seat beside her. "I loved you yesterday, I love you today, and I'll love you tomorrow. I can't think of anything I'd like to do more than be your wife."

With shaking hands, Sean took the ring out of the box and slid it onto her finger.

"It fits," Becky said with tears in her eyes.

“I had a little help with that.”

“It was me,” Mary said excitedly. “Grandma said to take a ring out of your jewelry box and give it to Sean. And it worked!”

“Grandma has good advice.”

Mary nodded. “Does this mean I can sleep in the pink bedroom?”

Sean lifted Mary into Becky’s lap and hugged them tight. “It means you can sleep in the pink bedroom. I love you both very much.”

With Sean’s arms around them, Becky knew their lives couldn’t get much better than this. Their home would be filled with love, light, and happiness. And two kittens who were desperately trying to jump onto Mary’s lap.

CHAPTER 23



Three Months later...

BECKY SAT on the veranda of Sean's grandparents' house, swinging on the seat she'd made with Mary last weekend.

A little over five weeks ago, she'd married Sean in Pastor Steven's church surrounded by their family and friends. It was a glorious event and everything she'd ever imagined a wedding should be. Mary had looked adorable in her pretty pink gown and Molly had stunned everyone in her satin sheath.

Becky was still in love with the gown Emily had made for her. With its pretty satin bodice decorated with diamante crystals, it sparkled whenever she moved. And the tulle skirt, gathered in soft flounces around the hem, made her feel like a princess.

Sean's brothers had been expert groomsmen for the second time in a few months. And, excluding a sudden shower of rain, the afternoon was perfect.

She looked across the yard into the inky black darkness and smiled. The new house they were building would be

pegged out next April. By then, the winter snow would have thawed and life would return to normal. Or as normal as it could be on the ranch.

“Are you all right?” Sean handed her a mug of tea and sat beside her.

She looked at her husband and sighed. “I’m fine. ‘Tis a wondrous night to enjoy the stars.”

“As long as you’re wearing four layers of clothes.” He straightened his ski cap and smiled. “Edith would have enjoyed her funeral.”

“That wouldn’t surprise me. She planned every last detail, right down to what the priest would say.”

Sean nodded. “Father Grayland won’t forget her in a hurry. He said they had some interesting discussions before she died.”

Becky smiled. “Edith told me some of what was said. He’s a very understanding man. Is Mary okay?”

“She’s sound asleep. It’s been a long few days.”

Sean wasn’t wrong. They’d flown to Milwaukee four days ago. Edith’s health had been steadily declining but, in true form, she’d told the staff in the palliative care unit not to let them know how bad it was until after she’d died.

The last few months had been healing for Edith, Becky, and Mary. They’d found an easy friendship with each other and learned to live with their differences. Edith’s passing was bittersweet, but Becky hoped the last few months had brought her some kind of comfort.

She pulled an envelope out of her pocket and stared at her handwritten name across the front.

Sean took a sip of his coffee. “Are you opening it now?”

“Edith said to leave it until after she died. It feels like the right time. Mary can open hers when she’s ready.”

Sean kissed her cheek. “Do you want to do this on your own?”

“No. I’d like you to be here. I have no idea what’s inside. But, knowing Edith, it won’t be what most people would leave as their final message.”

Taking a deep breath, she slowly peeled back the flap. The folded sheet of cream paper was thick, much thicker than the paper Becky normally used.

When she read the message, her eyes filled with tears.

“What does it say?” Sean asked.

She handed him the letter. Seven simple words were carefully written across the center of the page. *Thank you. You made my life matter.*

Sean wrapped his arm around her shoulders and held her tight. “That’s all anyone can ask for.”

Wiping her eyes, she thought about their lives, the decisions they’d made, and the choices that were yet to come. Edith and Sean were right. Making a difference in someone else’s life was all that truly mattered.

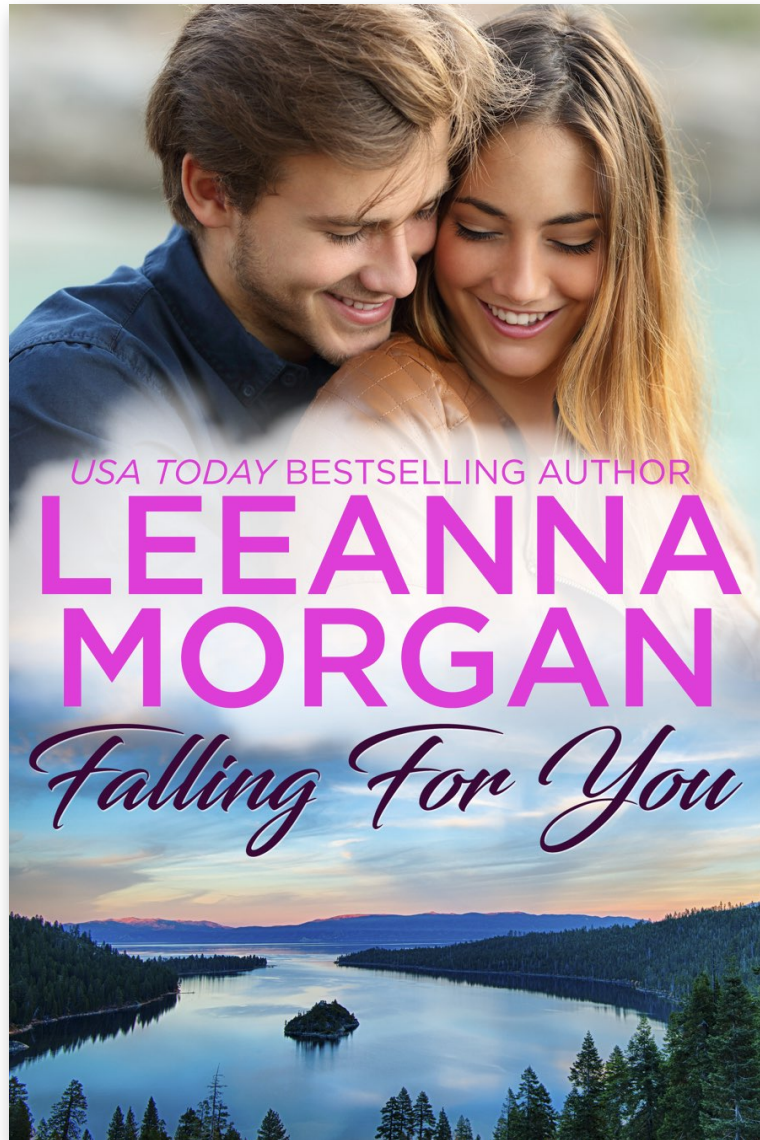
THE END

THANK YOU

Thank you for reading *Country Love* I hope you enjoyed it! If you did...

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Falling For You

Sapphire Bay, Book 1

FREE FROM ALL RETAILERS

After six years of focusing on her career, Natalie Armstrong craves the peace and tranquility that only Sapphire Bay can give her. But returning to her grandparents' cottage isn't as easy as she imagined. No one told her about her houseguest or the unexpected changes in the small town she calls home.

Gabe Lanigan is a former NYPD detective. His new career as a bestselling crime writer has brought him everything he didn't want—fame, fortune, and a deep distrust of strangers. When Natalie arrives in Sapphire Bay, their unlikely friendship sparks into something he never expected. But he needs to be careful. The real reason he left New York City is closing in fast and Natalie is standing in his way.

Keep reading for a preview of ***Falling For You***, Natalie and Gabe's story and the first book in the Sapphire Bay series!

CHAPTER 1



Natalie parked her truck on the side of the road and rolled down her window. For nine years she'd missed seeing the sparkling water of Flathead Lake, the mountains that rose around her like a warm and welcoming hug, and the wildflowers that grew everywhere. The colors, the light, the peace—it was all here and more.

Nestled against the shore of the lake was Sapphire Bay, the small town that had given her so many happy memories.

Her fingers itched to take out her sketchpad, but she had to keep moving. After countless delays and a diverted flight, it had taken three days to fly from Italy to Montana. She should have stayed with friends in Kalispell, caught up on the sleep she desperately needed. But once she'd made the decision to leave Venice, she'd wanted to get to Sapphire Bay as quickly as possible.

With one last, lingering look at the lake, she started her truck and drove toward town.

The number of vehicles on the road surprised her. So did the new stores that had opened. The sleepy little town with no traffic lights or fast-food restaurants had changed. Cafés rubbed shoulders with antique stores. There was even a

fashion boutique and a gallery. There were so many new businesses that she nearly drove past the general store.

The first person she saw when she walked inside was Mabel Terry. Gray hair framed the same kind face and gentle blue eyes that Natalie remembered.

Mabel was listening to a customer, smiling at what was being said.

While they were talking, Natalie found a shopping cart and wheeled it toward the shelves. She'd buy enough food for a few days, then come back when she wasn't so jet-lagged. Halfway around the store, she remembered the apple cider that Mabel's husband used to make.

She spun her cart around and nearly bumped into another woman. "Oops. Sorry."

"That's okay," the woman said. "I've done the same thing myself. The aisles aren't very wide."

Natalie smiled and kept walking. After going up and down another two aisles, she stopped and frowned.

"You look lost. Can I help?"

The same woman she'd nearly collided with was standing beside her. "The owner of the store used to make his own apple cider. Do you know if he's still selling it?"

"I sure do. Follow me." The woman pushed her cart across the store and stopped in front of a small refrigerator. "Here you go."

Stacked in neat rows were at least a dozen bottles of Allan's homemade cider. "Thanks. I don't know how I missed them."

“I’m not sure why they’re separate from the other drinks. But at least you know where they are now.” The woman held out her hand. “I’m Brooke. I haven’t seen you in Sapphire Bay before.”

“My grandparents owned a cottage here. I used to stay with them each summer, but I haven’t been back for a long time.”

“I moved here two years ago and it’s the best thing I ever did. Is this a visit or are you planning on staying?”

Natalie looked over her shoulder. It was silly to think that anyone would care about who she was, but old habits were hard to break.

A man took something off the shelf behind her.

After he’d moved away, she turned back to Brooke. “I thought I’d stay for a few weeks and see how everything goes.”

Mabel rushed across the store with her arms open wide. “Well, I declare! If it isn’t Natalie Armstrong. It’s been too long since we’ve seen you.”

Natalie returned Mabel’s hug. “It’s good to see you, too. I’m surprised you recognized me.”

“You haven’t changed one bit. We missed seeing you at your grandparents’ funeral.”

“I was living in Europe and couldn’t get home.” Natalie swallowed the knot of grief that lodged in her throat. To this day, she regretted the decision she’d made. It had taken her too long to realize that work should never come before family.

Mabel’s generous smile turned into a frown. “I hope you pre-booked your accommodation. There’s a craft fair and a

concert this weekend. The hotels are full.”

“I’m staying at my cottage for a while.”

“The cottage at the end of Bluewater Road?” Mabel seemed confused. “But someone’s living there. It was rented a couple of months ago.”

Natalie’s eyes widened. “Rented? Mom didn’t tell me someone’s staying there.”

“Are you sure the person is living in Natalie’s cottage?” Brooke asked.

Mabel nodded. “He’s come into the store a couple of times but doesn’t say much.”

A massive headache started to build behind Natalie’s eyes. “I’ll pay for my groceries, then go and see him. Someone’s made a mistake.”

Brooke took a business card out of her pocket. “Take this. If you get stuck, give me a call. I have a spare bedroom you can use.”

She didn’t think she’d need it, but Natalie took the card anyway. “Thanks. I’m sure it will be okay.”

“Don’t forget your apple cider,” Brooke said quickly.

Natalie added two half-gallon containers of cider to her cart. She might not need to use Brooke’s spare bedroom, but she would definitely need the cider.



GABE’S FINGERS paused over the keyboard. He glanced at his story outline, then back at the page he’d spent the last hour rewriting. It wasn’t working. No matter how hard he tried, he

couldn't find a convincing way to make a dead body appear in Zac Connelly's orchard.

His dog, Sherlock, looked up and sighed.

Gabe smiled. "You're right. It's time for a break. Let's go for a walk." Before he could push back his chair, Sherlock was sitting in front of the French doors, waiting to escape.

As soon as the doors opened, his black German Shepherd bolted down the path that led to Flathead Lake.

Gabe limped after him, wincing as a sharp pain shot down his right leg. He knew not to sit in one position for too long, but time had a way of disappearing when he was writing. In the next couple of hours, he wanted to finish the second chapter of his book. But that depended on the dead body floating in the Hudson River.

Sherlock had disappeared, but he wasn't worried. The German Shepherd rarely went more than a hundred yards from him. He'd be in the forest, sniffing out a skunk, chasing a red squirrel, or terrorizing the neighbor's cat.

He took a deep breath, enjoying the sweet scent of the pine trees surrounding the property. After spending most of his life in New York City, Sapphire Bay was like living in a parallel universe. He'd only been here for three months, but he couldn't imagine going back to the concrete jungle he'd called home.

His cell phone rang. Gabe sighed. Sometimes, the rest of the world found you whether you wanted it to or not. He looked at the caller display before answering. "Hi, Caleb."

"Where are you?"

Gabe stopped walking. The urgency in his friend's voice worried him. "Walking toward the lake. Why?"

“A woman is coming to see you. She’s the granddaughter of the original owners of the cottage. She doesn’t know you’ve rented the property.”

“Why does that matter?”

“She was going to stay there.”

Gabe rubbed his leg. “She can’t. I’m here.”

“That’s up to you to work through. I just wanted to let you know that she’s on her way. Her name is Natalie.”

Of all the things he needed right now, an unexpected visitor wasn’t one of them. “Where did you see her?”

“She was buying groceries at the general store. I overheard her talking to Mabel.”

Anyone who spent more than a day in Sapphire Bay ended up in the general store. “Thanks for warning me.”

“No problem. How’s the book coming along?”

“Slowly. You don’t know how to get a dead body from the Hudson River to Delaware, do you?”

“Refrigerated truck?”

“Too risky.”

“Boat?”

“Maybe.” Sherlock sprinted toward Gabe with something dangling from his mouth. “I have to go. I’ll call you tonight.”

“Good luck with Natalie.”

“I don’t need luck. I have a copy of the rental agreement and a screenshot of the original listing. If Natalie has a problem with that, she can talk to the person who rented me the cottage.”

“I’m looking forward to hearing how that conversation turns out. Call me after seven o’clock.”

Sherlock dropped an old shoe on the ground.

Gabe said goodbye to Caleb, then studied the rotting shoe. An idea started to form in his mind. An idea that might just get his dead body across to Delaware.

He knelt beside Sherlock and rubbed his ears. “Have I told you what a brilliant dog you are?”

Sherlock’s big brown eyes seemed to laugh at him. At least someone was having a good day.



AS SOON AS Natalie stacked her groceries into the truck, she pulled out her phone. Her mom would know if someone was renting their cottage. The only problem was that her mom didn’t realize she was in America.

It only took a few seconds for Kathleen Armstrong to answer the phone. “Natalie? Why aren’t there a lot more digits in front of your number?”

The pounding in her head was getting worse. “Hi, Mom. I’m in Sapphire Bay.”

“Our Sapphire Bay? In Montana? Why didn’t you tell me you were coming home?”

“It’s complicated.”

She heard her mother’s sharp intake of breath. “Calling me isn’t all that complicated. I thought you were in Venice getting ready for your next exhibition?”

If Natalie felt stressed before she'd called her mom, she felt worse now. "Someone broke into my apartment and stole two of my paintings."

"Oh, my Lord. Were you hurt?"

"No. I was at the opening of a friend's exhibition when it happened."

"Thank goodness for that," Kathleen sighed. "I worry about you. If something goes wrong, there's not a lot I can do from Indianapolis."

There was no point reminding her mom that she'd been living in Europe for nine years. Until a month ago, nothing had happened. "I need to paint two new canvases for Lorenzo's gallery. I thought coming to Sapphire Bay would give me a better chance of finishing them. But someone told me grandma's cottage has been rented."

"Oh, dear. I didn't know you were coming back. Gabe is a friend of a friend. He was desperate for somewhere to stay, so I let him rent the cottage. But he's only using Grandma and Granddad's rooms. Our side of the cottage is still empty."

Natalie leaned against the side of her truck. Her grandparents' cottage was originally a small two-bedroom home. When her parents divorced, her grandparents added another three bedrooms, a small living room, and a kitchen onto the cottage. She'd lived there with her mom until they'd moved to Bozeman.

"Why didn't you tell me you rented the cottage?"

"I tried calling you, but you were at the Art Expo in Milan," Kathleen said quickly. "I spoke to your landlord. He said he would tell you when you got back."

Natalie sighed. Her landlord was a nice man, but he wasn't the most reliable person on the planet. "He didn't say anything."

"Is there somewhere else you can stay?"

The chances of finding a property with enough space to set up a studio weren't great. "I'll call a realtor and ask."

The traffic lights outside the general store turned red, and a line of trucks stopped. "When did Sapphire Bay become so popular?"

"About three years ago. It's less busy during winter. If you need anything—"

"No. I'm fine. I'll go and see the man who rented the cottage. Did he know someone else might be living in the rest of the cottage?"

"No, although the rental agreement only gives him access to Grandma and Granddad's side of the cottage. If it makes you any happier, Gabe used to be a detective in the New York Police Department. If you decide to stay, you couldn't ask for a better neighbor."

"We'll see," Natalie said. "I'll call you tonight and let you know what's happened."

"You can always catch a flight to Indianapolis and stay with me."

"Thanks, Mom. I appreciate the offer, but I'll speak to Gabe first." When they'd finished talking, Natalie slid the phone into her pocket and opened the driver's door. She was so tired that she was tempted to fall asleep in the truck. And if talking to Gabe didn't work out, that's what she might have to do.



GABE OPENED HIS FRONT DOOR. The woman standing on his porch didn't look like any landlord he'd met. With her long brown hair pulled into a ponytail, black jeans, and a baggy red T-shirt, she could have been one of the hundreds of tourists passing through town.

Her deep blue eyes regarded him suspiciously. "Are you Gabe?"

He crossed his arms in front of his chest, leveling his best bad cop stare in her direction. "It depends on who's asking."

She didn't even flinch. Interesting.

"I'm Natalie Armstrong. One of the owners of the cottage."

"I thought you might be."

Natalie's eyes narrowed. "You knew I was coming?"

"A friend overheard you speaking to Mabel." Reaching behind him, he took a folder off the hallway table. "This is a copy of my rental agreement."

Her gaze skimmed over the document, pausing when she saw his signature. "You've been here three months?"

"Almost four."

A deep doggy woof gave him a ten-second warning that Sherlock was running toward them.

He turned and used a hand signal. "Stop."

Sherlock's bottom hit the floor. With his ears pricked up, he looked at Gabe, waiting to see what happened next.

“You have a dog?” For the first time since he’d seen her, Natalie’s blue eyes softened. “He’s beautiful. What’s his name?”

Gabe studied the smile on her face. If she thought she could sweet-talk him out of his rental agreement, she was wrong. “Sherlock.”

Her smile turned into a full-throttle grin. “Can I pat him?”

“Sure. Just go slow. He was a police dog and doesn’t like strangers.”

Natalie held out her hand.

Sherlock, being the contrary beast that he was, proved him wrong by not only licking her hand but moving closer.

“He likes me.”

Gabe cleared his throat. “That doesn’t mean you can tell me to leave.”

“That’s not why I’m here. I didn’t know anyone had rented the cottage, but that’s not your problem. I need somewhere to stay and the rooms at the back of the cottage are empty.”

“You want to move into the cottage?”

“Not the whole building,” Natalie said quickly. “Just the rooms at the back. I’ll have my own bathroom and there’s a separate kitchen. I’ll be completely self-sufficient.”

“That wasn’t part of my agreement.”

Natalie stopped patting Sherlock. “You agreed to lease my grandparents’ cottage. The rooms at the back aren’t part of the original house.”

Gabe knew they weren’t, but that didn’t mean he wanted a neighbor. “That’s not the point. I came here for some peace

and quiet.”

“You won’t know I’m here.”

He doubted anyone could live within a few feet of her and not know she was there. “How long are you staying?”

She glanced down at Sherlock. “Three months at the most.”

Gabe studied the black circles under her eyes. When he’d signed the rental agreement, the realtor told him one of the owners was living overseas. What she hadn’t told him was that Natalie was coming back.

“Where have you come from?”

“Venice.”

“Italy?”

Natalie nodded. “I’m sorry this isn’t what you expected, but it’s the best I can do. I’m happy to call the hotels in town until we sort something out, but I don’t think they’ll have any rooms available. If I can’t stay here, I might have to sleep in my truck.”

Gabe looked down at Sherlock. The traitor had wiggled his way closer to Natalie’s legs. “You can’t sleep in your truck.”

“Does that mean you don’t mind me living next door?”

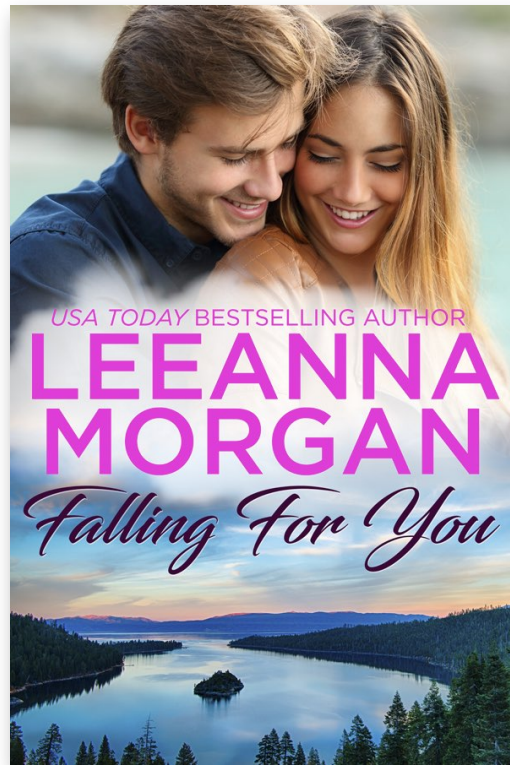
He had a feeling he might regret what he was about to say, but he didn’t want Natalie to get hurt. “It’s your cottage. As long as you respect my privacy, we’ll get along fine.”

Natalie’s relieved smile made his breath catch. That hadn’t happened in so long he wondered what was wrong with him.

“Thank you. You don’t know how much I appreciate being able to stay here.”

She might not be so thankful after he looked into her background. He didn't need any more surprises.

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