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SHANNA HATFIELD

GUIDING  
THE  
*Stouck*



SUMMER CREEK 5

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GUIDING  
THE  
*Crouch*

*Summer Creek Book 5*

A Sweet Contemporary Holiday Western Romance

by

*USA TODAY Bestselling Author*

SHANNA HATFIELD

*Wholesome Hearts*



PUBLISHING

# *Guiding the Grouch*

*Summer Creek Series Book 5*

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*To anyone  
Who allows love to  
fill and change  
their heart*



# Chapter One



A spectacular sunrise flooded the Oklahoma City skyline with vibrant color, offering the promise of a glorious November day. However, the beauty of it was wasted on Gabe Gatlin.

From his seat in a top-floor corner office in the downtown building owned by Daniels Corporation, Gabe failed to notice the sunrise or the amazing view outside his window.

With his head buried in his work, he cast a harried glimpse at the citrus and gold hues splashing the sky as he

mentally composed an email. After typing and sending it, he composed a dozen more before the sun could crest the horizon.

As president of Daniels Realty, one of two divisions under the umbrella of the Daniels Corporation that his grandfather, Gabriel Daniels, had started from nothing, Gabe felt as though his work was never finished. There were always a dozen more tasks that required his attention.

Gabe had arrived at the office at half past four this morning, intent on getting caught up on work so he could leave town for a few days.

Right after lunch, he planned to take the corporate jet to Kansas City to meet three of his college buddies at a football game scheduled for that evening. Then back-to-back meetings filled his schedule tomorrow as he worked on land acquisition deals in the Kansas City area. His weekend plans were for him to schmooze clients at the home of one of his father's acquaintances. Bright and early on Monday, he'd fly to Denver for two more days of meetings, before returning to Oklahoma City in time for Thanksgiving.

But all Gabe really wanted to do was go to the game, then escape to the sprawling ranch in the Oklahoma Panhandle his grandfather had established more than fifty years ago. He longed to spend a quiet, restful holiday at the Rafter D Ranch that held so many wonderful memories from his childhood days. No one in his family ever set foot on the ranch, so it was the perfect place for him to get away. It looked like it might be sometime in the spring before he could manage a visit, though.

Regardless of a trip to the panhandle, he was looking forward to the football game.

Focused on his work, Gabe paid no heed to anything going on around him. Two hours later, his assistant entered his office carrying a mug of steaming coffee and a thick manila file folder. He glanced at the clock, shocked to see it was already past eight.

"From the look of things, you were an early bird this morning, boss," Eddie Bennett said, looking over her bifocals

at him. She set the coffee in front of him and the file on top of his inbox. “Are you excited about the game tonight?”

“Yep. It’ll be good to connect with the guys.” He took a sip of the coffee and leaned back in his chair.

She gave him an admonishing look. “Just behave yourself. The last time the four of you got together, I thought I was going to have to drive to Houston and post bail money.”

“That was a slight misunderstanding, as you well know.” Gabe drew another long sip of the dark brew. He preferred it just like his grandpa had always ordered it—straight black and strong. As he took another drink, he studied his assistant in her no-nonsense black shoes, a black suit, and a blouse that looked like autumn’s most colorful leaves danced across it. Short gray hair and conservative makeup did nothing to enhance her appearance, but Gabe well knew appearances could be deceiving.

Eddie Bennett had been fresh out of business school when his grandfather had hired her to be his secretary in the real estate division of the corporation. She’d soon proven herself to be trustworthy, discreet, intelligent, creative, and organized. By the time Gabe had joined the company, Eddie had known everything there was to know about the inner workings of Daniels Realty and all the dirt on everyone who worked there. When his grandfather had passed away, Eddie had gone to work for Gabe and had now been his personal assistant for seventeen years.

“What’s in the file?” Gabe asked, taking another drink of coffee as he eyed the folder. He’d needed the caffeine boost since the to-go cup of coffee he’d picked up on the way to the office had worn off hours ago. Next time, he’d swing by the gas station for a five-hour energy drink instead.

Eddie adjusted her glasses. A sure sign there was something she didn’t want to tell him.

“Come on, Ed. Out with it.” Gabe attempted to pin her with his bend-you-to-my-will glare.

She ignored his efforts at intimidating her and tapped the file. “Your beloved brother-in-law sent one of the sniveling interns from his office over with this. He said he’d give you a few minutes to review the details before he came to discuss it. I believe it has something to do with your father’s recent proclamation that Chadwick trim any unnecessary expenses.”

Gabe rolled his eyes. Although Daniels Corporation had billions of dollars in its accounts and was in no danger of going bankrupt, Jeffrey Gatlin had gotten a burr under his blanket about cutting costs. He’d placed Gabe’s brother-in-law, Chadwick, in charge of the project. Chadwick was the financial manager of the corporation, although he held a fancy title that had gone entirely to his head.

A firm believer in waste not, want not, Gabe wasn’t opposed to eliminating unnecessary expenses, but he was convinced his father’s main reason for giving Chadwick the task was to keep him busy and out of his hair. Every time Gabe saw Chadwick, it made him think of the scrawny, urban character who always died first in a movie because he was just too stupid to run the other way.

Both Jeffrey and Chadwick had accounting degrees and were all business all the time. It drove Gabe nuts. In their laser focus on the bottom-line, they often forgot it was the people who worked for them that kept the company afloat. Gabe knew he was equally as guilty of taking his staff for granted when he was concentrating on the projects instead of the people who made them happen.

“What idiotic thing has Chad dredged up now?” Gabe asked, picking up the file and holding it above his garbage can. The urge to toss it in was strong, but then Chadwick would just accuse Eddie of failing to deliver it. He wouldn’t put his assistant in his father’s crosshairs.

“Something about a property that has no acquisition records, but money is poured into it every year.”

“I’ll take a look,” Gabe set the file in the center of his desk. “Would you order my usual for lunch? I’d like to eat at eleven since I need to leave for the airport no later than noon.”

“Of course.” Eddie took two steps toward the door and stopped. “I feel it only fair to warn you, I overheard your father’s assistant and your sister’s discussing the holiday schedule in the restroom yesterday. You can expect an email from Monique soon.”

Gabe groaned. His sister was a tyrant in four-inch heels on a good day. But the holidays seemed to bring out the worst in his family, especially Monique.

It wasn’t a season of joy or giving. No peace-on-earth or goodwill-toward-men existed. For the Gatlin family, it was a time to impress and shine, to close deals and manipulate their way into more sales. The holidays were all about making money and charming potential clients.

Gabe loathed the entire holiday season. From Thanksgiving until after New Year’s Day, his sister, fully supported by their father, would do her best to cram his schedule full of meaningless events he had no interest in attending while escorted by women he despised.

“Already? Didn’t we just survive last year’s five weeks of torture?” Gabe asked, glancing up from his desk at Eddie long enough to see her grin.

“Thanksgiving is next week. You know how things go from there.” Eddie shrugged and walked out of his office, closing the door behind her.

Gabe sighed and opened the file Eddie had brought in from Chadwick. Everything about his brother-in-law annoyed Gabe, starting with his name. He refused to answer to Chad. It was Chadwick. And because he was a money-grubbing moron, he’d changed his last name to Gatlin when he’d married Monique, the worst sister in the world. Gabe was five years older than Monique, but she’d taken it upon herself to try to run his life. But just because Chadwick was too much of a spineless coward to stand up to her didn’t mean Gabe had to put up with her nonsense.

Usually, their mother stepped into the gap to smooth ruffled feathers this time of year, but she’d been occupied recently with Monique and Chadwick’s three-year-old

daughter, Giselle. The child looked like her father, which wasn't a good thing, and acted like her mother, which was even worse. Two months ago, Monique had fired the nanny who'd worked for them even before Giselle was born, and no one else had been brave enough or desperate enough to take the job. Without any daycare centers willing to deal with Monique, Jacqui Gatlin had volunteered to babysit. She seemed to revel in the opportunity to spend time with her grandchild.

On the few occasions Gabe had been around his niece recently, he had noticed she didn't seem quite as volatile and given to tantrums as normal. Perhaps his mother was a positive influence on the spoiled child.

Regardless, Gabe dreaded a meeting with Chadwick. Even the man's nasally voice grated on his nerves.

He skipped the note Chadwick had included in the file and took out expense reports, tax assessments, and bills from a property management company located in Bend, Oregon for a property listed as Lapine. Gabe dug deeper into the file, looking for something with a listing address or city name. He'd just pulled out a paper that appeared to be a copy of a deed from the late 1800s when there was a tap on his door, and Chadwick strode inside.

"Eddie said she gave you the file," Chadwick said as he walked into the office without waiting for an invitation or offering a word of greeting. "Do you know anything about it?"

"I was just looking into it. Do you know the name of the property? Location?"

Chadwick smoothed a hand over his thinning hair. "It's in Oregon, and the only name I can find attached to the place is Lapine."

Gabe took a magnifying glass from his desk drawer and studied the copy of the old deed that was smudged and nearly impossible to read. "It's not la-pine. The name is pronounced Lepiane."

“It’s what? Lipizzan? Like the horse?” Chadwick walked around the desk and looked over Gabe’s shoulder.

Gabe felt like elbowing Chadwick in the ribs, but refrained. With his luck, he’d break them and his dad and sister would never let him hear the end of it.

“Not Lipizzan. Lepiane,” he said, trying not to sound as irritated as he felt. “It’s pronounced Lip-ee-awn-ee.”

“Oh,” Chadwick said, moving to take a seat across from Gabe. “So, you know where this place is?”

“No, but I’ll figure it out. What’s your interest in it?”

Chadwick sighed and slumped in the chair.

Gabe looked over at him, noticing his brother-in-law appeared both exhausted and stressed.

“Since Jeffrey issued the challenge to trim expenses, I’ve been doing all I can to meet his expectations. You’ll see from the expense report, this property requires a good deal of upkeep every year, but there isn’t any income produced from it. I did find your grandmother’s name on one record, but other than that, it seems rather convoluted.”

Gabe had been in the business long enough to view properties such as this one as a puzzle or mystery to be solved. He figured by the time his plane landed in Kansas City, he’d know every detail about the property once owned by T. Lepiane.

But his brother-in-law didn’t need to know that. In fact, Gabe took far more pleasure than he should in the fact that Chadwick would be biting his nails, waiting for him to get back to him with the property details.

“I’ll take care of it, Chadwick. Thanks for sending this over.” Gabe rose to his feet and held out a hand to his brother-in-law. Chadwick stood and shook his hand. The limp, damp skin of his brother-in-law’s hand put Gabe in mind of holding onto a dead fish. When he released Chadwick’s hand, he resisted the urge to wipe his palm on the leg of his pants.

“Don’t forget the board meeting this afternoon,” Chadwick said in that annoyingly nasal tone. Gabe thought fingernails scraping along a chalkboard would be half as unpleasant to hear.

“I won’t be ...” Gabe snapped his mouth shut. His nosy brother-in-law didn’t need to know he had no intention of attending the meeting. Eddie had already made copies of his reports to share with the board and would offer his apologies for being absent. “I won’t forget.” That much was true. Gabe hadn’t forgotten the meeting, even if he planned to be landing in Kansas City about the time it began.

“Try to be punctual this time,” Chadwick said, then left the office.

Gabe picked up his mug of coffee, considering how hard he’d have to throw it to hit his brother-in-law in the head with it, then went in search of a refill. Eddie gave him an odd look as he filled the cup to nearly the brim.

“Will you hold my calls for an hour?” he asked after taking a deep drink. “I need to dive into some research.”

She nodded. “Sure, boss. Is it about that mystery property?”

He wondered if anything ever got by his assistant and promptly decided it most likely did not.

“That’s the one.”

“If I were you, I’d search that odd name and see what comes up.” Eddie turned back to her computer before Gabe could offer a reply.

He returned to his office, sank onto his leather desk chair, and searched online for the odd-sounding name. As he typed it, something jiggled in his memory, even if he couldn’t quite dislodge it. How had he known the proper pronunciation of the name? It wasn’t like he’d ever closed a deal or worked with someone named Lepiane.

Before the search results could pop up on his screen, he opened a new window on the computer and typed in his



grandmother's name in an ancestry website he frequently used to track down relatives of people trying to sell property.

His mother had paid a small fortune to have someone research their family tree. Now, Gabe was grateful she'd insisted it was important to have a record of their ancestors. It appeared Gabe's relatives had settled in a town named Summer Creek. Much to his shock, he discovered his great-great-grandfather's name was Lepiane.

Memories of his grandmother's stories about growing up in a small Oregon town close to the mountains and surrounded by sagebrush came back to him. He recalled her mentioning the name of the house and the woman who'd designed it. *Lepiane*. It had to be the same place.

Vague recollections of his mother inheriting the house when his grandmother passed twenty years ago almost made him pick up the phone to give Jacqui Gatlin a call, but he refrained. His mother preferred not to be involved in any of the company's business. With Chadwick hot on the trail of the property as a potential sale, his mother would not take it well.

Something about Summer Creek seemed vaguely familiar, so Gabe started researching the town. The articles that filled his screen were far from boring. According to several news reports, a princess had been hiding there last year, and the media had gone wild when they'd discovered her whereabouts. The town was also trying to resurrect a bunch of old buildings and offer historical tours.

Gabe clicked on a video of a quaint town with Edwardian brick buildings. A fountain surrounded by summer blossoms and a deep-blue sky in the background made it look like an attractive place to visit. Then a goat with a gnawed-on yellow shoe wandered onscreen, and Gabe chuckled. The town's website listed the goat named Ethel as the town's official mascot. Somehow, the crazy animal fit in with the vibe of Summer Creek.

"How about that?" he muttered to himself as he scanned dozens of images of Summer Creek taken in the past year. It appeared the recently-started tours were bringing people into

the little town. He found links to an outdoor guide website and watched a group of men test out Tundra products on a camping trip. The guys were funny and did a good job promoting the products. He wondered if Jon Sinclair, owner of the Tundra company, had made a deal with the outdoor guide to offer product endorsements.

Gabe returned to his search for the name Lepiane, but didn't find anything. He typed in a search for historical photos from Summer Creek and discovered an image of a large Victorian house that was listed as the Lapine home.

He printed out the image and studied it, picturing his grandmother as a young girl playing on the swing hanging from a big cottonwood tree in the side yard.

Gabe set the photo aside and returned to studying the expense reports. He realized the bills were all for the maintenance of the property three times a year. He figured the company in Bend had someone do spring yard work, probably checking on it in the summer, and then returning in the fall to winterize it. He figured mowing, if any was done, was probably part of the summer expenses.

The question, though, was if the property was in good shape to sell and if that's something he should pursue. Unwilling to spend more time on it at the moment, he shoved all the reports along with the images he'd just printed into the file and tucked it into his briefcase.

He was just finishing a report he needed to send to his sales manager when Eddie arrived with his lunch. Gabe wanted to curl up his nose at the bed of lettuce topped with grilled chicken, avocado, and sliced tomatoes, drizzled with a vinaigrette dressing. His preference would have been a juicy burger or a thick steak.

Although he tried to get to the gym five days a week, Gabe didn't always make it, and he refused to get as overweight and out of shape as his father. He tried to eat healthy meals and avoid empty calories as much as possible, even though he was sick of eating salads.

Tonight, though, he intended to indulge in whatever struck his fancy while he was hanging out with his friends. A football game was all about greasy food and good company, and Gabe intended to enjoy both.

“You ought to just order a burger, or steak, or something you’ll enjoy,” Eddie commented as she set the salad on his desk with a bottle of water.

“I’ll do that tonight,” he said, grinning at her before she left the room.

Gabe dug into the salad as he responded to a few more emails. He drained the bottle of water as he gathered files for his meetings tomorrow and added them to his already full briefcase.

After turning off his computer and locking his desk, he picked up his carry-on bag, laptop bag, and briefcase. Gabe snagged the coat he’d tossed onto the mesquite rack with bent horseshoes for hangers that stood by his door, then let his gaze sweep around his western-themed office with big leather chairs and a long couch, polished mesquite tables, and Charles Russell paintings on the walls.

Even if he couldn’t be at the ranch as often as he liked, the décor in the office reminded him of the place that had always felt more like home to him than the house where he’d grown up or the penthouse where he currently resided when he was in Oklahoma City.

“Stay out of trouble,” Eddie cautioned as he walked past her desk and dropped several file folders into her inbox.

“Always,” he said, smirking at her before he pushed the button on the elevator and headed for the parking garage.

Gabe sighed in relief to be leaving behind his responsibilities, at least for a few hours. By the time he reached his pickup, he felt almost giddy to have the rest of the day to do nothing more than hang with his friends and cheer for one of his favorite professional football teams.

As he pulled into traffic, Gabe yanked off his tie, unfastened the top two buttons of his shirt, and turned on the

radio to a station that played country songs. Thumb tapping on the steering wheel, he made his way to the airport and to the company jet that was waiting to fly him to Kansas City.

If his dad were looking to tighten the company's proverbial belt, Gabe had no doubt personal use of the company jets would soon be under Chadwick's microscope.

"You would hate how they run things now, Grandpa," Gabe said under his breath as he boarded the jet and stowed his bags.

Gabe could recall company picnics where he'd played with the children of the oil workers on the Daniels Oil payroll. Those days were long gone. The last company picnic they'd had was when Monique was thirteen and accused a boy of trying to kiss her. Gabe was convinced she'd been the one approaching stalker status and the boy had likely run from her affection. Nevertheless, after that, it was the last event that included all the employees. Now, the blue-collar workers had their own celebrations no one in the office bothered to attend.

It was sad, really, that his father, and now his brother-in-law, were so focused on making money they forgot to respect and acknowledge the hardworking people that did the work.

Gabe thought about changes he'd make if he were in charge of the corporation, but until his dad retired, that was not going to happen. And with the way Chadwick was constantly in his father's ear, Gabe wouldn't be surprised if his dad simply handed over the whole shooting match to his sister's husband, despite Gabe's ownership of the real estate division.

The day that happened, Gabe would pack up his things, walk out the door, and never look back. The thought of that didn't cause the anxiety he expected. Instead, he envisioned spending all his time on the family ranch where he could ride and rope to his heart's content without any stress or pressure.

A bump and slight jolt as the jet landed in Kansas City drew Gabe from his musings. He gathered his belongings and after deboarding made his way to the private car waiting to transport him to a swanky hotel. He'd paid for rooms on the same floor for himself and his friends. They'd met in college,

bonded over classes they detested, and bemoaned their bad luck when pretty girls wouldn't give them the time of day.

As the car drove toward the hotel, Gabe thought of his friends.

J.T. had grown up on a cattle ranch near Omaha and still lived there with his wife and four adorable kids. Tam had become a health teacher and high school football coach. His wife also taught at the same school, and their two daughters were so smart they were scary. Mike had a degree in agribusiness, but had spent three years on the rodeo circuit before he'd taken a job working for a company that produced and tested wheat seed. His wife managed the bank in the small town where they lived, and their three boys helped Mike with their farm.

Gabe felt like his friends had all grown up and moved on while he'd fallen into a corporate rut where the years flew by but nothing changed. He figured he'd wake up one day, look in the mirror, see an embittered old man, and wonder what had happened to his life.

In his twenties, and even his early thirties, Gabe had been quite popular with the ladies, but none of the women he'd dated had interested him enough to envision waking up next to them for the duration of his life. The ones who weren't out to latch on to his family name and fortune didn't seem smart enough to know they should be digging for gold in his deep pockets.

By the time he was thirty-five, he'd given up on meeting someone special and buried himself in his work.

Now he was in his early forties, and he'd recently realized life was passing him by. No amount of money could turn back the clock.

On the verge of falling into a maudlin state, Gabe looked out the car window as it pulled up to the hotel and stopped at the entry. He tipped the driver although he knew the tip had already been paid with the car reservation, then got out and strode into the lobby. As he headed for the front desk and

checked in, he didn't take even a moment to admire the grandeur of the lobby.

"Have the other gentlemen in my party arrived?" he asked after he'd checked in. He took the room key from the front desk agent and slid his wallet into his pocket.

"Yes, Mr. Gatlin. They arrived about twenty minutes ago."

Gabe nodded. "Thanks." He tipped the clerk and, once he arrived at his room, he also tipped the porter who'd insisted on carrying his bags.

The moment the porter closed the door behind him, Gabe released a long breath, grateful for the silence. He then hurried to change into a pair of worn jeans, sneakers, and a football jersey. He yanked on a ballcap with the team's logo on the front, stuffed his phone and wallet into his pockets, then sent a text to J.T. with his room number. It was time to shift from career man into football fan.

## Chapter Two



“Go! Go! Go!” Gabe chanted then shot a fist into the air in victory. He turned and gave J.T. a high five as their team made a game-winning touchdown in the last five seconds.

“Man, that was close,” Mike said, fist-bumping Gabe, then Tam as the four of them watched the two teams pour onto the field as the game ended.

“Too close, but they won.” Gabe grinned at his friends and drained the bottle of soda he’d been drinking. “That’s the important thing. Our annual game night gathering would have been a bust if they’d lost.”

“Are you kidding?” Tam shot him a disbelieving glance, then waved his hand around the suite from where they’d watched the game in climate-controlled comfort. They were the only four in the room, the chairs were comfy leather seats, and Gabe had arranged, with Eddie’s assistance, for catered food to be delivered throughout the game, starting with appetizers and ending with an assortment of desserts.

“Even if the team didn’t make a single score, it would’ve still been awesome, Gabe,” Mike said, perusing the desserts and choosing another apple tart. “We’re all so grateful to you for making this get-together possible.”

“Hey, it’s my pleasure. I just wish—” The buzzing of Gabe’s phone made him stop mid-sentence and glower at the screen. “She is relentless!”

“It’s not your sister again, is it?” J.T. asked, grabbing a handful of popcorn. “Hasn’t she called or texted like ten times already?”

“Eleven, but who’s counting?” Gabe grouched as he refused to answer the call. Before he could stuff the phone back into his pocket, it beeped with the arrival of a text. He glanced at the text from Monique and wondered if something had happened to his parents or if the company headquarters had burned to the ground based on the urgent tone of her message.

*Emergency! Plz read email now!*

Gabe opened his email and glanced through a dozen messages until he saw one from his sister titled “Holiday Schedule.”

He scrolled through the schedule that began with Thanksgiving lunch at a posh restaurant Gabe hated and ended with a New Year’s Eve party held at the home of Chadwick’s family, whom he also despised. There wasn’t a single day between the two holidays that didn’t have a party, charity luncheon, gala, auction, or swanky event scheduled that Monique hadn’t monopolized with her ludicrous schedule. To make matters worse, on each day she’d made notes of what he



should wear, the women he was to escort, and the gifts he would be expected to bring.

Monique had added a note to the schedule that she needed his confirmation on all the details right away.

“If she thinks this constitutes an emergency, she’s completely loony.” Gabe started to tuck his phone back into his pocket, but J.T. grabbed it from him.

“What’s going on? You look like you’re about to go all enraged madman on us and rip something, or someone, apart.” J.T. glanced at him, then read the schedule and message from Monique. “Your crazy sister has been hounding you for hours about this ridiculous schedule she made for you? Is that what this is all about? Are you seriously going to wear a candy cane striped suit to a luncheon and escort a woman named Mabel Bloomberg?”

“No and no. I’m not replying to Monique. I’m not going to any of these events, and I’m for sure not wearing a stupid candy cane suit or escorting some woman named Mabel. If Monique thinks I should ask her to be my guest, then she’s already on my never-want-to-see list. For all I know, she could be an octogenarian looking for husband number nine.”

Tam and Mike tried really hard not to laugh, but they couldn’t hold it in. Soon all four of them were chuckling. As they gathered their things to leave, Mike placed his hand on Gabe’s shoulder. “We generally only see the fun stuff you get to do, Gabe. I think we all forget about the responsibilities you have that would be hard to endure.”

“Thanks, man. I can usually muddle through most of it without a problem, but I’ve been dreading the holiday season for this very reason.” Gabe held up his phone and waggled it, indicating the schedule from his sister and her annoying perseverance in making sure he saw it.

When his phone rang again, he turned it off.

“Have you ever thought about taking a vacation for the holidays, dude?” J.T. asked as they made their way out of the arena and toward their hotel a few blocks down the street. He

held his hands up with all the panache of a barker at a carnival. “Picture escaping somewhere tropical for a month and enjoying sandy beaches and beautiful girls in bikinis instead of becoming an escort for your sister’s friends.”

Gabe scowled at J.T. as they waited at a crosswalk for the light to change. “It’s not like I can just run away from my responsibilities.”

“Why not?” Tam asked. “What if you did the unthinkable and took some time for yourself? Other than this game and the few weekends you go to the ranch, when was the last time you took a vacation?”

“It was ...” Gabe couldn’t remember the last time he’d taken an entire week to do something he wanted to do. Years had passed since he’d gone more than a day without responding to phone calls, text messages, or emails.

“You can’t remember, can you?” Mike asked as they entered the hotel and crossed the lobby.

“Honestly, no. I can’t.”

J.T. pushed the elevator button and looked at Gabe. “Maybe it’s time to think about scheduling a vacation. You’ve earned it if you usually put up with anything close to the ludicrous things your sister has planned between now and the new year.”

Gabe couldn’t shirk his duties, but he sure liked the thought of it. Before he asked his friends for more ideas about vacation spots, he shut down that line of thinking. They could stay up half the night cracking jokes, but he couldn’t spare the time.

The game had run late, and Gabe had meetings starting at nine in the morning. If he wanted to be prepared for them, he needed sleep.

He bid his friends good night, promised to eat breakfast with them in the morning, then took a shower and went to bed.

Rather than sleeping, though, his mind continued to toy with Tam’s question.

Why couldn't he run away? Why couldn't he take a week or two for himself and just exist without someone demanding his attention, money, time, or input?

Between Eddie and the vice president of Daniels Realty, he knew the office could survive without him there for a while. There wasn't a single event that he needed to attend, even if his father and sister thought each member of the family had to be present and accounted for, giving a good Gatlin showing, as they referred to their appearance at social obligations.

The more he thought about it, the more Gabe liked the idea of not just unplugging, but disappearing for a week. He was so tired of work. So tired of his family and their unreasonable expectations. So tired of smiling and shaking hands with people he'd rather not associate with at all. He was tired of telephone calls and text messages at all hours of the day and night. What had happened to the common courtesy of only doing business during business hours?

With a decision taking shape in his mind, Gabe finally rolled over and fell asleep. He awoke at four and began setting plans into place. The first thing he did was cancel all his meetings for the day.

After searching online for used vehicles, he found one he thought would do, then went down to the ATM machine in the hotel's lobby and withdrew the maximum amount allowed. He recalled seeing a bank just up the street and walked through the nippy air in the early morning darkness to see what time it opened.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a sketchy guy in a dark trench coat eyeing him, but considering his current frame of mind, Gabe almost dared him to try something. He hurried back to the hotel, made a reservation for a car to pick him up following breakfast with his friends, and packed the last of his things, wishing he'd thought to bring something other than suits, golf shirts, and khakis, or a football jersey to wear. He'd worry about buying clothes later.

He dressed in a pair of khaki pants and a golf shirt, slipped on a pair of comfortable loafers, then smoothed his hair. Although he wanted to share his plans with his friends, he figured the less they knew, the better, in case someone came to them asking questions later.

Working at a frantic pace, Gabe canceled his meetings for the coming week, made generous donations to the charities whose fundraisers he had no intention of attending, then sent Eddie an email to let her know he'd dropped his meetings and to reschedule them in January.

After turning off his laptop and tucking it into his bag, Gabe hurried to the hotel's restaurant and requested a table for four. He'd just sat down with the local newspaper and a cup of coffee when J.T. joined him. By the time they'd both read the comics and sports sections, Tam and Mike appeared. They all indulged in hearty breakfasts. Gabe ate four fluffy pancakes smothered in butter and syrup as well as a double order of bacon.

"You planning on not eating again for a while?" Tam asked as he finished off a Denver omelet.

"I don't think I'll have time for lunch today." Gabe dipped the last bite of pancake into a pool of syrup, then stuffed it in his mouth.

"What's going on? I thought you had a meeting with some fancy-pants property owner."

Gabe shrugged.

"Come on, dude. Talk to us. Something is going on," Mike said, dragging the final bite of his biscuit through the last remaining glob of gravy on his plate. "I'm trying to picture you dressed like a giant candy cane and it just doesn't gel in my brain. You're about to do something that will send your sister into a ballistic eruption of her famed temper, aren't you?"

Gabe grinned. "Maybe, but the less you know, the better. As far as anyone is concerned, I was dressed for my meetings

today when the three of you had breakfast with me. We said our goodbyes, and that was that.”

“But that isn’t that. What are you planning?” J.T. asked, leaning forward with an excited expression on his face. “Are there beaches and babes in bikinis involved?”

Gabe scowled at his friend. “Do you want me to call your wife and mention you are fantasizing about tropical getaways and girls half your age in scantily clad attire?”

“Are you trying to get me killed, dude?” J.T. slapped a hand to his chest in mock agitation, then grinned. “You can tell us, Gabe. What’s up?”

“I’m still working out the details, but I will say I have no intention of following my sister’s directives for the holiday season. After so many years of all their artificial nonsense, I’ve had it. I’m simply not going to participate this year.”

“You’re not going to participate in the corporate drama, or you’re planning to ignore Christmas altogether?” Tam asked.

“Both.”

Gabe was surprised when his friends looked at each other and laughed. “What’s so funny?” he asked, frowning at them.

“You can’t exactly ignore the biggest holiday of the year. It’s everywhere. Unless you plan to isolate yourself in some mountain cabin without any communication with the outside world, you are out of luck, man,” Mike said.

“I’ll figure out something.” Gabe took out his credit card and paid the bill, then glanced at his friends. “Seriously, guys, I’m grateful we can hang out like this for one day a year. Maybe next year, we can plan on a whole weekend.”

“That would be awesome, man,” J.T. said, grinning at Gabe before he drank the last of his coffee. “You know, I’ve got plenty of room at the ranch if you all wanted to come for a week in the spring or summer. You could bring your families.” He looked at Gabe. “And you can be fun Uncle Gabe who spoils them all.”

“I think that’s a great idea. Let’s talk more about it in January.” Gabe glanced at his watch, then at his friends. “I hope all of you have a fantastic Christmas, even if I’ll be pretending it doesn’t exist this year.”

Tam shook his head. “All I can say is good luck with that.”

Together, they made their way out of the restaurant and up to their rooms. They all checked out together, then Gabe’s three friends climbed into an SUV he’d hired to take them to the airport. He waved, made his way to the bank he’d walked to earlier, went inside, and withdrew eight thousand dollars from his account. Anything under ten wouldn’t cause an alert.

He returned to the hotel just as the driver pulled up with the car he’d hired. Rather than go to the airport, however, he had the driver take him to a rental-car agency. From there, he hired a rideshare service to drive him to a private residence that had a vehicle parked in the driveway with a “For Sale” sign stuck in the front windshield.

Although he would have gladly paid the asking price for the 1998 Chevrolet pickup with an extended cab in a deep shade of teal green, Gabe had to make his money stretch. After a test drive followed by thirty minutes of haggling, the owner agreed to accept the thirty-eight hundred dollars Gabe offered for the pickup.

Gabe handed over the cash, took the keys and the title, dumped his bags on the seat, and headed north with plans to make Cheyenne, Wyoming, before he stopped for the night. It wasn’t until he crossed the state line that he fully acknowledged he was actually running away for Christmas.

A sly smile wreathed his face. For a moment, he wished he could be a fly on the wall in his sister’s office when she realized he was hiding out for the holidays.

## Chapter Three



“Eddie, it’s me.” Gabe glanced at the new phone on the seat beside him as he drove out of Boise, Idaho. It had started to snow an hour earlier, but so far, the pickup had handled well on the roads. The gas mileage was ridiculous, but other than that, he had no complaints about the used vehicle. By paying cash for it in a private deal with the previous owner, the purchase should be untraceable. If anyone decided to search for him, he hoped they’d hit a dead end in Kansas City.

“Where in the world are you?” Eddie asked in a terse whisper.

Gabe had called her private cell phone. A number that no one in the office even knew existed except him. Eddie had threatened to remove important body parts if he ever called the number unless it was a life-and-death emergency.

He assumed she might make an exception to her rule just this once.

“On the road,” Gabe said, listening to the sound of her shoes tapping across the tile floors at work. He envisioned her striding away from her desk and ears that might be straining to tune into her conversation.

“Just hang on a minute,” Eddie commanded as a door squeaked. A moment later, he heard what sounded like a motor running. She must have gone to the parking garage to talk.

Gabe turned his windshield wipers up a notch as the snow went from fluffy flakes to small pellets that seemed to be mixed with ice. He hoped he’d either reach his destination or that the snow would stop before dark.

Last night, he’d stayed in a hole-in-the-wall town halfway across Wyoming before rising early and getting on the road by five this morning. He’d stopped for breakfast and fuel in Salt Lake City, then headed on to Boise where he’d eaten lunch and filled his gas tank as well as the two gas cans he’d purchased, just in case he needed them.

In his years at Daniels Realty, especially since he became the owner of the company, he’d traveled all over the country—and many places around the world—but he’d never spent any time in Idaho or Eastern Oregon. He had no idea what to expect and wanted to be prepared. With the way the snow was falling like it might turn into a blinding blizzard, he was glad he’d thought to purchase tire chains the first time he stopped for gas back in Nebraska.

“Okay, I can talk now. I’m sitting in the back seat of my car in the far reaches of the parking garage. I don’t think anyone has stooped low enough to attach a listening device to my vehicle, but I’m fairly certain they’ve got your phone line tapped and your office bugged.”



Gabe didn't have to ask to know "they" meant his father and brother-in-law. Nothing they did would surprise him, although he didn't know why they felt the need for spy games. He was always honest in his dealings and completed scrupulous reports that outlined every detail of the business he conducted. His father had always been a paranoid control freak, and it appeared Chadwick was doing his best to imitate someone he clearly admired.

Based on Eddie's comments, Gabe was grateful he'd purchased a new cell phone in Kansas City. He hadn't been willing to toss his old phone, but he'd turned it off and pulled out the battery after transferring the few contacts he wanted to have on hand to his new phone.

"Where are you? What's going on?" Eddie asked in a hoarse whisper.

"If I tell you where I am and what I'm doing, do you swear to keep it a secret, Eddie? I need to know you won't share the info with anyone. Not even Mom."

"Of course, Gabe. You know you can trust me. I promise on my pension that I won't breathe a word of anything you share with me."

Gabe knew he could trust Eddie without asking. It's why he'd called her in the first place. "You know that file folder you brought to me the morning I left for the football game? The one from Chadwick?"

"Yes. He asked if you'd taken it with you. I told him I had no idea. I assume you've been studying it."

"I have. The name on all the information about the house is wrong, except for the original deed. I think that's why no one could figure out anything about it." Gabe swerved to miss what looked like a bag of pink foam insulation, then returned to the conversation. "The house in question is the one where my grandmother grew up. I want to see it in person before I decide if we should sell it or keep it. Technically, it belongs to Mom, but the company has been paying for the upkeep. Also, after Monique bugged me to death during the football game

and sent the most ridiculous holiday schedule I've ever seen, I decided I just can't do it this year."

"Do what?" Eddie questioned, sounding confused.

"Christmas. The holidays. The whole shebang of mindless socializing and meaningless fluff. I've decided to get away for a week, or maybe four, and avoid my family for the holidays. I know I have a full slate of meetings, but will you cancel everything from now through Christmas? I doubt I'll be back before then, and there's nothing that can't wait until January."

"Well, it's about time, Gabe. I'm glad to see you still have a little gumption. Your grandfather would say 'atta boy' and tell you to have fun on your adventure."

Gabe grinned. "That he would, Eddie. If anyone asks, tell them I've given you strict orders I'm to be left undisturbed. If an emergency arises, they can contact me via email. Under no circumstances will you share this phone number."

"What phone number?" Eddie asked with humor in her voice. "I think you deserve a little time away from the office, boss. Enjoy every minute of it. I promise I won't do bodily harm if you want to call my cell phone and get updates until you return, but it might be best if you call either before or after work."

"Thanks, Eddie. You're a jewel. Inform Chadwick I said to give you a ten-percent raise and add a zero to your usual Christmas bonus. If he has any questions he can email me."

"I'll do that, Gabe. Thank you. Can you tell me where you're going in case I need to send something to you?"

"Summer Creek, Oregon. It's in the eastern part of the state in a fairly unpopulated area. I think Burns is the closest town of any size. Just don't look it up on your computer at work. If Dad and Chadwick are truly tracking things, they'll be able to go through your browser history."

He heard Eddie suck in a gulp of air. "Eddie, old girl, are you looking up naughty things on the office computer?" he teased.

“No! For your information, I ordered ... well, never you mind what I ordered, but it was on my break. I’m going to clear my browser history right now. Be careful, Gabe, and let me know you made it there in one piece.”

“Will do. Bye, Eddie.”

The call disconnected, and Gabe shifted his entire focus to driving on the slick roads. By the time he reached Burns, his hands ached from clenching the steering wheel. When he filled up with gas and bought a few groceries, he casually asked about Summer Creek and discovered it was less than an hour away.

He figured he had about an hour and a half of daylight left and wanted to make use of it. He followed the directions on his phone to turn off the highway onto a paved road that headed northwest. In the distance, he could see mountains. The whole landscape was far, far different from the ranch where he’d spent so many joyful hours with his grandparents. There, the land was flat and he felt like he could see almost forever.

Here, rolling hills and high mountains filled his view. Sagebrush grew between fields of wheat and what he assumed would be hay in the summer. Pastures full of fat cattle blanketed with a coating of snow looked like something from a Christmas card.

Gabe thought of his friends laughing at him, warning him it was impossible to escape Christmas. He knew they were right, especially when even the landscape was working against him.

Just when he thought he’d taken a wrong turn, a sign for Summer Creek let him know he was nearly there. He glanced at the address he’d written down for the house and hoped it wouldn’t be hard to find.

As he drove into town, he realized it was a small place with a limited number of streets. Rather than start searching for the house, Gabe traveled along Main Street, taking in the newly opened hotel that had been completely renovated and restored. He drove past the grouping of old buildings featured

in the historical tours promotion. Across the street, City Hall was already decked out with holiday lights and wreaths hanging on the doors.

He drove past the barbershop where a goat licked the striped pole fastened outside the building. If it got any colder, the animal's tongue might stick to it. Gabe wondered if the wacky beast was the famed Ethel he'd seen online.

There was a gas station, the post office, a grocery store, and a bar and grill. A few more houses lined the street before the borders of the town gave way to more farmland and pastures.

Gabe turned around and drove back through Summer Creek. He'd seen the Second Avenue sign toward the other end of town. If he remembered correctly from the map he'd looked at that morning, he needed to turn west on Second Avenue and the house should be down a few blocks near the railroad tracks.

He stared at the goat as she sauntered down the sidewalk, munching on a bright-red length of ribbon. Perhaps the barbershop's pole failed to provide much flavor, although he doubted the ribbon would be much of an improvement.

Gabe drove past the fountain and old buildings again, saw the sign for Third Avenue, and slowed as he neared Second Avenue. He turned onto the street, drove past a Sinclair-owned feed store, crossed Depot Street, and recognized the house he'd studied online.

The large Victorian home looked like something from an old movie set with a turret, dormers, and gingerbread trim decorating a porch that wrapped around the house. Painted a soft hue of dove-gray with white trim, and accented by dark-gray shingles, it had great curb appeal. A picket fence around the house's yard looked as though it had been recently painted.

If Gabe were guessing the size of the lot, he'd say it was probably at least four if not five acres. The house faced Second Avenue, and the lot took up the entire block from Depot Street to Railroad Way. From the information he'd read about Summer Creek, the train no longer passed through town,

so noise from it wouldn't be an issue, making it an excellent location.

Gabe pulled around the corner and drove to the back of the house where he found an old barn that appeared to receive regular upkeep, including a fresh coat of paint.

He wondered if the door to it was locked, and assumed it probably was, as well as the house.

Feeling like an idiot, he realized he should have tracked down the keys, but it was too late to worry about that now. After parking the pickup by the barn, he tried the side door of the large building, but it was locked.

He hurried across the yard, shocked by the feel of the cold air slapping at his cheeks and the snow falling down the neck of his coat. He opened the gate, made his way up the porch steps, and stopped under the cover of the porch that kept the snow from assaulting him.

Gabe had sold enough properties to know most people kept a hidden key somewhere. The trick was figuring out where it was located. He felt over the frame of the back door. Lifted the doormat. Checked beneath the two wicker chairs and the small table gracing the back porch but found nothing. Then he noticed the ears of a cast-iron bunny lawn ornament sticking up through the snow in what he assumed would be flowerbeds in warmer months. He lifted the bunny, turned it over, and found a key tucked into a hidden compartment in the bottom.

“Score!” he said aloud, then looked around as though someone might hear him. No one was dumb enough to be outside in this weather, except an idiot running from the demands of his family who were more than sixteen hundred miles away.

Gabe pulled open the old-fashioned wooden screen door and pushed the key into the lock. At the satisfying “click” sound, he turned the knob, and stepped inside the house. It was cool inside, but not cold, making him think the heat had been left on.

In the last remnants of daylight, he flicked a switch and light bathed a breakfast nook. An antique round oak table surrounded by four chairs filled a good portion of the space.

A few more steps forward, another flick of a light switch, and he peered into a well-equipped kitchen with oak cabinets and marble counters. The kitchen had been remodeled in the last five or so years, making him question who had authorized the work, and why.

Gabe opened a door to find a large pantry with shelves that appeared to have been dusted sometime in recent weeks. He recalled seeing a maintenance service date for early November. It would seem he'd timed his arrival well to find the house clean and ready for winter.

He returned to the nook, walked into what he thought would be another room, and tipped his head back, getting a dramatic view of a rotunda with a stained glass skylight at the top. Gabe hurried to turn on more lights, then stood in awe, admiring the circular floor plan of the home as well as the hand-carved, curving stairs. To him, it seemed the stairs were the central feature with the house built around them.

Downstairs, in addition to the entry foyer, kitchen and nook, he discovered a living room, a family room with a two-story rock fireplace, a library full of shelves overflowing with books and interesting antiques, a laundry room, guest bathroom, and a short hallway that led to a garage. Inside the garage, he noted the door faced the side street, so it wasn't any wonder he'd missed it.

Gabe pushed a button on the wall, and the garage door rolled upward. He jogged outside, drove his pickup to the side of the house and into the garage, then pushed the button to close the door.

After carrying his things and the groceries he'd purchased in Burns inside, he put the food away, then tried the faucet in the kitchen. No water came out. He turned on the sink in the bathroom with the same result and concluded someone had likely turned off the pump for the winter so water wouldn't freeze in the pipes. In the garage he found the fuse box—

which was meticulously labeled—and turned on the pump and the hot-water heater.

When he returned to the kitchen, water spluttered from the faucet he'd left on. He let it run a few minutes until the water heated, then washed his hands and made a note he'd need to purchase soap and paper towels, along with a few dozen other things if he intended to stay at the house for more than a day or two.

Gabe made his way up the stairs, impressed with the craftsmanship. At the top, he looked down from the landing, and his eyes widened at the intricate star pattern set in the floor made from inlaid oak and cherry wood.

He explored the upstairs rooms, discovering an expansive master suite with a sitting room in a turret, a spa bathroom that looked as though it had never been used, and four more bedrooms, two of them with private baths.

Gabe had expected the house to be outdated and run-down, but he was pleased beyond measure to discover the house had been completely renovated and updated in recent years. He wondered who'd ordered the work and overseen the project. The current style of the kitchen made it clear it had happened long after his grandparents had passed away.

Could his mother have done it? If so, why hadn't she ever said anything about the house, or Summer Creek? All she'd ever mentioned of the place was that she'd spent a few happy summers with her grandparents in a remote Oregon town.

A hundred questions popped through his head, but calling his mother would give up his location, and he wasn't ready to do that. Not just yet.

Gabe wondered if all the antique furniture was original to the house. In the master suite, a cherry-wood bedroom set included a king-size bed with an ornately carved headboard, a dresser with a curved mirror, a tall chest of drawers, and two matching nightstands. The sitting area in the turret featured overstuffed cream leather chairs, a small bookcase, and a coffee table that matched the rest of the furniture in the bedroom. Tiffany floor lamps stood behind the two chairs in

the sitting area, and smaller lamps in a similar style flanked the bed on the nightstands. Even the bedding, which he was surprised to find on the bed, had a vintage damask vibe but felt like it was new.

The room, done in shades of pale gray and deep blue with white accents, looked like it belonged in a Victorian home magazine.

Gabe found the room—and the entire house—to feel comfortable and welcoming. If he listed it on the market, furniture included, he knew the company would make a significant profit, especially with Summer Creek gaining traction as a tourist destination.

However, part of him rebelled at the thought of selling the home that had meant so much to his grandmother.

Gabe wandered back through each room. In a bedroom done in shades of cream and pink, he found a framed photo of his grandmother with his grandfather. Then he noticed several other photographs. From her smile, he was able to tell it was his grandmother in each photo, going back to when she was a tiny girl with ringlets of curls and frilly lace on her ankle socks as she clutched a baby doll in her arms. He concluded the bedroom must have been his grandmother's when she was a young girl.

He took a moment to sit on the bed and imagine her there. He could almost hear her telling him to relax and spend time exploring his past.

Gabe turned off the lights in the upstairs bedrooms, except for the one in the master bathroom, then made his way downstairs. He thought about building a fire to chase away the chill, then decided he should probably figure out where the thermostat was located first. He found it in the breakfast nook and turned up the heat, then went into the kitchen. There were a few dishes in the cupboard, so he rinsed out a bowl, opened a can of soup, and looked around the kitchen until he found the microwave hidden behind a cabinet door. Grateful for the miracle of modern conveniences and a warm, clean home in



which to stay, Gabe bowed his head and offered thanks for the meal. It was the first time he'd done that in a long, long time.

His grandfather wouldn't have been pleased that he'd all but forgotten his Christian upbringing, or at least the upbringing his grandparents had offered when he'd stayed with them.

Gabe ate his soup, along with a handful of chocolate chip cookies from a package he'd picked up at the store, drank a bottle of water, then decided to take a shower and go to bed. He'd had two long days of driving, not to mention months of being constantly on the go.

After making sure the doors were locked and the lights were turned off downstairs, he started upstairs.

Suddenly, he felt so exhausted, he could hardly make it to the second floor. The water wasn't as hot as he would have preferred, so he took a quick shower, brushed his teeth, and climbed between the smooth, crisp linens on the bed that smelled just like the sheets always had when his grandma had washed them at the ranch.

Gabe turned out the lamp by his bed, closed his eyes, and fell instantly asleep.

## Chapter Four



Dani Latham brushed the snow from her windshield while her vehicle warmed. Someday she hoped to have a garage, or even a carport, to park in so she wouldn't freeze her fingers and toes while scraping ice off her windows while her car heated. For now, though, she wouldn't complain. Not when her landlord continued to offer her cheap rent on a snug two-bedroom house on a quiet street in Summer Creek.

Granted, every street in Summer Creek was quiet this time of year. Once snow had loomed in the forecast, the tourist business had all but disappeared.

Part of Dani didn't mind the peaceful atmosphere that had settled over the town in their absence. The other, more frantic part of her that constantly worried about finances wished the tourists would return. Now.

The tourists who had flocked into Summer Creek for the historical tours dreamed up by Emery Cole had been a boon to the town's economy. In truth, before Emery had arrived in Summer Creek, there had been talk of the town dying and everyone moving away. Thanks to Emery's perseverance and vision, Summer Creek was not only surviving but thriving with new businesses and more residents moving in, at least to stay in seasonally open homes during the summer months.

Another reason for Summer Creek's recent popularity could be attributed to the local outdoor guide, Parker Princeton. Last year, he began endorsing products for Jon Sinclair's variety of enterprises, including the popular Tundra line. The videos he was in, including two that had gone viral, drew additional tourists and outdoor enthusiasts to Summer Creek.

Dani smiled as she thought of Parker having to hire two new staff members after his lone long-time employee, Zadie, had wed Deputy Knox Strickland in a lovely spring ceremony. Zadie had cut her hours significantly, reveling in the bliss of being newly wed.

Who could blame Zadie, though? She'd married a man who could give Captain American impersonators a run for their money. Not only was he incredibly handsome, but Knox was also sweet, gentle, and kind.

If Dani were tossing out wishes to swirl with the snowflakes blowing around her, she'd wish to meet a good, solid, caring man like the deputy, or Parker, or even Hud Cole, Emery's husband.

"Yeah, right. Like you'd know what to do with him if Santa dropped a man right in your lap." Dani shook her head. "Get real, you dork," she mumbled as she finished scraping her windshield and tapped the side of the scraper against her leg to dislodge the ice and snow.

She could envision the look on her face if a man did fall into her lap. She'd likely shove him onto the floor and run the other direction instead of waiting around to see if he'd offer her a holly jolly holiday.

Besides, how would Seth react to a man in her life? It had always been just the two of them. Her son was fifteen and a great kid, but she was determined to provide stability and security for him regardless of what she thought she wanted.

Dani sighed, then decided she needed to shift her perspective and attitude to one of gratitude. In the past, it always cheered her up and helped her realize she was richly blessed.

She climbed into her SUV, which she'd purchased used two years ago from one of the teachers at the school who'd decided the vehicle was too big for them and wanted a smaller car.

"I'm thankful for this dependable vehicle that takes Seth and me where we need to go." Dani pulled onto the street and drove past the vet clinic where Ethel the goat rubbed against a fence post. At least once a day, the meandering goat could be found there. The vet made sure she received a decent meal.

Ethel liked to eat, well ... everything. Dani had seen her munching on rotten produce tossed out at Neil's grocery store, rubber boots she'd stolen off a porch, and even an umbrella the wind had blown down the street. Nothing seemed to phase Ethel.

"I'm thankful for Ethel. She might be a loony goat, but she's our town mascot and provides all of us with entertainment and a point of connection."

Dani stopped at the bank and rushed inside to deposit her paycheck. She worked at the Broken Bucket Bar & Grill. The place had originally been a saloon, then a restaurant, and it now had a bar on one side with the restaurant on the other. Most of the people who sat in the bar were overflow seating from the restaurant, although a few regulars ought to have had their names engraved on the barstools because it seemed like they were always there.

Owen Thorpe, a renowned chef who'd come to Summer Creek when his uncle had left him the business, was a great boss. Dani hadn't minded working for Owen's uncle, but he'd never been understanding when she had to rush off because Seth was sick, or there was an emergency.

However, Owen always told her family came first. He'd also given her a split shift, which was great because she was home when Seth left for school and when he came home. Dani arrived at the Broken Bucket at ten, stayed until two, then returned at five and worked until closing time, which was usually at nine, but sometimes stretched to ten or eleven on the weekends. Essentially her job was like having a three-hour lunch each day, but it gave her time to run errands, take care of appointments, and be available for her son.

Seth had started working three days a week for Owen, washing dishes and helping to clean up. Generally, he worked two school nights, and on Saturday. Dani was proud of her son. He worked hard, did a good job, and always had a smile to share with everyone. Her sweet boy was a little on the shy side, but she'd noticed he'd started to come out of his shell in the past year after becoming good friends with Logan Knight.

Dani thanked the teller at the bank who gave her a deposit slip, then she hurried back out into the cold, eager to return to the warmth of her vehicle. She thought about Logan as she drove to Main Street and turned toward the far end of town.

Logan was the same age as Seth, but the poor boy had basically raised himself. He'd run away when he was nine and lived on the streets until he bummed a ride with a truck driver and ended up in Summer Creek. He'd hidden in an empty house on Jossy Knight's land, only that was before she'd married Nate Knight. Logan had accidentally set the house on fire and Jossy had saved him.

For reasons no one could explain, she and Logan had bonded instantly. When Jossy declared her plans to adopt Logan, Nate, who was the city attorney, was able to speed things along. Logan officially took the name of Knight about the time he and Seth became friends. Despite his rough past, Logan was a good kid. It seemed as if everyone from his

seven-year-old cousin, Cricket, to his grandmother Nell all worked to instill manners in the boy and help set his moral compass in a favorable direction.

Dani liked Logan. He had a great sense of humor, was as smart as a whip, and could be counted on to do what was right instead of looking for trouble. She thought that could be part of why he and Seth got along so well. They shared many similar interests, but they were also just nice kids.

“I’m thankful for my son and the fact that he rarely causes any trouble. I’m grateful for Logan, because his friendship means the world to Seth. I’m thankful for the Knight and Cole families because they’ve all been so kind to me.”

Tassie Easton waved at Dani as she pumped gas at Whitey’s station into Mrs. Finley’s blue boat of a car that had rolled off a showroom floor sometime in the disco decade.

“I’m thankful for the residents of Summer Creek who add color to the world around us.” Dani rolled to a slow stop as Emery Cole and Nate Knight, Emery’s brother-in-law, crossed the street from City Hall to the Edwardian-era buildings that were the centerpiece of the Walk Through 1910 Tours.

Emery had been the driving force behind renovating and restoring the buildings in Summer Creek. Because of her marriage to local rancher Hud Cole and her refusal to return to her parents’ home in Portland to live, Emery’s father had purchased the old hotel that had looked like only a wrecking ball could have improved its appearance. After months of restoration and remodeling, the hotel had opened in the spring. Emery had taken Dani on a tour of the building. From the posh top-floor apartment where Emery’s parents stayed when they were in town to the lobby that looked like something from a *Downton Abbey* set, it was breathtaking.

Dani smiled and waved at them, feeling a pang of jealousy as Emery kept a hand on the mound of her belly. She and Hud were expecting their first child together in February. Hud’s daughter, Cricket, had declared Emery her new mother

long before Hud was ready to admit he was in love with the city girl.

Their love story was one of many that had blossomed right there in Summer Creek in the last year and a half. First Hud and Emery, then Jossy and Nate, followed by Parker and Princess Poppy.

Dani still had trouble wrapping her head around Poppy Princeton being a princess from a country she'd never heard of until the paparazzi had arrived in Summer Creek last year searching for her. Poppy had married Parker, renovated an old house that had been constructed by the local lumber baron, and opened a nursery and florist shop called Briden's Blooms.

"I'm grateful we have several fun places to shop in town now." Dani thought of the days when she used to have to drive to Burns, which was about forty-five minutes away, to purchase anything beyond basic groceries. In the past year, the feed store had been taken over by Sinclair Industries and expanded what it carried. Dani could buy clothing, gifts, and the treats Ethel liked so well all in the same store.

There were gift shops in some of the restored historical buildings. Poppy's florist shop carried a great assortment of gifts and home décor. Even Russell's Antiques and Treasures, which had been in Summer Creek for years, offered less yard-sale junk and more vintage items someone might actually want in their home. The latest gossip around town was that two sisters were thinking about opening a shop that sold fabrics and handmade soaps. She hoped they would make it work. There could never be too many stores to browse through, at least in her humble opinion.

"I'm thankful for money to pay my bills and the tips that give me a little extra," Dani said as she parked at the Sinclair store and picked up her purse. Two months ago, she and Seth had been in the store and he'd practically begged her to buy him a leather jacket. It was buttery soft and outrageously expensive, part of the famous Lasso Eight line, and Dani couldn't afford it. She'd hated to tell Seth no because he asked for so little.

Seth had nodded understandingly and wandered off to look at jeans, which was the reason they'd gone to the store.

The next day, Dani had returned to Sinclair's and put the jacket on layaway. She knew if she were careful with her money, she could buy the jacket for Seth for Christmas. Thanks to a bustling fall season, she'd been able to set aside money for the jacket as well as a few other, far less expensive gifts. Although she could have paid off the jacket and taken it home today, she chose to leave it on layaway. If it remained at the store, Seth wouldn't accidentally find his gift, and she wouldn't be able to cave to her desire for him to have it and give it to him early.

She'd already talked to the store manager, Jack Olsen, about picking up the jacket on Christmas Eve. He'd promised it would be gift wrapped and ready for her to slide beneath her tree.

Excitement about the upcoming holiday season filled her as she entered the store and breathed in the spicy scent of the candles interspersed throughout a Christmas display that featured products from several of the Sinclair Industries lines. Dani still had a bunch of Christmas shopping to do, and she wondered if her boss would enjoy one of the Tundra tumblers. He was always drinking coffee, and the cups were known to keep it hot for hours. She could fill it with Owen's favorite chocolate candy.

Quickly deciding to purchase it while she was thinking about it, Dani selected a dark-gray tumbler, then browsed through the other gifts. She ended up getting a basket and adding a pair of wool socks for Seth. The last time he and Logan had gone with Parker up to the woods, he'd returned home complaining of his toes being cold.

She looked for something she could give to Knox and Zadie for Christmas. They were among the people she considered good friends for many reasons, not the least of which was the fact that Knox had been teaching Seth and Logan, as well as another boy named Chris, basic mechanic skills. Seth had impressed Dani a few weeks ago when he'd checked the oil in her SUV, discovered it was low, and added



more. She'd never known how to do anything beyond taking her car in to have the oil and filters changed when she could afford it.

Dani's eye landed on a huge "Welcome to Christmas" sign that looked like something Zadie would like. The price tag on it was almost five hundred dollars. Dani took a step away from it as though it were made of fragile glass instead of sturdy wood. If she had the wood, she could paint her own sign.

Inspired, she looked around the store to see if they had anything that would work for that, but nothing was the size or shape she wanted.

A smaller sign made of slats of wood gave her the idea of creating her own wood background using an old pallet.

With a plan in mind, Dani selected a fragrant candle labeled "Christmas Day" and a bag of mints she rarely purchased, then headed to the checkout counter. On the way there, she spied a clearance rack and browsed through it. A Lasso Eight blouse in her favorite hue of ruby red caught her eye. Although it was sleeveless, she loved the high neck and style of it. Even better, it was seventy percent off.

"Merry early Christmas to me," Dani muttered as she added the blouse to her basket and headed to the cash register before she found anything else to spend her hard-earned money on. Briefly, she considered putting back the blouse and the candy, but at the last minute, she changed her mind. Last week, she'd had two big hunting groups come through the Broken Bucket on their way home. She'd collected almost three hundred dollars in tips from the men who were a little tipsy and a lot flirty. She'd smiled and nodded and pretended their attention didn't disgust her. She could see wedding rings on several fingers, and it annoyed her the men didn't take their vows and commitments seriously, even if they were inebriated.

"Hi, Dani. Did you find everything you need?" Jack Olsen asked as he began to ring up her items.

"Considering I came in just to make a payment on Seth's jacket, I found more than I needed." She smiled at Jack. "The

front display is great. The scent of the candles really pulled me into the Christmas-shopping mood.”

“That’s the idea,” Jack said with a grin. “Need any gifts wrapped?”

“No, not today, but thank you.” Dani took cash from her wallet and counted it out when Jack gave her the total.

“How much do you want to put toward the payment on Seth’s jacket today?” Jack asked as he bagged her purchases.

“I thought I’d do fifty dollars, then I should only owe another twenty. Is that right?” Dani asked, already knowing how Jack would answer. She’d kept meticulous track of her payments. Years ago, she’d learned detailed accounting was the only way to keep herself out of debt. She made a weekly budget, and she and Seth stuck to it. If they had money left over, it went into an emergency fund she hoped she’d never need to use.

“That’s right, Dani. You still want to leave the jacket here and pick it up on Christmas Eve?”

She nodded at Jack. “Yes, please.”

When she’d first arrived in Summer Creek, he’d been nice to her. At one point, she’d even thought he held more than a passing interest in getting to know her, but after one date, they’d mutually agreed to remain just friends.

Jack took the money she held out to him, made a note of the payment in the layaway records, and handed her a receipt.

“You working today?” he asked as Dani returned her wallet to her purse and then picked up the bag holding her purchases.

“Sure am. I’m glad tomorrow is Thanksgiving, and we’ll all have the day off to enjoy, though. Are you doing anything special for the holiday?”

Jack shrugged. “Just hanging out with family. Eating too much turkey and pie, then watching football while we all groan about our jeans being too tight.”

Dani grinned. “Sounds like fun.”

Jack smiled at her and leaned against the counter behind him where gift wrap hung on the wall in long rolls and a dowel held spools of colorful ribbons. “What about you? Do you and Seth have plans?”

“We’ve been invited to join the Cole family. I think Logan practically begged for Hud and Emery to invite us so he could hang out with Seth.”

“It’s great those two boys have each other. They’re like two peas in a pod.” Jack gave her a studying glance. “How’s the third member of their group getting along?”

“Chris is doing better, I think.” Dani had been hesitant when Knox had suggested getting Seth and Logan together with a boy in their class who was about to end up in the system as a repeat juvenile delinquent. The first time Knox had hosted a get-together for the three boys, Dani had prayed the whole way to the deputy’s house that Chris wouldn’t be a negative influence on her son or Logan, and that the boys would help him see there was more to life than causing problems for others. Knox had spent a few hours that day teaching the boys about tools and how to use them. Since then, they’d had half a dozen lessons with the deputy.

Seth and Logan were still as thick as thieves, but they often included Chris. To his credit, Chris had stopped dyeing his hair weird colors, ceased sulking and slouching, and had given up shoplifting.

Dani was glad. She hated to see anyone waste their future because of something that haunted them from their past. She was a prime example of how one choice could alter a person’s entire life.

“It’s good Seth and Logan try to help that kid. He may still have a chance at a future out of prison,” Jack said, then pushed away from the counter when old Bert Price called to him from the boot section of the store. “Have a great Thanksgiving, Dani.”

“You too, Jack.” Dani hurried out to her vehicle and hoped the windshield wipers would brush off the snow that had accumulated on the windshield so she wouldn’t have to

get out and scrape it. She started the SUV, blew on her chilled fingers, then headed down Second Avenue, intending to follow Railroad Way down to the Broken Bucket. As she left the parking lot, she was surprised to see lights on in the old Victorian mansion across the road from the feed store.

A few times a year, a maintenance crew would show up and take care of trimming hedges, touching up paint, doing repairs, and keeping up the appearance of the house. In the summer, the lawn was mowed and edged every week by a lawn service from Burns.

Two weeks ago, a crew of three men and two women had come and stayed for several days, which was unusual. They'd had rooms at the hotel, but, according to Emery, who usually knew all the gossip in town, the people working on the house were tight-lipped about what they were doing and who'd sent them.

Dani couldn't see a vehicle at the house, but perhaps they'd parked around back or in the garage. The door to it was placed so that it was hidden from the street view and could only be accessed through the side alley.

If Dani could have conjured her dream home, the Victorian house would have been it, at least on the outside. She'd always, even as a little girl, wanted to live in a fancy house like this one. She knew she shouldn't have, but once, a handful of years ago, after the maintenance crew had left in the spring, she'd walked over to the house and peered inside. The shades and curtains had been drawn, so she hadn't been able to see anything, but in her mind's eye, the interior, like the exterior, would be beautiful.

A shadow moved in front of an upstairs window, drawing Dani's gaze to it. Whatever was going on at the house was none of her business. Unless, of course, someone had broken into the old house they'd all assumed was vacant. In that case, perhaps she should mention to Knox it appeared someone was there.

She contemplated what to do as she drove to the Broken Bucket and parked out back in the employee parking area.

After placing an old piece of canvas on her windshield so she wouldn't have to scrape it later, she turned and found Ethel watching her. The goat edged toward the vehicle with her gaze fixated on the canvas tarp.

Dani shook a finger at the goat. "Do not eat that, Ethel, my girl. I need it to keep the snow off the window."

The goat bleated and rubbed against her leg as Dani took a treat from her purse and fed it to Ethel, then made her way inside through the back door. She stowed her coat and purse in the employee lockers Owen had added to their break room three years ago, washed her hands, tied a black apron with the Broken Bucket logo around her waist, then wadded her long blonde hair into a messy knot on top of her head. After checking to make sure she had a notepad and pen in her apron pocket, she clocked in and got to work.

Seth had asked to go with Logan to the library after school, where the two boys were going to help Nate and Emery set up a holiday display in what everyone referred to as the Time Capsule. Emery rotated items in the display, creating a place people came back to visit to see what was new.

Apparently, one of the older residents who had passed away last month had an attic full of Summer Creek memorabilia that dated back to the 1930s. The old woman's children didn't want any of it, so the entire collection had been given to Emery to use in the displays.

Seth was excited about helping choose what to put in the display. He and Logan seemed to get a kick out of all the history that surrounded their tiny town. For years, the population had never exceeded five hundred, but with the recent additions, they were now approaching five hundred and fifty, if they counted the summer-only residents.

"How will we handle the boom?" Dani muttered to herself.

"What's that?" Owen asked as he looked up from braising a pork roast.

“Just talking to myself, boss.” Dani leaned closer and sniffed the air redolent with thyme and rosemary. “Smells good. Is that a new recipe?”

“Just another experiment.” Owen shrugged. “I’ve got butternut ravioli with a browned butter sauce and steamed broccoli to go with the pork.”

“Yum!” Dani looked forward to sampling the meal. Owen had always been generous with his employees, allowing them to eat a meal for free for every four hours they worked. He often sent Dani home with leftovers for Seth, which was great, especially on the nights her son didn’t work.

“What specials are you running tonight?” she asked Owen as she tucked a few paper-wrapped straws and extra napkins into the pockets of her apron.

“Turkey noodle soup. Hot turkey sandwich with cranberry sauce on the side. The pork dish. Tonight’s featured dessert is my take on pumpkin pie.”

Dani’s eyes twinkled with interest. “Is it the same pie you made last year with the gingersnap crust and cheesecake filling?”

Owen nodded. “Similar. The crust is made out of shortbread with crushed candied pecans.”

“Oh, wow! It sounds amazing,” Dani said as she hurried to fill pitchers with ice water. She checked to make sure the coffee machines were doing their thing, then she dashed out to the front of the restaurant where another server welcomed the first arrivals for dinner.

On a busy night, they had three servers who covered the restaurant, and one in the bar area besides the bartender.

Dani predicted tonight would be hectic with people streaming in for dinner who didn’t want to cook with the big turkey-day meal planned for tomorrow.

The phone jangled, and Dani picked it up on the second ring. “Broken Bucket, may I assist you?”

“Hey, Dani, it’s Knox. Can I get a meat pizza to go? If Owen has anything with lemon for dessert, a piece of it for Zadie, please?”

“Of course. I think there are a few pieces left of the lemon mousse cake from yesterday. Do you want any dessert for yourself? Owen made a pumpkin cheesecake pie.”

“Sure. Add a piece of that to my order. I’ll be there in about thirty minutes.”

“Great. We’ll have that ready for you. Oh, in case I don’t see you when you come in, I noticed lights on at the Lapine house earlier. I just thought I should mention it since it’s usually empty.”

“I’ll drive by on my way there. Thanks, Dani. See you in a bit.”

Dani hung up the call and entered Knox’s order into their automated system, then rushed to greet customers as they arrived, a gust of cold air and a flurry of snow blowing inside with each opening of the door. Dani never tired of glancing at the walls of the entry which were lined with photographs that covered every decade of Summer Creek’s existence. One of her favorites was a recently added photo of Knox and Zadie. Up until her wedding day, Zadie had refused to be in photographs or would only pose wearing dark sunglasses and a hat shading her face.

Zadie had confided in Dani about being in a witness protection program for years, but after testifying in a trial in May, she no longer felt the need to hide from the world.

Dani passed through the kitchen and boxed up Knox’s pizza, set the desserts in to-go containers, and bagged them with napkins and the crushed red pepper flake packets that Zadie liked on her pizza.

She carried the order out front just as Knox walked in, brushing flakes of snow from his shoulders.

“It looks like a blizzard out there,” Dani observed through the restaurant’s windows. Darkness had fallen, but the

parking lot lights illuminated the heavy flakes falling from the sky.

“It does look like a blizzard, and the temperature dropped. I’m not sure I like this much snow before Thanksgiving,” Knox said, taking out his wallet and handing Dani his credit card.

She charged him for his order and gave the card back to him. “Did you see anyone at the Lapine house?”

Knox shook his head, dislodging more snow that had been clinging to him. “No. I knocked on both the front and back doors. The lights were off and it didn’t appear that anyone had been outside because my tracks were the only ones in the snow, but I’ll keep an eye on the place this weekend. It’s possible someone passing through in need of a warm place to sleep broke in or something along those lines. It’s too bad Emery and Nate haven’t been able to figure out who owns the place.”

“I agree. All they’ve been able to find is the name of a corporation, but when they called asking about the house, no one there seemed to have any idea what they were talking about.” Dani waved as a group left, then smiled back at Knox. “You and Zadie are going to be out at Hud’s house tomorrow, aren’t you?”

“That’s the plan. Her dad and stepmother are coming here for Christmas. Zadie is so excited about spending the holiday with them. It will be the first in a long, long time they’ll get to be together on Christmas Day.”

Dani placed her hand on Knox’s arm. “I’m so happy for her, Knox. You two enjoy the pizza, and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Dani. If you and Seth want to ride with us out to the ranch, just send a text in the morning, and we’ll pick you up.”

“If it keeps snowing, I might take you up on that kind offer.” For years, Dani had struggled with being independent and not allowing anyone to help her. But in the past few years,



she felt like she'd mellowed, and gladly accepted help when it was offered. She still wasn't comfortable asking for assistance, but maybe she'd get there eventually.

Dani watched as Knox left and Steve and Natalie Park arrived with their daughter, Jasmine, who happened to be Cricket Cole's best friend. Dani always got such a kick out of watching the two little girls interact.

She seated the Park family at a table in the restaurant, then took them menus and glasses of water. While they decided on what to order, Dani refilled coffee cups and carried plates of steaming food to eager patrons. When there was a brief lull, Dani ate a serving of the pork with the ravioli and broccoli.

"Oh, my word, Owen! The pork is so tender, and the ravioli with the butter sauce is off the charts. I hope you'll make it again." Dani took another bite of the ravioli, thinking she could eat three helpings of it and still be hungry for more.

Owen tossed a glimpse in her direction as he wiped the edges of a plate, then set it under the heat lamp before it was carried out to a table. "Glad you like it. I will probably make it again."

"We've had so many people ask if it will be on the menu in the future." Dani shoved in her last bite, then set her plate in the dish pit and wiped her mouth on a napkin. "Just thought you'd want to know everyone is raving about it."

"Thanks, Dani."

Owen turned to answer a question from one of his line chefs, and Dani rushed back out front, carrying four plates as she went.

By eight, the place was empty except for two regulars at the bar. The bartender told them they had five minutes before closing time. The two men drained their glasses and sauntered out the door. Dani locked it behind them, then joined the others in cleaning up, leaving the place ready for business on Friday. She was glad the Broken Bucket only served lunch and

dinner. The Early Bird Café was the spot to head for breakfast, however, they were also open for lunch.

It seemed the community split their time and taste buds for lunch between the two businesses, but dinner was only available at the Broken Bucket, unless someone wanted to run by the grocery store's deli or grab a burrito or chicken strips from Whitey's.

Dani hoped she didn't need any groceries before Saturday, because the Nelson family, who owned Neil's, had declared they were taking two days off for the holiday.

"Take home dessert for you and Seth," Owen said, tipping his head toward the last two pieces of pumpkin pie.

"Are you sure?" Dani asked, even as she reached beneath a counter for a to-go box.

Owen grinned. "I'm sure."

"Do you have plans tomorrow?" she asked as she slid the last of the pie into the container and closed the lid.

"You know, food and football."

Dani rolled her eyes at him. "I assumed that much. I meant are you spending the day with anyone?"

Over the years she'd worked there, she'd never heard of Owen dating anyone in town. He sometimes left Saturday after they closed and didn't return until right before they opened Tuesday for lunch. She liked that all the employees got two days off every week. They needed it after the Saturday-night rush. However, Dani had no idea if Owen left to visit a girlfriend, or what he did when he drove away from Summer Creek.

"Nope."

"I'm sure you'd be welcome to join the Cole family at Summer Creek Ranch." Dani didn't think Hud, Emery, or Nell would object to Owen's presence. In fact, she was sure they'd all welcome him.

"I'll pass, but thanks."

The way Owen turned away from her to scrub the flat top grill made her think he didn't want to discuss it further. She finished her tasks, removed her apron, shrugged into her coat, retrieved her purse, then returned to the kitchen to get the container of pie she'd almost forgotten.

"Have a nice holiday, Owen. If you change your mind, let me know."

"I appreciate that, Dani," Owen said, giving her an unguarded look that made her think he held more pain in his heart than most of them realized. Over what, though, remained a mystery.

She supposed there were reasons they all kept their own secrets. "Have a nice Thanksgiving."

"You too."

Dani gave him one more glance, then hurried outside.

It didn't take her long to remove the piece of old canvas from her windshield and shake the snow from it before she tossed it into the back of the vehicle. Teeth about to chatter, she drove home before giving the heater a chance to chase away the cold.

As she parked at the curb and rushed inside the warmth of the house, she said a prayer for anyone who'd be spending the holiday all alone.

## Chapter Five



Gabe rolled onto his back, stretched his arms over his head, then slowly opened his eyes. He'd pulled the drapes at some point, so he had no idea if it were day or night. He hadn't bothered to look at his watch or cell phone to check the time. He'd needed sleep, and with nothing pressing that he needed to attend to, he'd allowed his body to fully rest.

Vaguely, he recalled getting up a few times to use the bathroom. The last time he'd gotten up, he'd been thirsty and trooped downstairs to retrieve a bottle of water. He'd downed half of it and left the bottle on the bathroom counter so he

wouldn't have to walk on the chilly floors in his bare feet again.

With a deep sigh, Gabe sat up in bed, rubbed the sleep from his eyes, and wondered if he'd managed to get in eight hours of sleep.

He thought about flopping back against the pillows, tugging up the covers, and returning to sleep, but, despite his groggy state, he knew it was time to get up. Gabe tossed back the covers, picked up his watch, and saw that it was half past two. From the bare hint of light sneaking around the edge of the drapes, he assumed it was afternoon.

Not once in his life could he recall sleeping that late. His grandpa used to roust him out of bed with a threat of ice water poured over him if he lingered past seven.

His parents hadn't paid any mind to what time he went to bed or got up, but after all the time spent on the ranch with his grandparents, Gabe was generally an early riser.

He stretched again, twisting his shoulders from one side to the other, then got up and decided a shower would help wake him up. He knew he'd just taken one last night, but it seemed days ago.

Pleased to find the water temperature to his liking, he took a hot shower, then dressed in the lone pair of jeans he had with him and one of his golf shirts. He could choose between the sneakers he'd worn to the ball game, loafers, or his dress shoes, so he tugged on the sneakers and wished he'd thought to bring along a sweatshirt.

He made his way downstairs, admiring again the craftsmanship of the old house. He pictured his grandmother playing on the starburst pattern of the inlaid wood floor in the foyer. Had she ever slid down the banister or roller skated in the hall? Gabe wished she were there to answer his questions.

In the kitchen, he drank a bottle of water, since that's all he'd purchased to drink at the store, and looked over his food options. Unless he wanted canned soup or chili, ramen noodles, or cold cereal, he was out of luck.

Nothing appealed to him, so he decided to go to the grocery store he'd seen earlier. He might even swing by the bar and grill across the street from it and get a meal to go. The idea of something hot that he didn't have to cook held great appeal. So did a cup of strong black coffee. If the bar and grill were not yet open, he thought he'd seen something on the town's website about a cafe. Maybe he could get something there.

Gabe grabbed his coat from where he'd left it last night, went out to the garage, pushed the button to open the door, and scowled to see it was still snowing. In fact, it must have snowed hard all night for the amount that had accumulated. He wondered if there were a snow shovel anywhere on the property. If not, he'd need to purchase one. The Sinclair store would surely have an assortment of them.

The pickup started right up, even though the engine sounded more like a wheezing beast than a purring kitten.

Gabe slid onto the bench seat, kicked the heater on high, and backed out of the garage. He considered leaving the door open since he wouldn't be gone long, then thought better of it. Although he hated to get out in the cold, he did, picked his way across the tracks the tires had made and pushed the button to the garage, then made a mad dash out before the door rolled all the way closed. He really needed to find the garage door opener, if one existed.

Carefully backing around, Gabe drove down the side street and turned onto Second Avenue, then made his way to Main Street. As he drove past the Sinclair store, there wasn't a single vehicle in the parking lot. That was odd. He would have thought they'd be doing a booming business the day before Thanksgiving.

Gabe turned onto Main Street and headed in the direction of the grocery store. Before he pulled into the lot, he glanced over at the bar and grill. No lights were on, and he couldn't see any cars there either.

He drove through the grocery store parking lot and felt relieved to see two cars parked there. It struck him as strange

the store wasn't bustling with last-minute shoppers stocking up for the holiday, though. He parked, got out, and hurried through the snow that quickly soaked into his shoes and threatened to freeze his toes into chunks of ice. He walked up to the electronic door, waited for it to open, then waited some more. Maybe it was out of order. He tried pushing on it, then pulling.

Gabe leaned forward until his nose almost touched the glass, cupped his hands around his eyes to block out the exterior light, and tried to peer inside. He couldn't see anything. There wasn't a single human around. He straightened and noticed a sign on the door that said, "Closed until Saturday."

"Seriously? They can just close the only grocery store on what has to surely be one of the busiest days of the year?" Gabe turned around and tripped over something furry.

He grabbed on to the garbage can to regain his balance and stared at a goat. She looked at him like he was the dumbest human she'd ever encountered.

"Right back at you, girl," he muttered, pondering where she'd found a bright-purple brassiere big enough to hold two watermelons.

The fact that he was standing in the snow with his toes about to get frostbitten, talking to a goat eating lingerie made him wonder if he were having a nightmare. Maybe he'd finally snapped from all the pressure of work and his family and had lost his mind.

Gabe slid his way across the icy parking lot back to his pickup, climbed in, and drove through town.

It was then he realized all the businesses were closed. Even the gas station was locked up tight. No cars drove on the streets or sat in the parking lots.

Cold, hungry, and annoyed, Gabe debated driving into Burns, but decided a trip that would take him at least two hours held no appeal at all.

He turned back down Second Avenue and returned to his ancestral home. After parking the pickup in the garage, he hurried into the house, kicked off his damp shoes, and went straight to the fireplace in the family room. He felt relief to discover it was a gas fireplace and searched for the switch, finally finding it behind a long, narrow needlepoint wall hanging with “Lepiane” stitched amid flowers and vines.

“Please work,” he whispered, then turned on the switch. Nothing happened. He probably needed to turn on the pilot light. Gabe got down on his knees in front of the fireplace, removed the bottom grate, and turned the pilot switch to “on,” then pushed the button a few times to ignite it. A whooshing sound was followed by one flicker, then two, and the fire came to life.

Even if it didn’t kick out any heat yet, it made him feel warmer just looking at it.

Gabe replaced the grate, hurried upstairs to change his socks to a dry pair, then returned downstairs and turned up the setting on the thermostat. He scooted an armchair closer to the fireplace, stretched his feet toward the flames, and started to feel heat soak into his chilled skin.

It took twenty minutes before he decided he wouldn’t turn into a popsicle. He removed his coat and draped it over a chair in the breakfast nook, then went into the kitchen to heat a can of soup.

While it warmed in the microwave, he went upstairs to get his cell phone and discovered the battery had gone dead. He took it back downstairs with him and plugged it in to charge. By that time, the microwave beeped at him, so he removed the bowl of soup and took it by the fire to eat.

He’d eaten two bites when a clawing hunger overtook him. He finished the bowl in half a dozen bites. He warmed a can of chili, ate half of the cookies that were left, and wished, again, he’d thought to purchase more groceries.

Since there wasn’t a television in the house, at least that he’d seen, Gabe plugged in his laptop and choked on the sip of



water he'd taken as he realized it was Thanksgiving Day. No wonder all the stores were closed and no one was around.

But that was impossible, wasn't it? If it were Thanksgiving, that meant he'd fallen asleep Tuesday evening and slept all the way through Wednesday and a good part of today. Could a human being really sleep that long?

Gabe supposed a person could since he'd just done that very thing. He tried to recall the last time he'd gotten more than a handful of hours of sleep in a night and couldn't. He was often working late or rising early, or both. Not only that, but he constantly felt as though he were under pressure from his father, and more recently Chadwick.

If his grandfather were alive, he'd take matters in hand and remind them all that life isn't about money, but the people you love.

For the first time in his life, Gabe missed his family. He'd never spent Thanksgiving completely alone. The house suddenly seemed far too quiet. Too lonely.

He set aside his laptop, rose from the chair by the fire, and began a thorough inspection of each room in the house. Upstairs, he opened a door he'd missed on his original tour and found himself looking at a large screen television with leather recliners grouped around it, theater style. The last thing he'd expected to find in the house was a media room, but he was grateful it had one. If only he had some popcorn, he could settle in and enjoy the afternoon.

Gabe located the remote, turned on a football game, and plopped into a recliner. Exhausted, he let his eyes drift shut, and allowed sleep to claim him again.

Awakened with a start, Gabe bolted upright. The television blared the morning news from a station out of Bend, reminding shoppers to be careful as they battled the Black Friday crowds.

Gabe couldn't believe he'd fallen asleep and slept all night and half the morning in the recliner. He got up, turned

off the television, made a pit stop in the bathroom of the master suite, then returned downstairs.

The gas fireplace had heated the entire bottom floor of the house, and it felt wonderful to bask in the heat. Gabe flicked off the fire, though. Until he ascertained if it ran on a tank or was piped in from a different source, he didn't want to waste the fuel more than he already had.

He ate a bowl of cold, dry cereal thanks to his oversight of not buying milk, then decided he had to get warmer clothing. He couldn't even go outside and look around the property with his silly sneakers and coat that was meant to look nice with a suit, not keep him warm in a blizzard.

He yanked on his sneakers, trying not to cringe as they sucked what little warmth he had from his feet, and went to the garage. After he opened the door and started the pickup, he made a thorough search of a built-in cabinet by the interior door and found the garage-door remote.

Buoyed by his success, he got in the pickup, backed out of the garage, and pushed the button on the remote, delighted to stay in the warmth as the garage door rolled down.

He could have walked to the Sinclair store since it was just across the street, but with everything he intended to purchase, he didn't want to carry it all back to the house.

A dozen vehicles sat in the parking lot as he pulled into a space halfway to the door. He didn't waste any time heading inside and snagging a shopping cart.

His first stop was the boot department where he chose a pair of waterproof insulated boots that promised to keep his feet warm in below-zero temperatures. He set them in the cart, then chose a pair of plain black square-toed cowboy boots with a sole that would get good traction even in the snow. He tossed a can of waterproof sealant into the cart. From there, he added several pairs of wool socks, then made his way to the clothing department. It appeared Sinclair's was running a big Black Friday sale on clothing.

Gabe chose four pairs of jeans, a leather belt, half a dozen T-shirts, two thick sweatshirts, three flannel shirts, and three Lasso Eight pearl-snap western shirts. He added a heavy insulated chore coat and a pair of coveralls, gloves, and a stocking cap, as well as a black cowboy hat to his overflowing cart.

Mindful that the grocery store was closed until Saturday, Gabe chose several bags of snacks and three bottles of soda. He was almost to the cash register when he saw a display of snow shovels and veered in that direction. He chose a shovel with a sturdy handle, then grabbed a few jugs of deicer.

A stack of fleece blankets that looked warm caught his eye, so he added a dark-blue one to his cart, then headed to the register and stood in line behind a woman with purple hair who had a behemoth dog with her. She visited with the college-age kid at the register like they were old friends, then paid for her purchases and made a kissy face to the dog.

“Come on, Buddy. Time to go,” she said and slapped her hand against her thigh. The dog lumbered to his feet and followed her out the door.

“Welcome to Sinclair’s. It looks like you’re stocking up,” the kid said in a cheerful tone. “Are you here visiting family or just passing through?”

“Yep,” Gabe answered, unwilling to divulge any details to a perfect stranger. No one needed to know he was taking up temporary residence in the home that had meant so much to his grandmother. Even in the short time he’d been here, something about the house called to him. He couldn’t bring himself to begin to consider selling it. Not yet.

He’d already decided he’d stay another week before he made any decisions about what to do with the house and if he’d return to Oklahoma City for the remainder of the holiday season.

Thoughts of the holidays brought his sister to mind, and Gabe realized he’d forgotten his phone again. After feeling like it was practically glued to his hand at least twenty-hours a

day, it hadn't been hard at all to forget about it. Not having to answer it constantly offered a certain freedom he relished.

Brought back to the moment when the kid gave him the total, it was far less than Gabe had expected, but he'd forgotten about all the Black Friday deals.

While the sales clerk bagged his purchases, Gabe dug out his wallet from his back pocket, pulled out cash to cover the total, and slid it across the counter.

The kid's eyes widened, as though he'd never seen so many hundred-dollar bills all at once. He counted out the exact change, handed it to Gabe, then piled the bags back in the shopping cart and nosed it toward the door.

"Have a great day, sir. I hope you come back again soon."

"Thanks." Gabe nodded once to the clerk, then pushed the cart outside. He loaded his purchases into the back seat of the pickup, returned the cart inside the store, then went to the gas station. While a friendly young woman pumped his gas, he went inside and filled the largest cup he could find with coffee. The aroma of it made his mouth water, and he took a sip before he looked around and discovered the convenience store carried a few basics like milk, eggs, and bread. He started a pile on the counter, sipping coffee as he made his selections.

"It's too bad Neil's is closed today, but it's sure been good for business," the girl said, grinning at him as she rang up his sale and gave him the total.

Gabe again paid cash, wondering how long he could make it stretch before he was forced to use his credit card. He still had almost seven thousand dollars tucked away in the hidden compartment of his briefcase. That should last him until he was ready to let his family know where he was hiding. If he got in a pinch, he could always have Eddie wire him money.

He wondered if his assistant had a nice Thanksgiving. Eddie had been married for forty years. She had two daughters who were also happily married and had produced five grandchildren the woman adored.

Gabe tried to recall the names of the daughters but couldn't. He really should make more of an effort to retain details that were important to Eddie because she worked so hard to make his life easier. He sometimes thought she put up with him solely because she'd been fond of his grandparents.

Determined to do better where Eddie was concerned, Gabe hauled his purchases out to the pickup, glanced at his watch, and concluded it was too late for lunch and too early for dinner. He drove back to the house, packed everything inside, put away the food, then sprayed the cowboy boots he'd purchased with the waterproof sealant.

While they dried, he hauled all but one outfit of the clothes he'd just purchased into the laundry room to wash, then realized he didn't have any laundry soap. Annoyed with himself, he carried the change of clothes he'd set aside up to the master suite.

In no rush, he took a shower to warm up, shaved because he hated scratchy scruff on his face, and dressed in a new pair of jeans, a flannel western shirt over a T-shirt, and a pair of warm woolen socks. After combing his hair and slapping on a little aftershave, he hung his towel up to dry and rolled his dirty clothes into a ball that he carried downstairs. He dropped them in the laundry room, then went to the nook where he'd left his new outerwear.

Gabe shoved his feet into the winter boots he'd purchased, laced them up, and made sure his jeans were tucked into the tops before he slipped on the new chore coat, tugged on the gloves, and yanked on the stocking cap.

On his way out the door, he grabbed his old cell phone, slid the battery back in it, and stuffed it into his coat pocket.

Now that he was appropriately dressed for the weather, Gabe decided to walk to the bar and grill. Rather than traipse along Main Street, he chose to saunter along Railroad Way. The street appeared to be primarily residential, with homes of a variety of ages and styles. Two houses situated next door to one another looked like tiny homes from a reality show, but he

saw rental signs in the windows and wondered if they'd been Summer Creek's answer to not having a hotel until recently.

When he reached Eighth Avenue, Gabe turned right at the corner and made his way to the Broken Bucket Bar & Grill. He could see cars in the parking lot and lights on inside.

Hunger gnawed at his empty belly as he made his way toward the door. A bump against his leg pulled his gaze down to the goat he'd seen yesterday. Today a piece of red ribbon hung from her mouth, making it look like she had a foot-long tongue sticking out.

"You are an odd duck, aren't you?" He grinned and patted the goat on her back.

Gabe glanced at an old stagecoach in the parking lot, then made his way inside the building. The entry hallway was lined with framed photos from every generation. From what he could see at a glance, the images appeared to go back to the beginning of the town. He took a step toward the hostess station, then glanced at the photos again.

As though a spotlight drew him to it, his gaze landed on a photo of a lovely young woman who looked familiar. He moved closer and studied the image, realizing the woman was his grandmother. She sat astride a horse and held a big cowboy hat high over her head, beaming like she'd just won a race.

"How about that?" Gabe mumbled, then turned to the hostess station. No one was there, but he noticed a sign that said, "Seat yourself."

He tugged off his stocking cap and gloves, tucking them into his coat pockets, then looked into a large open room full of tables. Half of them had people sitting at them, so he turned in the opposite direction. The room was empty except for two guys sitting on stools at the long counter.

Gabe walked into the bar and took a seat in the far corner with his back to the wall, draping his coat over the chair next to him. He took his old phone from his pocket, turned it on, and sighed to see he had forty-seven new text messages and twenty-three missed calls.

He started going through the missed calls from his staff, clients, and family. A server brought him a glass of water and a menu, but he didn't bother to look up as he listened to his sister screeching into the phone, insisting he return home immediately. That call was from Wednesday afternoon.

As he listened to three more calls from Monique, they got progressively more annoying. The call from just an hour earlier ended with her making threats to "have Daddy fire you" if he didn't come home and fulfill his holiday obligations.

"Maybe I don't want to be there," Gabe said, unaware of his dark glower or that he spoke aloud as he scrolled through a dozen of Monique's infuriating text messages. "Maybe I'll skip every holiday from now until the end of time. Maybe I actually despise Christmas and all the hoopla of the stupid, stupid season!"

"Well, aren't you a grouchy one," a teasing voice spoke from beside him, "I believe you could use a dose of Christmas cheer before you whip out the phone book and begin alphabetically listing all the people you hate. Or is it loathe?"

Gabe had no idea about her reference to the phone book, and he didn't care. Irritated at being interrupted, he glanced up and stared at the server.

The stunning woman smiling at him could have been an angel as the overhead lights created a halo around her golden hair. Hers was a rare beauty. The kind that didn't need makeup to enhance it, although she wore a light coat of mascara and lip gloss. She was of medium height and willowy, with high cheekbones, a generous mouth, and hazel eyes that twinkled with mirth. If she lived in New York City, he had no doubt she'd be in high demand as a fashion model. What was a woman with her looks and seductive voice doing in such a backwater place taking food and drink orders?

He envisioned her in a ruby-red velvet evening gown, strolling on his arm to a symphony performance. The picture in his mind was so real, so clear, he felt the oddest sense of knowing this woman deep in his soul.

Dumbfounded by his thoughts, Gabe felt like someone had sucked the air right out of his lungs.

The woman slid the menu closer to him “Chef Owen is one of the best in the Pacific Northwest. You can choose anything and know it’s going to be wonderful. Take a look at the menu. I’ll be right back.”

The angel strode across the room, walked behind the bar, and disappeared through a doorway before he could engage enough brain cells to utter a single word to her.

Gabe picked up the menu, but it might as well have been written in hieroglyphics based on his sudden inability to read. It was like his brain had just decided to take a vacation and left him in the lurch.

He still hadn’t gathered his wits when the woman returned and set a drink in front of him.

A glass rimmed with red sugar crystals held a bright green liquid. Whipping cream formed a peak on top. A red-and-white straw poked through the mound of sweetened cream and held three skewered bright-red maraschino cherries.

“What is that?” Gabe asked, not in the mood to explain why he didn’t drink and wondering why she’d brought him such a colorfully strange creation.

“We call it Green Fuzz. It seemed fitting for you,” she said with a shrug. “Give it a try.”

“I don’t imbibe,” Gabe said, looking up at the gorgeous woman, noticing the cleft in her chin. It stood out when she smiled.

She had an easygoing, likeable manner that made him want to ask her to take a seat across from him and share her life story. He never willingly asked anyone to share more details than necessary. The fact that he wanted to hear her story left him even more rattled than he’d already been.

“I don’t either, but this is a seasonal mocktail I’m sure you’ll enjoy. After all, you grouches have to stick together.”



Gabe scowled, wondering why she'd deemed him a grouch. He'd been sitting at the table, minding his own business, growing increasingly angry by his sister's relentless nagging when she'd uttered that nonsense about a phone book that left him confused. "I'm not a grouch."

"Sure, Mr. Grouchy. Although people who go around saying they despise Christmas and call the holiday season stupid tend to fall into that category."

Just to keep from refuting her statement, Gabe picked up the glass and used the straw to push aside the mound of whipping cream, then took a sip. The drink tasted tropical, bubbly, and not too sweet. Delicious. It was absolutely delicious.

"What's in this?" he asked, taking another drink.

The woman's smile widened, showing off teeth that weren't perfectly straight, but gleamed white in the overhead lights. "You've got a little something ..." She touched her index finger to her upper lip.

Gabe grabbed a napkin from the dispenser on the table, swiped at his mouth, and looked back at her.

"Almost," she said, taking the napkin from him and gently dabbing his lip like she assisted a helpless child.

The moment her fingers brushed over his skin, his body felt both electrified and weightless. No one had ever had that effect on him before. He wasn't entirely certain he liked it now.

"The drink. What's in it?" he asked again, wondering when his brain had splintered and left him with a short circuit. He didn't care about the drink or the fact that the beauty standing by the table had referred to him as a grouch. Not when he fought the urge to pull her onto his lap and taste those kissable, rosy lips that seemed inclined to rest in a smile.

"It's the chef's own blend of fresh pineapple juice, lemonade he squeezes himself, lemon-lime soda, and green food coloring. He makes it every year for the holiday season.

You're the official recipient of the first Green Fuzz drink this year."

Gabe didn't know if it was supposed to be some kind of honor to be served the obnoxious drink that was sure to please pre-teens, but he chose to ignore her enthusiasm. "Do you have any specials?"

The woman rattled off something about soup, a hot sandwich, a turkey platter, or smoky ham with country gravy. He had trouble paying attention since he was intently watching her lips move. His malfunctioning brain latched on to the last thing she'd said.

"The ham, please."

"Coming right up. Would you like a salad with that?"

He shook his head. "No. No salad."

The thought of choking down a plateful of lettuce made him want to gag. Gabe wasn't certain he'd ever eat another salad in his lifetime.

"Any appetizers?"

"No," he replied in a curt tone. Too curt, if her smile melting into a frown were any indication.

The woman gave him a long glance. "Okay," she said, drawing out the word until it sounded like four syllables, then walked away.

Gabe wanted to pound the table in frustration, or maybe slug himself to knock his snarly attitude to the curb.

He could talk to anyone, anytime, anywhere. He could lay on the charm and get people, especially women, to agree to most anything. He'd never once had any trouble being friendly or putting people at ease.

So why, in this tiny town in the middle of nowhere, did he have to encounter an enchanting female who left him so addled he could barely recall his name?

After two more swigs of the whimsically fruity drink that had tantalized his taste buds, even if the name and presentation

were a little over the top, Gabe returned to listening to his voice mail messages. One from Eddie assured him he could ignore all staff and client calls because she was handling things. Not in the mood to listen to his irate father or concerned mother demand he return home immediately, he deleted the remainder of the voice mails along with his text messages, again removed the battery from his phone, and wondered if he could talk his bar angel into bringing him another ridiculous Green Fuzz drink.

When the server appeared through the doorway he was sure led into the kitchen carrying two plates, Gabe couldn't help but watch her walk with a slight sway to her hips. One that didn't look practiced but natural, and entirely enticing.

“Ham steak, mashed potatoes with country gravy, green beans with onion and bacon, seasoned apples, and two hot dinner rolls.” She set the two plates in front of him. One plate held a huge slab of ham that would easily feed three people. Grill marks and the smoky aroma made his mouth begin to water. Or maybe it was the woman's warm fragrance as she leaned forward to pick up his empty drink glass.

“Enjoyed that, didn't you?” she asked with a knowing grin.

Gabe could have denied it, but what was the use? “I did. May I have another?”

“Sure, but I'll leave off the whipped cream this time.” As she turned to leave, Gabe noticed the name tag on her shirt.

Dani.

Somehow the name fit her. To him, the name seemed upbeat and perfect for a person with sunshine in her smile.

Gabe picked up the steak knife on the plate with the ham, lifted the fork from the other plate, and cut off a bite.

A groan escaped him as the smoky, meaty flavor filled his mouth. He loved ham, although he rarely ate it. This was one of the tastiest pieces he'd ever eaten.

Gabe finished another bite before he sampled the potatoes and gravy, and the green beans loaded with bits of sauteed

onion and crispy bacon. “So good,” he mumbled, then tried the apples seasoned with cinnamon and nutmeg, with a splash of something he couldn’t quite identify. The sauce covering the sauteed apples was incredible, holding just the right amount of sweetness to balance the tart apples.

“By the content look on your face, might I assume you are enjoying your meal?” Dani asked as she set another Green Fuzz drink on the table.

“I am. It’s good. Really good.”

“I’ll pass on those high words of praise to the chef.” Dani grinned at him again, and he realized she was teasing.

“You might mention I said the ham was the best I’ve ever eaten and the apples are incredible. The sauce is a smooth yet bold choice bordering on perfection.”

Her eyebrows shifted upward slightly, and her grin widened to a smile. “I’ll try to remember all that. Let me know if you need anything else.”

“Thanks,” Gabe said, offering her a genuine smile before returning his attention to his meal. If he hadn’t been so starved for what he considered real food, he would have observed Dani as she waited on another table, took orders, and disappeared into the kitchen.

Twenty minutes later, when Gabe was so full he was sure he might burst if he ate another bite, Dani appeared with a small to-go container.

“What’s that?” Gabe asked, eyeing the to-go box suspiciously. “I didn’t order anything else.”

“I know, but you can obviously use a little sweetening up. There was only one slice left, and I thought you should have it. Take it home to enjoy later.” Dani slipped his bill on the table and carried away his empty dishes.

When she’d placed all that food before him, he’d planned to have enough left to eat for lunch tomorrow. Instead, he’d found himself ravenously devouring every tasty bite.

Gabe glanced at the bill, dug his wallet from his back jeans' pocket, and was just setting money on the table to cover his meal with a generous tip for Dani, when a man in a chef's coat headed straight for him.

Maybe Dani had complained about his less-than-friendly attitude.

"Hi, I'm Owen Thorpe, chef and owner of this fine establishment." The way Owen said "establishment" made Gabe think the man considered the restaurant more of a dive than fine dining.

Gabe stood and shook Owen's outstretched hand. "Gabe Gatlin. It's nice to meet the person responsible for my fantastic meal."

Owen grinned. "Dani mentioned you enjoyed it. I just wanted to come out and say 'thank you' in person. I hope you'll come back again if you're in town very long."

"I'm uncertain how long I'll be here, but I'll definitely be back." Gabe picked up his coat, hoping he'd see Dani before he left, but she was nowhere in sight.

"Great. Well, have a nice evening, Mr. Gatlin."

"Call me Gabe. And thanks."

As Owen visited a few other patrons, Gabe slipped on his coat and gloves, pulled the stocking cap on, and picked up the container with what he was sure had to be dessert.

With one more glance around, he left and walked home. It wasn't until he was in the kitchen that he opened the container and glanced down at a piece of pumpkin pie. Gabe liked pumpkin pie almost as well as he did ham. Unable to stop himself, he found a fork in a drawer, drew it through the pie, and took a bite.

"Oh, man!" he said, hurriedly forking another bite of what turned out to be a cookie crust filled with cheesecake and pumpkin.

A hot cup of coffee would have been perfect with the pie, but since he didn't have one, or any way to make one, he made

do with a bottle of water. He took the dessert into the family room, flicked on the fireplace, and sat studying the flames as he ate his piece of pie, thinking of a golden-haired angel who'd made him smile.

## Chapter Six



Dani pulled into the grocery store parking lot Saturday morning with a lengthy list. Although she'd gone to the store Tuesday, Seth seemed to be a bottomless pit these days. With Logan and sometimes Chris, hanging out at the house from time to time, she was hard-pressed to keep food on hand.

Thankful for the big tippers who'd been at the Broken Bucket yesterday, she had a little extra cash in her pocket, alleviating her concerns about exceeding her weekly food budget. The biggest tipper of the day was the handsome man she'd teased about being a grouch.

When she'd first seen him walk in, she'd thought he was good-looking, in a rugged way. He'd been dressed in clothes from Sinclair's Feed Store, as were several of the patrons enjoying dinner, but something about him seemed different, although she couldn't pinpoint what.

She'd taken a menu and a glass of water to his table and heard him grouching under his breath about hating Christmas. It made her heart hurt to think of anyone despising a holiday that brought her so much joy. So, she'd decided to tease him into a better mood. After working as a waitress for fifteen years, Dani had gained plenty of skills in dealing with a variety of personality types. She'd assumed a little lighthearted banter might prod him into a better mood, and it had.

As she'd prepared the green mocktail for him, she'd pictured the look of disgust on his face when she sat it in front of him.

He hadn't disappointed her as he'd glared from the drink to her, then something had changed. His expression had softened. She'd seen something in those incredible cobalt-blue eyes that challenged her to make him smile. Determined to succeed, she hadn't stopped until he'd smiled back at her, a genuine smile, then she'd wished she'd minded her own business.

When he wasn't glowering at his cell phone, the man had been undeniably attractive with a smooth-shaven, tanned face and a rounded jawline, but then he'd smiled ... Mercy! Dani had experienced a lightheaded feeling the moment he'd turned the wattage of that smile on her, and deep dimples had popped out in both of his cheeks.

How could a guy who had appeared so standoffish and unapproachable completely change into a boyish charmer just by smiling?

Dani had no idea how, but he'd done it. Even now, thinking about those dimples made her stomach feel like butterflies whooshed into a frenzied flight inside it.

Part of her wished she'd gotten his name, or at least asked if he'd be in town for a while. She wouldn't mind seeing him a



second time, especially if he smiled and flashed those dimples again. However, her interest in the man was exactly the reason she felt relief that he was most likely long gone by now.

In the years since Seth had been born, Dani had only dated a few guys, and no one more than a second date. She didn't trust men and didn't trust herself to be in a relationship. It wasn't so bad, or at least she convinced herself of that. At night, when she curled around a spare pillow and let her dreams out of the box where she kept them under lock and key, she wondered what it would be like to love and be loved. To have a partner in life to share in the joys and sorrows. To go to sleep each night knowing she would never again be alone or lonely.

Dani shook her head to dispel thoughts better left unexplored, got out of the car, and headed toward the door. She was almost there when Ethel ran up to her, bleating, like something had disturbed her. For once, the goat wasn't eating something she shouldn't have been.

"What's wrong, girl? Huh?" Dani asked, rubbing the spot on Ethel's head between her two crooked horns.

Ethel made another bleating sound as she leaned against Dani like she'd found a long-lost friend. Before Dani could figure out what had upset the goat, Ethel moved behind her and pushed on the back of her legs with her head.

Dani laughed and looked over her shoulder. "It's time for me to go in, is it?"

Ethel bleated a third time, then trotted over to where someone had dropped a half-eaten banana in the snow.

Dani smiled at the goat's antics as she went inside the store, tucked her gloves into her pockets, and unwound the scarf from around her neck. After unbuttoning her coat, she set her purse in a shopping cart and headed toward the produce aisle.

It didn't take her long to get everything on her list, also adding a few extra treats. She indulged in a box of Christmas cookie tea that tasted like sugar cookies, and she added a

carton of peppermint-fudge ripple ice cream to her cart. Seth was quite partial to it. A pint container of chocolate ice cream with a “lump of coal” label made her smile and she tossed it in the cart, thinking of the grump she’d encountered the previous evening.

The way the man so easily flowed into her thoughts disturbed her, but not enough to refuse to think about him. Dani might be a mother with no intention of ever getting into a serious relationship again, but a girl could have a fantasy or two.

She pushed her cart out the end of the frozen-food aisle, snagged three bags of close-out Halloween miniature candy bars, and headed to the checkout.

Focused on a beautiful magazine cover that showed a house bedecked for the holidays, she didn’t notice who was in line in front of her until she set a bag of potatoes on the conveyor belt.

When the cowboy wearing a black western hat and boots turned to look at her, Dani caught her breath. It was none other than her grouchy customer.

“Fancy meeting you here,” she said, relieved he was still in town, but plagued by anxiety that she hadn’t imagined how good-looking he’d appeared last night.

“Out doing a little shopping?” he asked, looking over her full cart. She leaned forward, seeing he had everything from cleaning supplies and laundry soap to frozen dinners, as well as a coffee maker and the biggest canister of ground coffee the store carried.

“Looks like you’re stocking up. I take it you are a coffee drinker.” Dani had hated the taste of coffee since the first day she’d awakened with morning sickness when she was expecting Seth. The smell didn’t bother her, but one taste was all it took for her gag reflexes to kick in.

The man just shrugged, hurriedly placed the full bags of his purchases in his cart, and took cash from a leather wallet to pay his bill.

Dani was surprised to see him pay in cash, since most people prefer plastic. For her, paying cash for everything meant she only bought what she could afford. Sometimes it was tempting to whip out her emergency credit card and use it to buy something for Seth, but she hadn't yet. If she'd taught her son nothing else, he'd learned to be careful with his money.

"You working tonight?" The cowboy asked as Dani placed bread, milk, cheese, eggs, and a large package of ground beef on the conveyor.

"Yep. I'll be there. You planning to come in again?"

He shrugged a second time as he returned his wallet to the back pocket of his jeans. She wondered if they'd fit him as well as she'd imagined. Currently, his coat hit mid-thigh and hindered her view.

Shamed by the direction her thoughts took, Dani felt heat suffuse her cheeks, and she ducked her head as she took lettuce, tomatoes, bananas, and oranges out of the cart.

"Maybe. Thanks for last night, Miss ...?"

"Latham. Dani Latham," she said, holding her hand out toward him. "Call me Dani."

"Dani. I'm Gabe."

"Gabe. Like Gabriel, the angel?"

He smirked. "There's not a whole lot angelic about me, Dani." He released the hand she'd been acutely aware of him still holding and nudged his cart forward.

Skin tingling from the contact with his, Dani tamped down the urge to wipe it along the side of her jeans.

*Act like a grown-up, you ninny,* she silently chided herself, then smiled at Gabe. "I'll keep an eye out for you, Mr. Grouchy Pants."

He scowled but tipped his hat. She caught the hint of a wink as he turned and pushed his cart outside.

So much for acting grown-up. She felt more like a thirteen-year-old with her first crush.

“Who was that guy?” Heidi Nelson, co-owner of the grocery store asked as she rang up Dani’s purchases.

“I’m not sure. He ate at the Broken Bucket last night. He was grumbling at his phone. I’m pretty sure if whoever kept texting him had been there in person, he would have ripped them apart. I heard him say something about despising Christmas, so I started calling him a grouch. I even took him one of the Green Fuzz mocktails Owen makes. It was kind of funny. By the time he left, he was smiling. I wonder if he’ll stay around town long.”

“With all the stuff he just purchased, I assume he’ll be here for a while. When I asked where he was staying, he said ‘in town’ like that answered my question. Maybe being in Summer Creek will give him a dose of Christmas cheer. It’s hard not to join in the fun,” Heidi said, following Dani’s gaze as she looked across the parking lot and watched Gabe lean across the cab of an older-model pickup to set the groceries inside. The view afforded by his lifting coat confirmed her suspicion he did, in fact, look good in a pair of jeans.

“Fun,” Dani echoed, although she had no idea what Heidi had said.

She set her purchases back in the shopping cart, paid the total, and thanked Heidi, then headed outside.

Ethel was nowhere in sight, but Dani saw Gabe’s pickup pulling in at Whitey’s up the street. Briefly, she considered following him to see where he was staying, then just as quickly dismissed the idea as bordering on stalker status. If Gabe remained in Summer Creek, it wouldn’t take long for everyone to know where he was staying, who he was, and why he was there.

Dani drove home, grabbed as many bags as she could carry, and hurried toward the front door. Seth swung it open before she reached it and took the bags from her.

“Morning, sunshine,” Dani teased, kissing his cheek. He looked like he’d just rolled out of bed with his hair pinwheeling around his head and a pillowcase crease on one cheek.

Seth grunted and took the bags to the kitchen while Dani returned to the SUV to finish unloading the groceries. As she walked back inside, she breathed in the scents of home, hung up her coat, and set about making Seth’s favorite breakfast of pancakes covered with peanut butter and strawberry jam, served with crispy bacon and fried eggs, while he put away the groceries.

“You seem even more chipper than usual, Mom. What’s up?” Seth asked as he completed the task, then washed his hands while Dani flipped a pancake and cooked it to golden perfection.

“Nothing, honey. What’s up with your hair?” she asked, patting the top of Seth’s head where the strands stood on end. “It looks like you did battle with your pillow and it won.”

Seth grunted again and dropped a coffee pod into their single-cup coffee brewer. Dani had won it last year as part of a prize package when she’d had the best costume at the Harvest Festival parade.

Her son loved coffee as much as Dani detested it. The single-cup brewer was perfect because he could make his daily cup and no extra work was involved for Dani. The pods he used had only cost about a quarter each, because Dani had stocked up when she’d found the brand he liked on a huge sale back in the spring.

Occasionally, she used the machine to brew a cup of hot chocolate or cider. For her birthday, Jossy Knight had given her a large box full of assorted teas, and she had used them sparingly, making the expensive, delicious teas last.

Dani thought about the people she knew in Summer Creek, which was most of the population. They were good people. Kind people. Sure, gossip tended to run rampant through town. A person couldn’t sneeze at the bank and not have the story of it beat them to the gas station, but the

community was caring and dedicated to each other, and it was a safe place to raise her son.

Seth yawned and stretched, his fingertips almost brushing the ceiling. She wondered what had happened to her little boy. Although he was skinny, Seth was tall. When he finished growing, she assumed he'd be an inch or two over six feet, although she doubted he'd ever be a big man. He had her thinner, leaner frame.

Thoughts of frames drew her mind right back around to Gabe. Now, there was a man with a broad set of shoulders, solid thighs, and strong arms. She wondered if he worked out frequently, or just worked outside. He had that outdoorsy look about him. Was he a rancher? A ranch hand? Or a drifter out for a good time?

Drifters didn't generally spend a small fortune on groceries and cleaning supplies, though.

Dani cooked the last pancake and set the plate on the high counter above the stove where she and Seth most often ate. When she'd moved into the small house all those years ago with her baby son, she'd never dreamed she'd still be living there, but the mayor, who owned the house, had made it almost impossible for her to leave because he gave her such a good deal on the rent.

Mayor Mitchell Kane was old enough to be her father and had taken her under his wing when she'd been so young and afraid. She'd knocked on his door and asked about a room for rent. He'd told her the room had been taken, but he had a house she might like.

When he'd opened the door to the house that day, Dani had known in that instant that everything was going to work out and be just fine. Her snug home had an open floor plan. The door opened into a living area with an open kitchen and a compact dining area. The bar separated the kitchen from the small round table with four chairs where Seth and his friends liked to sit and eat leftover pizza from the Broken Bucket.

The eating bar where she and Seth consumed most of their meals ran the length of the counter. The oven was

beneath it, along with the cabinets where Dani kept her baking pans and mixing bowls. The refrigerator and tiny pantry were located opposite of the eating bar, and the sink on the far wall sat beneath a window that looked out into a fenced backyard. Dani had given thanks hundreds of times over the years for the fence that had kept her son safely in the yard, where he could run and play without her worrying about him every second she was inside.

On either side of the great room was a bedroom. Dani's room was larger with a private bath while Seth's room sat next to the bathroom. A back hallway from the kitchen went through a laundry area before opening into the side yard. The mayor had mentioned a few times about his plans to build a deck in the side yard, but it had never happened, and Dani didn't mind. Not when Mitch had never raised her rent and often did things to help her that she didn't expect, like using his snowblower to clean off her sidewalk, or hauling off bags of leaves in the autumn so she wouldn't have to deal with it.

Dani reached out a hand to Seth as she took a seat beside him on a barstool. "Your turn, kiddo."

Seth bowed his head and offered a simple but sincere prayer of thanks for the meal and another day. When he expressed his gratitude for Dani, she swallowed back the emotion that welled in her and added her "amen" to his.

She wanted to wrap her arms around her son and pull him into a tight hug, but she knew he wouldn't appreciate it. Instead, she bumped her shoulder against his and passed him the jar of peanut butter.

Not a day went by that Dani didn't give thanks for Seth, for the light and joy he brought into her life. He'd never acted up or out. Never caused her worries. Never snuck around or lied to her.

There were so many times she wondered what she'd done to deserve such a sweet, awesome son. She concluded nothing. Not a thing. But she would never take the gift God had given her in Seth for granted.

“So, what do you think about decking our halls today?” she asked as she took two pieces of bacon, then slid the rest onto Seth’s plate.

“Thanks, Mom.” He picked up a salty piece of bacon and bit into it. “Your bacon is the best, even better than Owen’s.”

“That’s high praise, kiddo. Thank you.”

Seth grinned at her and motioned around the room with his half-eaten piece of bacon. “After breakfast, I’ll climb up and get the decorations down. We should be able to get part of it done before you go to work, and the rest when you come home after the lunch shift. Do you mind if I go hang with Chris while you’re at work?”

“Where will you be?” Dani asked, still cautious of Seth spending too much time with Chris. The boy was trying to do better and be better, but he still had a long way to go.

“At his grandma’s house. He asked if I could come over and help him fix a couple of things. It sounds like the bathroom door won’t close and the kitchen sink is leaking.”

“Do you know how to fix those things?” Dani asked, fork poised over a pancake she’d topped with warm maple syrup.

“Maybe? I asked Knox for some tips, and I also watched a bunch of how-to videos online. I figure if we try, we might fix something, but we probably won’t make it any worse.”

“Mrs. Hobkins knows what you plan to do?”

“Yeah. She said it was okay. Do you care if I take our toolbox?”

“That’s fine, Seth. Just be sure to bring everything home with you.”

Seth gave her a look that said he wasn’t an idiot and shoveled in several bites of pancake before he glugged half his glass of milk.

They talked about events planned in the community in the coming weeks they were both looking forward to. For the first time in many years, a Summer Creek tree lighting was planned at City Hall. Dani had heard there were people putting together



a caroling event and another group worked on a Christmas light competition.

“I’ll do the dishes if you bring down the decorations.” Dani carried their dirty plates over to the dishwasher and tucked them inside. She couldn’t even count the number of times she’d been grateful to have the appliance that made cleaning up after a meal so easy.

She washed the skillet she’d used to cook Seth’s eggs, tossed the foil she’d lined a baking sheet with to cook the bacon, then wiped off the counters. With the kitchen set to rights, Dani walked into the back hallway where Seth had set up a tall step stool to climb into the attic where they stored decorations and other things they wanted to keep but had nowhere to place them in the small house. The attic was unfinished, and she’d always been afraid she might stick a foot through the ceiling walking around up there. Three years ago, Seth had offered to go up to retrieve the Christmas decorations, and she’d let him. Since then, he’d been the one to climb up into the dark cobweb-filled space to haul down whatever they needed.

“Here’s the first one, Mom.” Seth bent over the opening in the ceiling and handed her a tub. She set it on the washer, then reached for the next one he held out to her.

Six tubs later, Seth climbed down, then said he was sure spiders were crawling in his hair and rushed off to take a shower.

Dani retrieved the dishrag she’d used earlier and wiped off the outside of the tubs before moving them to the living room.

She and Seth would wait a week or two to get their tree. It had become a tradition with them to drive into the woods and cut down their own tree. There was just something more magical about doing that than sticking up an artificial tree or buying one at Sinclair’s. Besides, she and Seth always took a picnic lunch and made a day of the outing. When he was younger, she’d pull him on his little red plastic toboggan, and he’d beg for just one more ride before they returned home.

Now, her lanky son wouldn't be able to fit on the toboggan even if she were strong enough to pull him, which she wasn't.

Dani opened the tub full of garlands and took one out, draping it along the top of the curtain rod in the living room. By the time Seth finished his shower, she'd draped garlands along the open space above the tops of the kitchen cabinets and over the doorway in the back hall. She wished they had a fireplace with a mantel, but they'd always made do, hanging their stockings on hooks from the bar in the kitchen on Christmas Eve.

Would Gabe still be in town for Christmas? Dani wondered if he had anyone to celebrate the day with. Maybe he'd lost a loved one recently and that was the reason he was anti-Christmas. Or perhaps someone had broken his heart during the holiday season.

She scoffed as she added a fluffy red bow to the garland that hung around the doorway to the back hall. If any hearts were broken, it was likely because Gabe had done the breaking. A man that attractive had probably left a string of weeping women in his wake.

Then again, he might be married with six kids for all she knew.

That thought brought her up short. For reasons beyond her ability to explain, she really, really hoped he wasn't married.

However, a guy his age most likely was married, or maybe divorced. She'd guessed him to be in his late thirties, which wasn't all that much older than her thirty-one years. After having Seth when she was little more than a child herself, Dani had been forced to grow up fast. There were days she felt like she'd been old forever.

Other days, she felt the same youthful zest for life she'd known before one bad choice had altered her life and ended her dreams.

Dani knew thinking of what might have been accomplished nothing. Rather than give in to reflections of yesterday, she pulled up a holiday playlist on her phone, turned it to speaker, and let it fill the house with the cheerful music of the season.

Seth ran out of his bedroom, one sock on his foot, the other in his hand, and sang along to The Chipmunks singing “Christmas Don’t Be Late.”

Dani laughed at his goofy performance, then clapped with enthusiasm when it ended.

“What’s the encore?” she asked as she took a fluffy snowman made out of an old tube sock from a tub and handed it to Seth. He’d made it in fifth grade and had given it to her as her Christmas present that year. The eyes were slightly lopsided, but she’d loved it because he’d created it.

Seth picked up her phone, scrolled through the songs, then grinned at her when she heard Thurl Ravenscroft begin to sing, “You’re A Mean One, Mr. Grinch.”

The song evoked images of Gabe staring at the drink she’d served him the previous evening, and those dimples taunting her when he smiled.

She shoved her longing to see him again to the far corner of her mind, took Seth’s hands in hers, and belted out the song as they two-stepped around the living room.

“You’re okay, Mom,” Seth said when the song ended and they returned to setting out decorations.

“Okay?” she asked, glancing at him over her shoulder. “What’s that mean?”

“It means you are fun and full of energy, and you make every day pretty cool to just be your kid.” Seth looked at her and raised his eyebrows in a perfect imitation of her. “But don’t let that go to your head.”

Dani reached out and engulfed him in a warm hug before he could get away. He pretended to squirm for freedom for a few seconds before he returned her embrace. He kissed her

cheek, then turned to hang a big snowflake from the cord of the ceiling fan over their dining table.

Unable to keep a tear or two from escaping, Dani wiped them away with her thumbs, expelled a long breath, then glanced at the clock. She needed to hustle if she planned to make it to work on time.

“I need to go to work, Seth. Do you want a ride to Chris’ house?”

“Yes, please. It will just take a sec, Mom.” Seth tossed the plastic Santa Claus figurine he always put in his room into a tub of carefully folded wrapping paper and rushed to get his things.

Dani went outside and started her SUV. At least it had stopped snowing. They usually didn’t have much snow before Thanksgiving. Maybe it was going to be a long, cold winter. She hoped that wasn’t the case. If it were up to her, the snow would all melt on December 31, and the temperatures would turn balmy. She knew the farmers counted on the snowpack in the mountains to provide adequate water for irrigating their crops during the summer, though, so she wouldn’t begrudge the snow solely for that reason.

She went to her bedroom and changed into a polo shirt with the Broken Bucket logo on the front, then took out the messy bun on top of her head and combed her hair into a high ponytail. She added another coating of mascara and dabbed on her favorite lip gloss before she realized she was primping all because she hoped to see Gabe again.

Annoyed with herself, she thought about wiping off the lip gloss, but instead spun around and left the room. After grabbing her coat and giving Seth a few dollars in case he and Chris wanted to go to Whitey’s for snacks or pop, she drove him to Mrs. Hobkins’ house. The woman was far too old and in too poor of health to deal with a troubled teen, but Chris’ parents had dumped him there more than a year ago.

Dani felt bad for Mrs. Hobkins. Instead of being able to enjoy her golden years, she was trying to guide her rebellious grandson in a better direction than he’d been headed. The

woman lived on a fixed income, so any extra dime she had went to taking care of Chris.

Knox and Zadie had repaired the woman's porch and front door, and they kept her yard in decent shape. Parker Princeton and Hud Cole had fixed the leaks in her roof. Dani had heard even Nate Knight had lent a hand cleaning up the fall leaves and winterizing the house.

"Have fun and stay out of trouble," Dani said as she stopped outside the house in dire need of a coat of paint. Maybe the community could join together and take care of that in the spring.

"I will. I should be back before you get off work."

"Just text me if you'll be late." Dani waved as Seth got out, retrieved the toolbox he'd set in the back, then hurried toward the front door of the house.

She waited until Mrs. Hobkins answered the door and waved at her before she drove to work. Dani hustled in the back door and clocked in with five minutes to spare. She hated being late and preferred to be ten minutes early whenever possible.

Once she stowed her coat and purse in her locker and tied on her apron, she went through the routine of preparing to open the doors at eleven. The lunch crowd was never as big or as busy as the dinner crowd. Saturdays were usually the busiest lunch service, while Friday evenings were the most hectic for dinner.

Dani greeted the first customers of the day with a smile, then rushed to keep up with the orders. Every time she felt cold air blow into the restaurant when the door opened, she glanced up, hoping it would be Gabe, the good-looking grouch.

She returned home for her afternoon break with a salad for herself and a meatball sandwich for Seth. While they ate, Seth excitedly described the successful repairs he'd made at the Hobkins abode. He even showed her a photo he'd taken on

his phone of how happy Mrs. Hobkins looked that the sink no longer leaked and the bathroom door now fully closed.

“The door was so easy to fix. Knox said I probably just needed to tighten the screws in the hinges, and that did it. The leaky sink was harder, but Chris and I searched online what it was doing and found a website from a home renovation company that had good suggestions on how to fix it. The third suggestion we tried worked.”

“I’m so proud of you, kiddo, and it’s really kind of you to help Mrs. Hobkins. Life isn’t easy for her, or Chris.”

“I know, Mom. I feel bad for Chris. His grandma tries, but she’s so old and tired all the time. He has two parents that don’t want him. It’s no wonder he can be, well ... Chris.” Seth gave her a studying glance. “Did my dad not want me, Mom?”

Dani generally avoided any mention of the member of the male species who had fathered her son. She hesitated to even call him a man because he was a coward and a bully at best, not to mention a pompous jerk. Her son never needed to know what that scheming, two-timing liar had done.

“You know it’s always been just us, Seth.” She reached over and cupped his chin, sidestepping his question like she’d done every time he asked about his father. “It was never a matter of him wanting or not wanting you, because I wanted you from the second I knew you existed.”

Seth opened his mouth like he had questions he wanted to ask, then snapped it shut and changed the subject to their plans for tomorrow. Logan had invited him out to the Lazy J Ranch to spend the afternoon.

“Could you pick me up around five, Mom? We can come back and eat pizza and watch a Christmas movie. Maybe have some popcorn and hot chocolate.”

Dani nodded. “Sure, kiddo. I can do that. Are you invited for lunch at Jossy and Nate’s house?”

“Yes. Logan said Jossy has everything all planned. After lunch, Logan and I are going to work on some Christmas stuff.”

“Christmas stuff? What kind of stuff? Regular stuff? Double stuff? Stuff with stuff?” she teased and waggled an eyebrow at him.

Seth chuckled and shook his head. “Sometimes you are too weird, Mom.”

“So, there are varying degrees of weird? You’ll have to explain what levels are acceptable so I always strive to exceed them.”

“Mom!” Seth drew out the one word for what seemed like five seconds before he grinned and went back to eating his sandwich.

“Shall we see if we can get the lights up outside before I have to head back to work?” Dani asked as she glanced at the clock. She had almost an hour and a half before she needed to return to the Broken Bucket.

“Sure. Don’t forget, I’m working this evening too. Owen asked me to help with the dishes.”

Dani gave him a knowing look as she finished her salad and set the reusable container in the dishwasher. “I know it’s not your favorite thing, but Owen has mentioned you do a good job. He thinks you’re a hard worker.”

“I’m glad, Mom. I feel like I have a lot to live up to working at the same place you do.”

She frowned. “I’m not sure what that means, Seth.”

“It’s just that everyone likes you, and you work so hard, and you care about people, and you are just this super-neat person.” He shrugged. “I know I can’t ever be as good as you, but I want to try.”

“Oh, baby.” Dani walked around the counter and gave Seth a hug, rubbing his shoulders before she leaned back and smiled at him. “You are an incredible young man, and I’m so, so proud of you. There isn’t a day that goes by that you don’t do something that amazes me. Every morning and night in my prayers and all through the day I thank God for giving me the privilege of being your mom. The only thing special about me is you.”

For once, Seth didn't say anything. He just kissed her cheek and smiled so big, she could see without even trying how pleased he was by what she'd shared.

"Just so you know, Mom, you're pretty nifty even when you aren't riding my coattails."

Dani laughed. "Have you been hanging out with Mrs. Finley's crowd again? I assume that's where you picked up words like 'nifty' and 'coattails.'"

Seth set his dishes in the dishwasher and nodded. "It's fun to hear them talk and tell stories about the things that used to be in Summer Creek. Emery always takes a bunch of notes and records them on her phone when they start tripping down memory lane."

"She does love her history, especially that of Summer Creek."

Seth nodded. "Tell me again about when we moved here, Mom."

Unlike her son, who thought it was a grand tale of adventure, Dani didn't enjoy the retelling of how she came to be in Summer Creek, even though she loved living in the tight-knit community.

"Maybe later. We need to get those lights up, then head to work." Dani opened a tub with lights wrapped around old gift-wrapping tubes and took one out. "I'll check to make sure they work if you'll carry the stepladder out front."

"Okay," Seth said, then grabbed his coat and headed outside.

Dani breathed a sigh of relief that he hadn't pushed to hear more about a story she tried hard not to remember. It was easier to pretend her life began when she arrived in Summer Creek with Seth. For her, it was like a second chance, to start over with a clean slate, and she had done her best to not squander it.

She might not have a glamorous job or life, but she enjoyed her work and the people she worked with. She provided a safe, comfortable home for her son. They'd never



gone hungry or been homeless, and Seth seemed to be a happy, well-adjusted teen. In her book, that was success.

They may not have the latest techie gadgets, drive a new vehicle, or buy expensive clothes, but Seth had never done without anything essential, and Dani made do. She was so grateful to Emery Cole for her idea to bring tourists into town. The more tourists that came, the busier it kept her at the Broken Bucket, and the more money she made in tips and overtime. She'd actually been able to tuck away some money into the college fund she'd started for Seth when he was three. Some years, she'd put less than a hundred dollars in it. In other years, she'd been able to add more. It was nowhere near being enough to pay for four years of college, but Seth was smart, and she held out hope he could secure a scholarship to cover his lodging and tuition. The money she'd saved would pay for everything else.

Seth hadn't yet settled on what he wanted to be when he grew up, and Dani was fine with that. When he landed on what was the best fit for him, he'd know it, and she'd support it.

"Ready?" Seth called as he opened the front door.

Dani carried out the tub of lights and handed an end to Seth after he climbed up the ladder. Hooks they'd left on the back side of the eaves made it relatively easy to string the lights. Working together, they finished, plugged in the lights, and took a moment to admire them in the waning November light before they hustled inside, cleaned up, and headed to the Broken Bucket for the dinner shift.

Seth pulled on an apron that repelled water and headed for the dish pit, while Dani tied her apron around her waist, checked her reflection in the small mirror she kept in her locker, then got to work.

At half past five, she glanced up from returning menus to the hostess station and saw Gabe standing in the entry hall studying the photos. One, in particular, seemed to garner his full attention.

Dani respected his privacy and refrained from walking over and asking questions. Instead, she picked up a menu and

a set of silverware rolled in a paper napkin, then smiled at him when he looked in her direction.

“Nice to see you, Mr. Grouchy. You ride your sleigh in off your high and mighty mountain? Come to toss around your cheerful holiday sentiments?”

“Har, hardee, har, har,” Gabe said, scowling at her as he removed his coat and hat. “If you’re through harassing me, do you think I could get a seat and some food?”

“Sure. I’d recommend the restaurant versus the bar this evening. The Saturday crowd in there tends to be guys drinking beer and watching whatever sporting telecast they can find.”

“Restaurant it is. Any quiet tables in a corner?” Gabe asked as he followed her into the restaurant side of the business.

Dani led him to a table in the back corner, partially hidden by a grouping of potted plants. The table was often used by city officials during lunch meetings when they wanted a little privacy for their discussions.

“Will this do?” she asked, sweeping a hand toward the table.

“Thanks,” Gabe said, draping his coat over a chair and turning his cowboy hat brim side up before setting it on the seat.

“Something to drink?”

Gabe stared at her as though he dared her to offer a suggestion. Dani held his gaze, fighting the urge to grin at him, or reach out and run her hand over the taut skin of his jaw. If he brought those dimples out of hiding, she wasn’t sure she could keep her hands to herself.

“How about you surprise me?” he finally said.

“Oh, a man who likes surprises,” she quipped, then set the menu and silverware in front of him before she hurried over to the bar.

She made a mocktail she herself favored and carried it out to Gabe's table along with a glass of water.

Gabe stared at the martini glass rimmed with crushed candy canes.

"Oh, brother," he said, and exaggeratedly rolled his eyes. "What's this one called? Snowball Lane?"

Dani set the glass in front of him. "Santa's Sleigh Ride."

"You're kidding me."

"Nope. Try it. You'll figure it out." Dani stepped back and waited as Gabe took a tentative sip. Whether he tried to hide it or not, she could see in his expression that he liked it. A lot. He took another, deeper drink, licked his lips, and looked up at her like she'd given him an unexpected gift.

"What is this magic in a glass you serve?" he asked in a deep, serious voice, but she could see mirth dancing in his eyes.

"Half and half, cream soda, simple syrup, peppermint extract, and a secret ingredient."

"Whatever it is, it's beyond tasty. Thank you."

Dani took a step back. "Would you like me to bring you some coffee? I got the idea from the coffee maker and industrial-size jug of grounds you bought this morning that you like it."

Gabe quirked an eyebrow at her, but slowly nodded his head. "Thanks. It would be great to have a cup with my meal. Speaking of food, what are the specials?"

"Turkey soup. A hot turkey sandwich. Brisket with mac and cheese. Dessert is cranberry pie."

Gabe's nose wrinkled at the mention of cranberries, and Dani grinned. "I'll save you a huge piece of that pie."

"No thanks. I'll take the brisket, please. And I'd like to try the fried pickles."

"Great choice," Dani said, picking up his menu. "Have you had them before?"

“Nope. Can’t say that I have.”

“Your taste buds are about to thank you.”

Dani put in his order, took two orders that were ready to their tables, checked on Seth who was elbow-deep in soap suds, then took a plate of fried pickles out to Gabe. He was speaking to someone on the phone, so she quietly left the pickles and went on her way.

She seated two families, helped clean up a spilled drink and broken glass in the bar, and walked through the restaurant refilling water glasses and coffee cups. When she stopped at Gabe’s table, he was still on the phone. Where his posture had been relaxed earlier, it was now tense and he looked angry enough to bend the spoon he toyed with in half.

Dani refilled his water glass. He glanced up at her and mouthed, “Thank you,” and then she left, wondering to whom he spoke that made him so upset.

It really wasn’t any of her business she reminded herself as she collected his order and delivered it to his table.

Gabe was no longer on the phone, but he still looked mad and out of sorts.

“Do you need a refill on your drink?” she asked as she slid a platter in front of him that held tender pieces of brisket, Owen’s creamy mac and cheese, and a serving of broccoli topped with grated Asiago cheese on top. She’d also brought a basket of breadsticks and several pats of soft butter.

Gabe shook his head as he eyed the food. “If I drink another one, I won’t want my dinner, and it looks too good to resist. I could drink a gallon of that Sleigh Ride stuff. It’s amazing.”

“It’s my seasonal favorite.” Dani inched away from the table. “I’ll bring your coffee. Anything else you need?”

“No. This looks great. Oh, the pickles were fantastic.” He pointed to the empty appetizer plate. “I didn’t know what to expect, but I have a feeling they could be addictive.”

Dani smiled. "They can be. Enjoy your meal. My son calls the brisket 'meat candy.'" She spun away and went to get his coffee. When she brought it to the table, Gabe was eating like the food might be his last meal.

"So good," he muttered between bites. "It's better than anything I ever had in Texas."

"I'll tell Owen that. He'll be pleased." Dani set the coffee to the side of his meat platter. "Anything else?"

"Are you married?" Gabe blurted, then looked like he wanted to stuff the question in his mouth along with the brisket.

"No. Are you?"

"Nope. Never have found a woman I liked well enough to enter that state of union," Gabe remarked, then took a drink of the coffee. "How old is your son?"

"Fifteen going on forty." Dani wondered at his questions and what prompted them, but at least she'd discovered he was single. That was a good thing. Or was it? Now, she could dream about those dimples without feeling guilty.

Gabe nodded his head. "I remember being that way when I was that age. Wanting to be all grown up, thinking I knew everything, but still too young and inexperienced to really have a clue."

"Exactly," Dani said, smiling as she noticed a group of four standing at the hostess station looking for an open table. "I'll check back in a bit."

It was a good ten minutes before she had a chance to return to Gabe's table. His plate was empty, except for two bites of broccoli. He leaned back in the booth, leisurely drinking his coffee and looking out the window as it began snowing again.

"You have room for dessert?" she asked as she picked up his plate.

"Not at this moment, but I'll take something with me."

“As long as it isn’t cranberry pie,” she said, grinning at him. “What are your thoughts on pudding?”

“It’s fine, I guess. I don’t dislike it. You have something in mind?”

“Do you trust me?” Dani asked, her voice light and teasing.

“I reckon I do, Miss Dani. You pick out whatever you think I’ll like, and I’ll let you know the next time I come in if I’ll eat it again.”

Dani felt a little thrill to know he intended to return. “Just a reminder we’re closed tomorrow and Monday.”

“Oh. In that case, can you box up another order of the brisket for me to take home?”

“Of course. Want another cup of java?”

“Of course,” he said, mimicking her with a grin that made her knees feel like they might buckle.

Dani spun around and went to get the coffee pot. She added his dessert and to-go order to the electronic system, refilled his coffee cup, and rushed away from him under the guise of helping other patrons. Out of the corner of her eye, she kept watch on him as he drank his coffee and stared out into the winter darkness. At one point he smiled, and she looked outside to see Ethel munching on a wreath Owen had hung on the back of the stagecoach yesterday when he’d gotten in the mood to decorate.

Dani was going to come to the restaurant Monday and paint holiday scenes on the windows. She would have gladly done it for free, but Owen always paid her well for her work, and it was like getting an extra Christmas bonus.

She bagged Gabe’s to-go box and dessert and took it to him.

“Thanks, Miss Dani,” he said, glancing at the receipt and taking money from his wallet, placing it on the table. “Is there anything open tomorrow?”

“The gas station is open from two to four. If you need something, you’ll have to drive to Burns or wait until Monday.”

“Thanks for the heads up,” Gabe said and stood.

Dani looked up into his face. Such a handsome face.

“How old are you?” she asked, without meaning for the words to escape from her thoughts through her lips.

Gabe smirked. “Most of the time, old enough to know better and still too young to care.”

Dani laughed, and he grinned. Those dimples really were hard to resist.

“Nice answer,” she said. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to get personal or intrusive. Have a nice evening, Mr. Grouchy.”

“You too, Santa’s sidekick.”

Joy filled her expression at his use of a playful nickname. “I intend to do just that. If you find yourself with time on your hands, the church service begins at half past ten. The church is a block behind the barbershop.”

“I’ll think about it,” he said as he slipped on his coat and settled his hat on his head. “It’s been so long since I was in a church, lightning might strike if I dare enter.”

She shook her head at him. “It doesn’t work that way, Gabe. You’re always welcome.”

“Thanks, Dani. See you later,” he said, picking up his to-go bag and heading for the door.

Suddenly overheated as she watched him walk away with a slight swagger, she used her apron to fan her face before she returned to work, doing her best not to let her thoughts linger on Gabe Gatlin.

## Chapter Seven



Gabe strolled through the gently falling snow toward home, feeling full and more rested than he'd been in months, maybe even years.

He'd slept ten hours last night and awakened early. He'd looked up the grocery store's hours of operation online and had arrived the moment the doors opened in the morning. Ethel had raced around the side of the building and greeted him with what could have been a smile. Or perhaps she'd just eaten something that had given her indigestion. At any rate, he'd stopped to give her a little attention and told her to be a



good girl. She'd bleated at him and moseyed over to chomp at what had appeared to be a smashed pumpkin that had fallen out of the trash can.

Gabe had gone up and down every aisle in the store, trying to get everything he might need while he was in Summer Creek. He'd almost whooped in excitement when he'd found a small coffee maker on a shelf with baking pans and skillet. If he had coffee, he could survive anything.

He'd been checking out when he glanced back and spied Dani in line behind him. He'd hoped he'd see her again, and then she'd started teasing him and he'd let himself enjoy it. He couldn't say he'd flirted with her, but they'd danced close to it.

He'd spent the day going through each room in the old house and every nook and cranny in the garage. At a quarter to five, he'd returned to the master suite to take a shower and shave, then he'd headed to the Broken Bucket, excited to see Dani again.

As he'd sipped the delicious peppermint-flavored drink, J.T. had called to see how he was doing and assured him he was doing the right thing by taking some time for himself. He'd barely hung up when Eddie had called, warning him his sister and father had hired a private investigator to track him down. She'd suggested he get in touch with one of them before things escalated to the point of them putting out a national alert that he'd been kidnapped.

Gabe hated that his family couldn't just leave him be, but he knew Eddie wasn't entirely wrong to think Monique and his father would take things to an extreme level if he didn't do something soon.

Frustrated and feeling cornered, he'd looked up to see Dani watching him as she held his meal. He'd tamped down his irritation and focused on the fantastic food, mulling over her comment about having a son.

He'd assumed she was single. The idea of her being married with a bunch of kids tormented him. He had no business thinking the thoughts that had invaded his mind about the pretty woman if she was already taken.

When she'd returned to the table, he'd blurted out, "Are you married," then wished he could have eaten the words with his dinner.

He'd been relieved to discover she was single, but still had no idea about her past. After Dani had brought him his to-go order, he'd left the Broken Bucket, enjoying the walk home through the crisp night air and snow.

Gabe unlocked the back door and entered the nook, left his coat draped over a chair and his hat on the table, then went into the kitchen. He set the brisket to-go box in the fridge, then peeked in the foam container that held dessert. A bright green slice of pie topped with whipped cream and red candy hearts on top made him smile.

In marker, Dani had written inside the lid.

*A slice of sweet pie for my grouchy friend. Enjoy!*

At the moment, Gabe was too full to indulge in the dessert, but he looked forward to enjoying it later.

He plopped down in front of the fireplace in the family room after switching it on, turned on a lamp, and decided to read one of the old Mark Twain books he'd found in the library room he thought would make a great office.

An hour later, when his eyes had grown heavy, he took out the pie, tasted a bite of the pudding filling that was rich and creamy, then went upstairs and got ready for bed. As he fell asleep, he thought maybe he'd take Dani up on her offer to join her at church. It wasn't like he had anything better to do.

The next morning, Gabe nervously stood in front of the mirror in the master bedroom closet, adjusting the collar of a new dark-blue shirt with subtle black stripes. It really could do with a good pressing, but he didn't have an iron and had no interest in purchasing one.

He went to the bathroom, dampened his hands, and tried to press the collar into place. When it finally looked halfway presentable, he gave himself one more glance and decided to leave before he talked himself into staying home. Gabe grabbed a black suit jacket and hustled downstairs. He'd

decided to drive to the church in the event he ended up going somewhere after the service.

That was, if he didn't chicken out and drive right past the building instead of going inside.

It had been years—far too many years—since he'd attended a church service. His grandparents had gone every Sunday, and Gabe had gone with them whenever he was at the ranch, or traveling with them. His mother still attended most Sundays, but his father had never been interested in going, and Monique only bothered herself with going at Easter and Christmas.

Gabe was filled with both anxiety and expectation as he backed out of the garage and drove to Main Street, then followed it to the barbershop. He turned there and could see the church ahead. Many cars were already pulling into the parking lot, but Gabe chose to park along the recently plowed street. He didn't immediately get out. Instead, he took a moment to inhale several calming breaths, as he watched people walk inside.

He'd worried about being over-or underdressed, but it appeared the majority of the men also wore jeans and boots with nice shirts, and a few wore suit coats.

Gabe removed his hat and left it on the seat, took one more calming breath, then got out and strode across the parking lot to the door.

Inside, he was greeted with curious looks and welcoming smiles. He'd almost decided to take a seat in the back row when he spied Dani sitting halfway up on the end of an aisle. A brown-haired teen sat beside her.

Gabe walked up the aisle, tapped her shoulder, and felt gratified when she looked up at him in welcome. She gave the boy beside her a nudge and slid over on the seat, making room for Gabe to squeeze in on the end.

"I'm glad you came," she whispered in his ear, causing all his senses to stand at attention. She smelled like vanilla and

something sweet, and the very scent of her conjured a sensation of coming home.

Unsettled by both the unfamiliar feeling and being in church again after so long an absence, Gabe nodded to Dani. Two teenage boys offered him curious looks. On the other side of them, a couple who looked to be in their thirties smiled in greeting as they tried to keep a cute baby boy entertained.

A man Gabe assumed was the pastor, since he was wearing a suit, walked up to the pulpit and the service began.

Dani shared a hymnbook with Gabe as they sang an opening hymn that he recalled from his childhood. It put him slightly at ease to find something familiar, at least in the hymn selection. The pastor had them bow their heads and offered a brief prayer, then he dove into his sermon. The topic was the word “Emmanuel” from the book of Matthew.

“Emmanuel means ‘God with us.’ What a wondrous thing, friends, to know every single day, He is with us. In our best of times, and our worst of times, and every time in between, in every moment of every day, He is with us. And He loves us. Let’s look into more scripture. If you’re following along in your Bible, turn to ...”

Gabe watched as Dani opened the Bible on her lap. The boy beside her, who had to be her son for the many similarities he saw in the two of them, leaned over her shoulder. Gabe forced his attention away from the woman beside him to the pastor who seemed to be speaking from his heart.

It had been years since Gabe had thought about God being with him. As a boy, he’d taken great comfort in that knowledge, but somewhere along the way, he’d walked away from his Christian upbringing and relied on himself to get through whatever challenges arose.

*You can open your heart to me anytime, Gabe,* a voice whispered in his heart and echoed in his ears. He looked around to see if someone spoke to him, but everyone was either reading their Bible or looking at the pastor.

Gabe felt goose bumps break out on his arms and fought back a shiver, but he continued listening to the sermon. When it ended, and a final prayer was offered and the last hymn was sung, Gabe felt a measure of relief. The church was still standing, he hadn't been struck dead, and Dani was smiling at him like he'd done something right.

A feeling deep inside Gabe's heart assured him he had.

"Happy Sunday to you, Mr. Grouch," Dani said, reaching out to shake his hand.

"Happy Sunday to you." He shook her hand, wanting to hold it longer than necessary, but he reluctantly released it.

Dani set a hand on the shoulder of the teen beside her and gave him a slight push toward Gabe. "Honey, this is the man I mentioned meeting at work. Seth, meet Grouchy Gabe."

"Gabe Gatlin." Gabe tossed Dani a look of mock indignation as he shook the boy's hand. Seth was tall but slender like his mother. He had a smattering of freckles on his nose, just like Dani, and the same mouth and chin. The main visible difference from mother to son was Seth's brown hair and brown eyes.

"Hi, Mr. Gatlin. It's nice to meet you." Seth studied him a moment before Gabe was introduced to Seth's friend, Logan, and Logan's parents, Jossy and Nate Knight. The couple didn't look old enough to have a son in his teens, but neither did Dani. Gabe knew Seth was fifteen but somehow, his head had created a picture of a boy closer to the age of the adorable curly-headed imp in the row in front of them who was studying him with rapt interest during the service.

The little girl now leaned against the leg of a tall, burly man who appeared to be a rancher. When the man turned around, Gabe could see both he and Jossy Knight bore a strong resemblance to one another.

"Welcome to Summer Creek. I'm Hud Cole. This is my wife, Emery, and our daughter, Cricket. We live out at Summer Creek Ranch."

Gabe shook hands with Hud and his wife, but Cricket continued eyeing him.

“Are you really a grouch?” she asked.

Gabe shrugged. “That’s what they tell me,” he said, tipping his head toward Dani.

Cricket’s eyes widened. “For real?”

Gabe nodded. “For real.”

“I gotta go tell Jasmine!” Cricket pushed away from her father and ran toward the back of the church.

“Are you passing through or visiting?” Emery asked as they all made their way out of the pew and fell into the slow-moving line to the door.

“Visiting, I guess you’d say. I work for Daniels Realty. We own a property here in Summer Creek, so I’ve come to look it over and determine what to do with it.”

“A residence?” Nate asked, joining the conversation.

“Yes. It was originally built by the Lepiane family.”

“I’ve never heard that name,” Emery said, glancing at Hud, then Nate and Jossy. They all shrugged. “I could do some digging and see if I can find any of the family history for you.”

“Thanks.” It was on the tip of Gabe’s tongue to refuse, but he would like to learn more about his ancestors. He knew he should have been more forthcoming with his answers, but he was still in hiding from his family and didn’t want anyone accidentally divulging his location. Not that a town with such a tiny population would be on the radar of anyone in Oklahoma, but still, he felt the need to take precautions and be careful. Besides, he hadn’t told a single lie, just withheld part of the details.

“If it’s one of the older homes, and you decide to sell it, please let me know. I’d love to add it to our historical tours,” Emery said, taking a business card out of the shoulder bag she carried and handing it to him.

“The historical society has the funds to purchase houses outright?”

Emery’s cheeks pinked, but she shook her head. “They don’t, but I do.”

Gabe made a mental note to look up Emery online when he got back to the house.

Dani had been quiet during the conversation with the Cole family, but her son and Logan were talking in whispers at the back of the group. Occasionally, they tossed Gabe a look that he couldn’t interpret, then went back to whispering.

Before he could give it much thought, he found himself shaking the pastor’s hand.

“Welcome to Summer Creek. I’m Pastor Jeff Markle, and this is my wife, Meredith. We’re sure pleased to have you join us today.”

Gabe shook the pastor’s hand and then Mrs. Markle’s. They seemed like genuine, nice people. “It’s a pleasure to be here, sir. Thank you.” As he said the words, Gabe meant them. He realized he felt different than he had when he’d arrived. Better, somehow, even if he couldn’t explain the reason for it.

“Do you know our Dani?” the pastor asked as he shook Dani’s hand, then looked back to Gabe.

“Not well. I’ve eaten dinner a few times at the Broken Bucket. She extended an invitation to the service today, so I thought I’d come.”

“Well, how about that? We’re truly glad you’re here, Gabe, and if you ever want to come back, you’re always welcome. My door is always open.”

Gabe nodded once, then stepped outside where Cricket Cole spoke animatedly to a little girl who looked to be about her age. She saw him and waved, then went back to talking to her friend. The two little girls turned and stared at him as he started toward his pickup.

“Mr. Grouch!” Dani called in a teasing tone.

Gabe turned around and scowled at her. “Seriously? Still with the grouch thing?”

“If the frown fits ...” she joked, then she placed a hand on his arm. “I just wanted to say how nice it was to have you join us this morning.”

“I’m glad I came, and I appreciated the invitation. Do you and Seth have big plans for the afternoon?”

Dani looked across the parking lot to where Seth and Logan got in a vehicle with Jossy and Nate. She waved to them, then turned back to Gabe. “No. Seth was invited out to the Lazy J Ranch for the afternoon. I’m supposed to pick him up at five.”

“Would you, uh ... would you have any interest in eating lunch with me?”

Dani gaped at him for a long moment. She looked like she was about to bolt, when she finally nodded her head. “I’d like that, Gabe, but there isn’t anywhere open in town today.”

“We could drive into Burns. There are places there that are open on Sunday, aren’t there?”

“Yes, of course, but it’s about a forty-five-minute drive one way.”

Gabe felt a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. She hadn’t offered an outright refusal, and he was good at talking people into his way of thinking. “If I promise it is just a meal between friends and I’ll get you back in plenty of time to pick up Seth, would you please go to lunch with me?”

“We’re just going as friends?” Dani asked, waving at three older women who got into a big blue car and drove off at the pace of racing snails.

“Friends. If you need a personal reference that I’m a good guy and can be trusted, I’ll give you the number of my ...” Gabe didn’t know what to call Eddie. She wasn’t a friend. He hated to say “assistant.” And admitting she was the glue that held his busy corporate life together was more than Dani needed to know. “Eddie,” he finally said.



“Your Eddie? Is that a son? A friend? An ice cream flavor?”

Gabe chuckled. “She worked as my grandpa’s assistant for years. When he died, she became the person who keeps me on track.”

Dani’s eyebrow quirked upward. “Actually, I would like to speak to her. I didn’t realize you were in town to do a property appraisal. Is that what you call it when you visit a place to determine its worth and if you intend to sell it?”

“Yes. That’s what I’m doing,” Gabe said, feeling only marginally guilty for standing outside the church and misleading Dani. He assumed he could trust her with the truth, but he was wary and worried just enough that he intended to keep his private life private.

He took out his phone, called Eddie, and listened to her rant at him for a solid minute about calling her on a Sunday afternoon before she asked what he wanted.

“Miss Eddie, I have a new friend here with me who would like verification that I’m not a serial killer, a drifter out to run off with her money, or a miscreant running from the law.”

Dani rolled her eyes, but took the phone from him. He listened as she introduced herself, told how she’d met Gabe at the restaurant, and said he’d invited her to lunch but she wanted a referral before she climbed inside a vehicle with him and let him drive her away from the safety of home and friends.

Laughter rolled out of Dani at one point, and Gabe could only imagine what Eddie had said.

“Okay, I’ll do that.” Dani handed the phone back to him. “She wants to speak with you.”

Gabe held the phone to his ear. “Thank you, Eddie.”

“She sounds lovely, Gabe. I told her you are safe, and probably a bit boring, but not to hold it against you. If you do talk her into going to lunch with you, send me a photo. I want proof she’s real.”

“You got it, Eddie, and thanks again.”

Gabe disconnected the call, tucked the phone into his pocket, and offered Dani a questioning look. “Well, do you feel safe going with me now?”

“I think so, but I am going to text Seth and Jossy and tell them where I’m at. If you try anything, just know you’ll have two irate teens and the whole Cole family gunning for you.”

“I am duly warned, but promise to be on my best behavior.”

Dani sent two quick texts, then took the arm he held out to her as they walked over to his pickup. Gabe opened the passenger door and gave her a hand inside.

“You look lovely today, Dani,” he said as she tucked her coat around her and settled on the seat.

“Thank you, kind sir.”

Gabe had admired the ruby velvet dress she wore with brown tooled western booties. It was the first time he’d seen her hair down. It was a beautiful golden blonde with lighter highlights he was sure had come from sunshine and not out of a bottle. It fell in chunky curls around her shoulders and down her back, making it hard for Gabe to resist reaching out and fingering one of the silky-looking strands.

He hurried around the pickup, slid behind the wheel, and cranked the heater on high as they pulled away from the curb.

“Just drive up the street and take a right,” Dani said, giving directions before Gabe could turn around to head back to Main Street.

At the end of the street, he could either turn right or left, or pull into the veterinarian’s clinic parking lot across the road. He turned to the right, as Dani had directed, and looked out the window, observing a house with a day care sign out front, and a small park beside it. Across the street from the park was the Early Bird Café.

“That’s *the* place for breakfast—not just in town, but in the region. Maudie has been the owner for ages, and she

makes the best cinnamon rolls. Oh, and you have to try her biscuits and gravy. She also makes amazing cookies. If you go in the afternoon, just before she closes, you can sometimes get them warm from the oven.”

“Good to know,” Gabe said, filing away that information for another day. The option of somewhere to eat breakfast meant he wouldn’t be forced to endure cold cereal every morning.

They drove past the school, the medical clinic, and came to a stop sign at Second Avenue.

“Another right?” Gabe asked and Dani nodded. He drove to Main Street, took a left, and headed out of town. The roads were clear, and he made good time to Burns. On the way there, Dani pointed out a few landmarks and talked about the geography as well as the size of the county.

“What would you like for lunch?” Gabe asked as they reached the edge of town.

“Do you like Chinese food? If not, we could get Mexican, or there’s a good diner that has plain ol’ American food.”

Gabe glanced over at her. “Chinese food is great. I haven’t had it for a while. Just tell me which direction.”

She told him where to turn, and they were soon at the parking lot of a Chinese restaurant that looked similar to places all across the country where Gabe had eaten. He wouldn’t tell Dani he’d been to China and loved the authentic food he’d eaten there. Not when she seemed excited to get to eat out somewhere other than the Early Bird Café or the Broken Bucket.

It didn’t take long for them to be seated or for their order to arrive. They’d decided to go with a family-style option so they could sample more menu options. Gabe would have gladly ordered one of everything if that’s what Dani wanted, but she seemed happy with sweet and sour chicken, pork chow mein, egg foo young, and fried rice. He ordered barbecue pork, broccoli and beef, and orange chicken. The soup they

had as a starter was good, as was the hot tea that came with the meal.

Gabe sat across the table from Dani, dazzled by her beauty and entranced by the warmth of her personality.

“Tell me about Seth,” he said, as Dani took a dainty sip of tea. “He looks like a great kid.”

Dani set down her cup and beamed at him, as though he’d said just the right thing. He’d felt like a tongue-tied, bumbling idiot from the moment he’d set foot inside the church, and sitting across the table from the woman who seemed to grow more entrancing by the moment wasn’t helping him gain his footing.

“He is a great kid, although I am aware I’m probably biased,” Dani grinned at him. “Seth never gets into trouble, or rebels, or acts out. He’s getting old enough and big enough that he helps without being asked. Knox Strickland—he’s a deputy who lives in Summer Creek—has been teaching Seth, Logan Knight, and another boy about basic mechanic skills. They’ve even done a few carpentry projects.”

“It’s nice the deputy does that.”

Dani nodded and took another sip of hot tea. “It’s beyond nice, especially since Knox has only been married about six months and has other things on his mind than showing three teenage boys how to change their oil or air up a tire.”

Gabe grinned. “I look forward to meeting him.”

“He sometimes works on the weekends, and so does Zadie, his wife. Although I think she was at church this morning. I just got a little distracted for some reason.” Dani gave him a sheepish look, then took a bite of her chicken.

“Tell me more about your friends. Emery Cole, she’s the one in charge of the historical tours?”

“Yes. Before Emery came to town, Summer Creek was on the verge of dying. She’s the one that started looking into the old buildings and the possibility of doing something with them. Once she got the ball rolling, others got on board. Nate and Emery were childhood friends. He came to help her with

some of the legalities involved in setting up the historical society and whatnot, and he fell in love with Jossy.”

“How long ago was that?” Gabe asked. From the information he read, he thought the tours had only been in operation for about a year.

“Emery arrived at the springtime. It will be two years ago in March, I think. Nate came a few months later and married Jossy that summer. Their baby arrived in May.”

“They didn’t waste any time getting started on family, but what about Logan?”

“They adopted him. He was a foster kid who got lost in the system and ended up here. Jossy and Logan bonded, and Nate pushed through the paperwork to take custody of him. Logan is a good boy, but he’s had a tough life. I’m glad he and Seth are such good friends, though. I think they balance each other.”

Gabe thought of his three closest friends and knew what Dani meant about balancing each other. They each had their strengths and weaknesses. “It’s great they are friends. Tell me about the princess.”

Dani took another bite of her meal and chewed it before she gave him a studying glance. “You don’t strike me as the type to have a thing for royals.”

“No?” he asked, tossing her a fake, besotted expression before he offered a genuine smile. “I don’t. But I read some of the news articles online about her. Did she really marry the outdoor guide guy?”

“She really did,” Dani said with a dreamy expression. “Parker is a nice guy, and a good person, but he almost blew it with Poppy. When her mother sent the palace security team to bring her home, Parker let her go. It took Hud a little while to convince him to fight for her, so off he went to Briden. I don’t know what happened there, but Parker came back alone, then Poppy returned, and the next thing we all knew, they were getting married. They bought what the community refers to as the ‘lumber baron’s house’ and renovated it. Poppy is quite

talented with flowers and plants, and opened a nursery in the carriage house. Zadie and Knox got married in the yard there.”

Gabe couldn't keep the surprise he felt from showing on his face. “You mean the princess has a business that she runs?”

“Runs, manages, and operates. Poppy is a hands-on girl who gets her hands in the dirt and does whatever is needed. She loves to go hiking and camping, and sometimes tags along with Parker on his guided adventures.”

“Wow. That's cool.” Gabe's mind refused to bend around a down-to-earth princess who lived an ordinary life. Then again, wasn't that exactly what *he* was longing for? An ordinary life with ordinary salt-of-the-earth people?

He continued asking questions about the businesses and people in town, and Dani answered them as they ate.

“Tell me again where you're staying,” she said as the server cleared away their plates and brought containers for the leftovers. “Did you say the Lawpenny house?”

“It's pronounced Lip-ee-awn-ee. It's an Italian name. The Lepiane family are the ones who built the house back in the late 1800s. That name is on the original deed.”

Dani frowned. “But where is the house? In a town as small as Summer Creek, I've never heard that name mentioned.”

Gabe knew he was treading close to revealing more than he wanted to, but people would figure out where he was staying whether he liked it or not. “You know the big old Victorian house across from the Sinclair store?”

“The one with the picket fence and the turret, and the porch that wraps around the front?” Dani's eyes widened. “You're staying at the Lapine house?”

He grinned. “People mispronounce the name. The plaque on the house has both the name and the date of origin wrong. It was built in 1898, not 1889.”

“Oh,” Dani said, and sat back as though she was working through details in her mind. Finally, she looked at him. “I

should probably admit I have trespassed a few times, trying to see in the windows. It's just such a neat house. I used to dream of living in a place like that."

"It is a really cool house. I'll show it to you sometime, if you want." Gabe hadn't planned to invite her to see it, but now that he had, he felt an eagerness to show the house to her. He anticipated witnessing her reaction to the architecture, especially the floor in the entry.

"I'll hold you to that," Dani said, pouring more tea.

Gabe held out the two plastic-wrapped fortune cookies the server had left on their table. Dani chose one, tore off the wrapper, and tugged the fortune from the cookie. A sad, almost regretful expression passed over her face, before she tucked the fortune into her purse.

"What did it say?" Gabe asked, curious what words would have dimmed her joy.

"It said, 'You will travel to many exotic places in your lifetime.' Unless Bend counts as an exotic locale, I think the fortune is off its mark."

Gabe wanted to offer to take her anywhere she wanted to go. Paris. Rome. Maybe Belize. Or perhaps Dani would enjoy visiting Poppy's country of Briden. He'd been there twice on business and found it to be quite a lovely place.

"Open yours," Dani said, looking at the cookie he still held.

Gabe removed the paper the fortune was written on and decided perhaps the fortunes were exactly right today.

"Well, mine says, 'Keep your eye out for someone special.' I won't have to do that, because I have someone special with me already."

She stared at him, as though considering if he were joking or serious, then took another sip of tea. When her phone beeped, she pulled it out of her purse. She tapped out a message, waited a second as another message arrived, then typed a second one.

Dani glanced up at him as she tucked her phone into her purse. “That was Seth. Jossy invited him to stay for dinner. Nate said he’ll drive him home later.”

Gabe would have to thank Nate and Jossy for giving him more time with Dani. At least he hoped to spend more time with her if he could talk her into hanging out with him all afternoon. “Would you like to go to the movies?”

“Really?” she asked, leaning forward. “You mean like a real theater with salty, greasy popcorn and a huge box of candy?”

“Exactly that. What’s your favorite movie-candy?” Gabe held up a hand before she could answer. “No, don’t tell me. It’s ...”

“Junior Mints,” they said in unison.

Dani laughed, and he smiled.

“Come on. Let’s go see what’s playing.” Gabe left cash for their meal along with a generous tip, then held Dani’s coat while she slipped her arms into the sleeves. He took the bag holding the leftovers and set it in the back of his pickup. He figured it was cold enough it wouldn’t spoil and if a free-roaming animal were hungry enough to climb in the pickup bed to eat it, they probably deserved it.

Dani told him where the theater was located. They arrived just in time to catch a romantic comedy with two big-name celebrities in the starring roles. Gabe didn’t care what was playing, he only wanted to spend more time with Dani. The reason behind that was one he refused to explore. He just wanted to enjoy the day with a woman who had no idea he was worth billions. She thought he was an average guy who was looking over an old house to see if it were worth selling.

He bought two tickets, the biggest tub of popcorn they offered, two boxes of Junior Mints, and two sodas, then they hurried into the theater and took seats in the back just as the opening credits rolled across the screen.

Despite his plans not to let the movie distract him from Dani, Gabe found himself laughing several times. Although



they'd eaten a big lunch, they polished off most of the popcorn and one box of the candy.

They walked out of the theater after the movie ended to discover it had started to snow. Dani glanced up at the sky, held up her hands in a gesture of wonder, and smiled. "It never gets old, watching the snow drift down."

Enthralled with her and the way she seemed to find beauty in each moment, he stood there, absorbing some of what he thought of as Dani magic before she grabbed his hand and then hurried to the pickup.

"Is there anywhere you want to go before we head back to Summer Creek?" he asked as he adjusted the heater to high.

Dani gave him a studying glance. "Are you sure you don't mind?"

"Nope. Think of me as your personal driver. Where to, Miss Latham?"

"The Dollar Store, if you please."

Gabe had never, not once in his life, set foot in a dollar store. He guessed there was a first time for everything. He'd noticed the large store with a green sign when they'd driven to the movie theater, and he now returned to it.

Inside, he concluded everything truly was a dollar. The marvel of it was not lost on him. In spite of his intentions, he found himself grabbing a shopping basket and adding a few things he'd forgotten to pick up at Neil's yesterday.

Dani pulled a cart from the rack by the door and added many items. Her selections ranged from candy "for Seth's stocking," as she informed him, to Christmas decorations. She studied some signs on fake wood plaques that had holiday phrases.

"Do you want one of those?" Gabe finally asked.

"Not exactly. I had an idea for Christmas gifts, but I need big wooden boards for them. I could probably paint over these signs, but they're smaller than I wanted. I thought about

building them from old pallets, but I'm not sure how to go about that."

"I can help you. Aren't there stacks of pallets behind the Sinclair store and the grocery store?"

"Yes. Acquiring pallets is the easy part, it's repurposing the wood into the signs that will be tough. I have no idea where to start."

"I'd be happy to help you," Gabe said, hoping he could follow through with his offer. His grandfather had taught him many life skills, much like Knox was teaching Seth. Although Gabe didn't often use them, he hoped they were still lingering somewhere in his mind and, like riding a bicycle, it would all come back to him.

"I'd appreciate that, Gabe, if you're sure it's no trouble. Aren't you going to be busy with the house?"

"It's no trouble, and the house won't take all my time. In fact, I planned on taking a little vacation time while I'm here." That much was absolutely true.

"Okay. I'll get some pallets, and we'll give it a try."

Dani added several more things to the cart, including a dozen plastic food containers with snowflakes on the red lids.

"What are those for?" he asked as she headed toward the checkout counter.

"I always bake goodies to give to our friends at Christmas." Dani began placing her things on the conveyor.

"Goodies?" Gabe asked, his interest piqued. Home-baked goods were something he rarely got since his grandmother passed away unless Eddie took pity on him and shared cookies or quick bread from time to time.

"You know. Sugar cookies, gingerbread, that sort of thing."

"How does one go about making it to your friend list?" Gabe asked, only half teasing. He'd pay a small fortune for fresh-baked sugar cookies if they had frosting and those little sprinkly things on the top.

She only grinned at him and shook her head as he continued setting her items on the conveyor.

It suddenly hit home with Gabe how hard it had to be for Dani to be on such a tight budget as a single parent. No wonder she was buying things like card games and pens for Seth's stocking at the dollar store. It might be all she could afford.

Growing up, Gabe had basically been given whatever he wanted whenever he wanted it by his parents. His grandpa and grandmother were the ones who'd taught him to value a dollar and to work for what he wanted. He hoped Dani had never gone hungry, or spent a night awake, worrying about how she'd pay a bill.

He wished he could help her financially, but knew she'd never take a dime from him. She was too proud and too independent.

When she finished with her purchase, he quickly paid for the items he'd selected, then carried the bags out to the pickup and set them in the back seat. The Chinese food was still in the back, now under a layer of snow, which left a fresh coat of white on the world around them.

Gabe had noticed on the drive to Burns it hadn't snowed as much there as it had in Summer Creek. He supposed the higher elevation of Summer Creek, and its location closer to the mountains, made the difference.

In fact, there were a few spots on the way to Burns where the ground was almost bare.

"Anywhere else I can take you?" Gabe asked as he started the pickup and welcome heat poured through the vents.

"No, but thank you for everything, Gabe. I didn't offer earlier, but I'd like to pay for my lunch and my share of the movie expenses." She started to dig into her purse, but Gabe caught her hand in his.

"I've got it, Dani. Don't give it another thought. It was my pleasure to buy lunch and pay for the movie. You've made

me feel so welcome in Summer Creek. Just look at it as my thanks for that.”

She gave him a dubious look but finally nodded in agreement.

The pickup cab warmed up quickly, so Gabe removed his coat, then saw Dani do the same. The velvet of her dress looked so soft and inviting, he had to grasp the steering wheel with both hands to keep from reaching out and caressing her shoulder.

To distract himself, he found a station playing Christmas songs and turned up the music.

Dani laughed and sang along when a song about a grinch began to play. Each time the lyrics mentioned a certain holiday-hating character, she pointed at him.

Gabe feigned affront but was mesmerized by her playfulness and the way her hair framed her lovely face. He could easily see her in Hollywood, or in the New York fashion scene.

They were only about ten miles from Summer Creek when Dani gasped and pointed out the window.

Gabe slammed on the brakes, and the pickup slid several feet before it stopped. Thankfully, no one else was stupid enough to be out on the roads that were rapidly turning slick. He parked the pickup on the side of the road, turned it off, and rushed around the cab.

A herd of antelope stood in the sagebrush, watching with curiosity, but making no move to run away.

Dani opened the door and stepped out of the pickup. “There must be at least a hundred of them,” she whispered, slowly moving close beside him.

“At least.” Gabe spoke quietly and moved slowly as he took his phone from his pocket and snapped several photos. He tucked it back inside, then settled an arm around Dani’s shoulders. Neither one of them had bothered with their coats, and it was freezing outside, but it seemed so magical to stand there with the snow falling around them, watching the herd.

Gabe had seen a few antelope here and there, but never such a large group of them. He was awed by the sight.

Although he and Dani hadn't moved or spoken, something spooked the herd, and they took off, leaping over sagebrush as they disappeared into the swirling snow.

Dani clapped her hands like a giddy child as she watched them, and her reaction made Gabe smile.

On impulse, he grabbed her hand, spun her around a few times, and listened as her laughter bubbled around him.

"Oh, it's cold," she said, taking a tighter grip of his hand and lifting a foot as she shook snow out of her boot.

"Let's get you inside and warmed up," he said, guiding her back to the pickup.

Dani yanked on her coat and gloves before she buckled her seatbelt.

Gabe felt warmth seep through him as he considered her laughter and simple joy in watching one of the Creator's wonders.

It had been too many years since he had acknowledged the One who created the beauty around him, but he was certainly grateful for the opportunity to spend time with the beauty beside him.

He and Dani were both quiet for the remainder of the drive to Summer Creek. It wasn't uncomfortable silence, though. It seemed more like companionship to him than anything he'd ever experienced.

When he drove into town, he glanced at Dani. "Is your car parked at the church?"

She shook her head. "No. Seth and I walked. If you turn on the street between the post office and Neil's, I live across from the vet clinic."

Gabe was surprised she'd told him where she lived but didn't say anything. It only took a few minutes to reach her home.

The house was small, but looked as though it was well-maintained from the outside. There was a tall fence around the backyard and a shorter one in the front.

“Home sweet home,” Dani said, smiling at him as he parked behind an SUV he assumed was hers. It was several years old, but looked to be in good shape.

“I’ll help carry your things in, unless you’d rather I didn’t.”

“I’d appreciate the help. Thank you.” Dani started to get out, but Gabe rushed around the pickup. His feet slid on a patch of ice, and he almost took a nose dive into the fender but managed to brace himself on the hood before he fell.

When he looked up, Dani appeared to be struggling to suppress her laughter, so he stuck his tongue out at her. She started to giggle while he chuckled as he opened her door, and soon they were both laughing.

“I never claimed to be graceful,” he said as he picked up her bags from the back seat, then snagged the Chinese food from the bed of the pickup.

“It could happen to anyone, Gabe. It was the look of total surprise on your face that made me laugh.” She unlocked the door, opened it, and stepped inside. Dusk had already settled, so she flicked on an overhead light and kicked off her shoes.

He stepped inside, wiping his boots on the doormat, then looked around the small but tidy house.

“If you wouldn’t mind putting the food in the fridge, I’ll take these bags to my room. I don’t want Seth finding a present before I can get this all put away.” She took the shopping bags from him and disappeared through a door on the left side of the living room.

Gabe could see into the kitchen area from his spot by the door and walked across the living room. He tucked the leftovers into the refrigerator, relieved to see it was well-stocked. He smiled at the garlands draped around the tops of the cabinets and hanging around the doorways. It appeared she and Seth had decked the halls for the holiday season, but he

didn't see a tree and wondered if she'd be able to afford one. If not, he'd make sure one was delivered to her house before Christmas Eve. If he were still in town, he might even bring it himself. He'd never, not once in his life, decorated a Christmas tree, but it might be fun to do with Dani.

Dani returned to the living room dressed in a green sweatshirt, faded jeans, and fuzzy red socks. She held out a hand and waved it around her home. "So, Mr. Grouch, what do you think?"

"Festive," Gabe said in a mocking tone, then grinned to let her know he wasn't serious. "It looks nice, Dani."

She pushed up the sleeves of her sweatshirt, went into the kitchen, and took two mugs from the cupboard. "If you aren't in a rush, would you like to stay awhile? It's nothing fancy, but I have leftover pizza from work. We could watch a holiday movie someone grouchy like you should see."

"Grouchy like me?" Gabe offered her a confused look.

She hummed the tune to a Christmas song about a grinch—one that was swiftly becoming quite familiar to Gabe.

He rolled his eyes, but removed the cowboy hat he still wore and left it by her door, then went out and retrieved his coat from the pickup. On his way back inside, he noticed the lights she had strung along the front of the house. He plugged them in and admired how they glowed in the fading evening light. Unable to recall the last time he'd paused long enough to study the beauty of lights twinkling through winter's darkness, he took a moment before rushing back into the warmth of the house.

When he stepped inside and left his coat by his hat, Dani leaned over the kitchen counter. "Thanks for plugging in the lights. It'll save me one trip out in the cold."

"They look nice," Gabe said, and he meant it. The string of old bulbs reminded him of his grandmother and the ranch during the holidays. He'd only been there twice at Christmastime, and never on Christmas Day, but he'd thought the simple decorations there far outshined any of the elaborate

décor his father paid far too much to have holiday stylists in Oklahoma City set up at their house.

He took a moment to look around Dani's home. The furniture was older but in good shape. What fascinated him, though, were the paintings covering the walls. He recognized the works of Monet, Thomas Moran, Jan van Goyen, and several other famous artists. How could Dani possibly afford to purchase priceless paintings, or even prints of them?

He stepped closer to a large landscape that looked like something John Constable would have painted. But there was something different about it that made him think someone else had created the intriguing piece of art.

"You like landscapes," he said when Dani walked around the counter and stood beside him, tilting her head as she looked at the painting.

"Guilty as charged. I love art of all types, but landscapes are my favorites. They remind me of God's handiwork."

"I could see how they'd do that," he said, moving a step closer to her to study what looked like one of Monet's waterlily paintings. "Are these prints?"

Dani shook her head. "No. I, um ... I painted them."

"What?" Gabe turned to her, taken aback at the talent she possessed to closely mimic some of the greatest artists to ever have taken a paintbrush in hand. "The talent it would take to do these blows my mind, Dani. Why aren't you painting for a living?"

She shrugged. "For one thing, I'm good at copying other artists' work, but not spectacular at creating my own. The second reason is when one has a baby to raise and is on her own at a young age, becoming an artist seems like an unreachable dream."

Gabe had no idea what to say, so he turned to study another landscape, one that looked exactly like his favorite Frederic Remington painting of cowboys herding cattle in a lightning storm. Only the cattle looked more realistic to him, and the horses less traumatized.



“You’re incredible, Dani. If you ever decide you want to pursue art, I have a friend I could call.”

She shook her head. “No, but thanks, Gabe. It’s just something I do for myself. Although, tomorrow I’ll be painting holiday scenes on the windows at the Broken Bucket. Owen has me do it every year. It’s fun, and he pays me well for my time.”

“I’ll look forward to seeing them.” Gabe took another long look at the art Dani had created, wishing he could see something original of hers. If he sent a photo of it to a gallery owner he knew in Dallas, he was sure Dani could launch a successful career as an artist.

“Okay. Do you want hot chocolate, coffee, tea, or would you prefer pop or water?” she asked, clearly ready to change the subject.

“Coffee, if you have it, would be great.” Gabe walked into the kitchen and saw her drop a pod of coffee into a single-cup brewer. “Where did you get that?” he asked.

“I won it last year. I don’t care for coffee, but Seth loves it. I let him have one cup in the morning. I prefer tea or hot chocolate pods myself.”

“I love these little brewers. They’re so handy,” he said, taking the mug of steaming coffee she handed to him, then watched as she dropped a chocolate pod into the machine.

“I put the pizza in the oven. It should be hot in about ten minutes.” She motioned to the couch in the living room. She walked over to an oversized oak entertainment center that had been a popular piece of furniture thirty years ago and opened the bottom cupboard, pulling out three DVDs. “Which version of our holiday-despising friend do you prefer?”

Gabe had thought she was teasing, but he realized she was serious about watching a show meant for kids. He shrugged. “I’ve never seen any of them. You choose.”

Her mouth fell open, and she stared at him before she snapped it shut and placed two of the DVDs back in the

cupboard and closed the door. “Explain to me how you haven’t watched any of these holiday classics.”

“My family doesn’t really do Christmas. It’s just another day to them.”

Dani appeared horrified as she folded one leg beneath her and sank onto the couch beside him. He looked at her fuzzy red sock barely touching his leg and worked to hide a grin. Would she shove him out the door if he reached down and took her foot in his hand and massaged it?

She’d likely shoot him and call her friend the deputy to come bury his remains. Then his family really could report him missing.

“I need to wrap my head around what you just said, Gabe.” Dani continued studying him. “Are you saying your family has different religious beliefs?”

“No, not unless worshipping at the altar of greed counts.” He was saying too much, but seemed unable to hold it in now that he’d let something slip. “My parents and only sibling are all about making impressions and looking important. As a kid, Monique and I never helped decorate a tree or got to watch kids’ shows, or even played in the snow. Our lives were organized and ordered by what my dad wanted or didn’t want. The only thing we did that was even close to a holiday tradition was on the Saturday before Christmas. My mom would spend the day baking Christmas cookies, and we’d help. Then she’d hide the cookies and clean up the mess before my dad came home. He’s always been solely focused on business. I guess you can accurately call me a grinch or a grouch because Christmas has never been important before, at least not for the right reasons.”

Gabe reached out a hand and brushed it over Dani’s. “But I’m willing to learn. Do you think you could teach me? Maybe guide this grouch into the holiday season?”

Dani grinned. “I would be honored to do that, Mr. Grouch.” She bowed her head in a gesture of respect, then hopped up and checked on the pizza.

When they both had plates of pizza and were settled on the couch, she pushed “play” on the remote and they settled in to watch a Dr. Seuss holiday cartoon.

The movie had just ended when Seth bounded in the door, gave them a look of shock, then grinned. “Hey, Mr. Gatlin. Nice to see you here.” He looked at the television, then scowled at his mother. “I can’t believe you watched it without me, Mom!”

“Let’s watch it again,” Gabe said. He wouldn’t admit it, not to anyone, but he’d enjoyed the old cartoon.

“Great! Let me change. I’ll be right back.” Seth hurried through a doorway to the right of the living room.

Gabe rose and followed Dani into the kitchen with his dinner plate. “That pizza was some of the best I’ve ever had. Is it from the Broken Bucket?”

“Yeah. Owen creates wood-fired pizza that is some of the best in the region. He even had some hoity-toity food reviewer come a few weeks ago. He’s been on pins and needles waiting to find out what they’ll write.”

“Anyone with taste buds would write a glowing review. It’s some seriously awesome pizza.”

Dani nodded in agreement as she set his plate in the dishwasher. “Want more coffee?”

“Sure,” he said, watching as she dropped another pod into the machine.

She glanced at him, as though weighing her opinion of him. “You don’t have to watch the show again if you don’t want to.”

Gabe leaned toward her. “I’ll deny it if you tell anyone, but it was fun to watch. I don’t mind sitting through it again. I need to study this guy, right? If I expect to live up to the name you gave me, I need to get in touch with my inner grouch.”

Dani laughed and handed him the cup of coffee, filled a glass with water for herself, and led the way back to the couch.

“Can I have coffee, Mom?” Seth asked as he stepped out of his room dressed in sweatpants and a sweatshirt with the Summer Creek school logo on the front.

“Not this late, honey. You can have juice or water.”

“Juice, it is,” Seth said, pouring a glass of grape juice, and then plopping down on one end of the sofa.

Gabe debated where to sit, but Dani took a seat beside Seth, then tugged on Gabe’s hand. “You can’t see the TV as well from the side chair. Sit with us.”

So he did.

For the craziest moment, he let himself pretend Dani and Seth were his family and laughing together at a cartoon was the most natural thing in the world.

This, he decided, was perhaps what he’d been looking for when he’d run away from his life in Oklahoma City.

## Chapter Eight



“Mommy?” Cricket Cole climbed up beside her mother as they sat on the couch after dinner, having snuggled in for the evening.

Her dad sat on the other side of Emery, flipping through viewing options, trying to find the show Cricket had requested.

“What sweetie? Emery asked, gently brushing the curls from Cricket’s forehead and planting a kiss there.

Cricket liked when her mom did that. It made her feel special and loved. Even though Emery hadn’t always been her

mommy, Cricket was grateful—that’s the word Grammy had taught her—every day that Emery had fallen in love with her daddy and they’d gotten married.

The moment Cricket had met Emery, she’d thought she was beautiful and kind. After Emery had stayed at their house a few days, Cricket didn’t want her to ever leave. And she hadn’t. She’d stayed and made them all so happy. She’d even made the town happy.

Cricket remembered when her daddy used to frown a lot and never seemed to laugh. Now he smiled all the time and laughed every day, and he seemed to have more time to spend with her than he used to when he worked so much before meeting Emery.

If anyone could help someone in need, Cricket knew Emery could.

“Mommy, did you meet Mr. Grouch at church today?”

Emery smiled. “I sure did, sweetheart. But his name is Mr. Gatlin.”

“But I heard Dani call him Mr. Grouch. And he looked sad, Mommy. I think he might be like that grumpy guy in the movie. He needs some love and presents, and he needs Christmas in his heart.”

Cricket leaned against Emery’s side and rested her head against Emery’s stomach. She felt a tiny foot kick her cheek and she giggled. “My brother is saying hello,” she said, then cupped her hands around her mouth and pressed her lips to Emery’s stomach. “Hi, brother! It’s Cricket. I can’t wait to meet you.”

She glanced up and saw her parents look at each other and smile a certain way that they only did with each other. She didn’t know what it meant, but they always got all mushy when they smiled that way. Cricket had caught them kissing so many times, she’d lost count. Now she just giggled when she found them sneaking kisses in the kitchen or hallway.

“What makes you think Mr. Gatlin is grumpy?” Hud asked, leaning around Emery.

Cricket shrugged. “I dunno. He just looks like he needs some friends, and some happiness, and maybe some cookies!”

“Okay. How about we take him some cookies this week?” Emery suggested.

“Yay! Can I help make them?”

Emery nodded, pulling Cricket closer to her and kissing the top of her head. “Of course, you can, sweetheart. Now, are you ready to watch the movie?”

Cricket nodded and settled in next to Emery. A few seconds later, she suddenly hopped off the couch. “I forgot something!”

She raced to her bedroom, running so fast she scared her cat, Luna, who dove under the bed for safety. “It’s okay, kitty! I’m just getting my book!”

Cricket snatched a book from the bookcase in her room, then raced back to the living room. She jumped onto the couch, squirming between her mom and dad, looking up at her father with a mischievous grin.

“I’m ready now, Daddy. Let’s watch the show.”

As Cricket watched the movie, a plan began to form in her mind.

She’d be like one of the characters and help Summer Creek’s grouchy Gabe find Christmas, and his too-small heart to grow big too.

## Chapter Nine



Dani dipped her paintbrush into the palette she held in her hand and continued working on the restaurant window she was painting to look like a Thomas Kinkade scene of a cottage in the snow.

She just loved the unspoiled beauty of his art. Some might say it was too idealistic, reflecting an imperfect world too perfectly. But she didn't care. She thought his paintings were lovely and full of light and hope which was why she created her own version of her favorite Kinkade Christmas paintings each year when Owen asked her to paint the



windows. This year, she was focusing on woodland scenes of cabins and cottages in the snow.

As she painted a glowing yellow light in a cottage window, she turned her attention to the Christmas music playing on the earbuds she wore. She'd just stepped back to survey her work, when a hand tapped on the glass outside, startling her, and making her jump. She was grateful whoever it was had waited until she wasn't working on the window, though. She might have smeared the paintbrush through her still-wet paint and ruined the scene.

Dani glowered at whomever dared disturb her until she realized it was Gabe. She shook her head at him as he pressed his nose to the window between a tree and the edge of the cottage where she hadn't yet filled in the snow. Yesterday, she'd mentioned painting the windows to Gabe, but she hadn't expected him to show up at the Broken Bucket.

"Come to the back door," she shouted and pointed toward the side of the building.

He nodded and headed in that direction.

Dani set her palette on newspapers she'd spread over one of the tables beneath the window, wiped her hands on a rag, and hurried through the restaurant to unlock the back door.

Gabe stepped inside, wiping his snow boots on the mat, and shaking snow off his shoulders before he tugged off the stocking cap he wore and ran a hand over his thick hair to smooth it.

She fought the urge to do the same, and took a step back from him.

It was then she noticed he carried a large paper bag.

"What are you up to, Mr. Grouch?"

He grinned and followed her as she led the way down the back hallway and into the restaurant.

"I brought lunch. I wasn't sure if you'd take time to eat. I know you can probably have anything you want from the kitchen, but I thought this would save you some time." Gabe

opened the bag and set out foam cups and containers. “I went to the Early Bird Café. Maudie had homemade chicken soup with thick noodles that looked good, and there are grilled cheese sandwiches. When I told her it was for you, she threw in two pears and a container of carrots and celery sticks.”

Dani smiled and backed toward the restroom. “That sounds like Maudie, and that was very thoughtful, Gabe. Thank you. I’ll go wash up. If you want, you can help yourself to a drink from the kitchen. There isn’t any coffee made, but you can get a pop if you like.”

“Thanks. What would you like?”

“Water is great.”

Dani hurried into the restroom and looked in the mirror, appalled to see she had paint smeared over both cheeks, on her chin, and a dab of bright blue in the middle of her forehead.

She used a handful of paper towels to clean her face, then she scrubbed her hands. She looked like a mess in a pair of old denim overalls she wore only when she was painting. The thermal shirt beneath them was equally paint-spattered. She had a blue bandana tied over her hair that she’d braided and pinned up to keep from getting paint on it.

If Gabe remained out there when she returned, she might have to give him credit for not scaring easily.

She returned to find him setting two glasses of water on the table. He’d draped his coat over one of the chairs at a nearby table. He pulled out a chair for her and smiled.

Oh, there were those darn, enticing dimples doing their best to charm her. Before she could remember all the reasons—any reason—to send him on his way, she returned his smile.

“Ready for lunch?” he asked as she took a seat and pulled a napkin from the dispenser on the table.

“Yes, I’m starving, although I didn’t realize it until you said ‘chicken soup.’ Maudie’s soup is so good. It makes me think of my grandma,” Dani said, bowing her head.

She felt Gabe squeeze her hand, so she offered a prayer of thanks aloud instead of silently as she'd originally intended.

Dani lifted a plastic spoon, took the lid off a foam cup, and steam redolent of chicken and herbs wafted up to her nose. She breathed deeply, transported back to her grandmother's kitchen when she'd been a little girl, staying there while her mother worked.

Before she got lost wandering around her memories, she brought herself back to the present and the handsome, thoughtful man sitting across from her. "Thank you for this, Gabe. It's been a long while since I've eaten Maudie's food."

"She said you don't come around often, but blamed Owen for that."

Dani didn't comment, instead taking a bite of the soup. "So, so good."

Gabe tasted his and nodded in agreement. "It's fantastic. You suppose she'd sell it by the jar so I could have some on hand?"

"No. Although, you wouldn't be the first hungry man who's asked. She threatened to cut out Bert Price's tongue if he asked her again."

Gabe chuckled and took another big bite of the soup. He wiped his mouth with a napkin and pointed his spoon at the windows she'd finished. "Those windows are incredible, Dani. It's unbelievable what you can do with a paintbrush. I just ... it's like ... I ..." He paused, as though searching for what he wanted to say. "It makes me want to walk into the scenes and experience Christmas—to see it through your perspective."

Dani was both flattered and humbled by his words. Art had been so important to her—everything to her—until the day she'd realized she was carrying Seth. Then it no longer mattered. She'd finally found her way back to painting—just for fun, just for herself. But the dreams she'd dreamed as a young girl were long gone. Now she just dreamed of Seth having a successful, happy, fulfilling life, and that he would

never make the mistakes she'd made. Although, she could never think of him as a mistake.

"I'm serious, Dani. You are incredibly talented. I just hate to think of your talent not making its way into the world for others to enjoy."

"It's better this way, Gabe. I paint for enjoyment, not because I have to. It's enough."

He nodded, although she could tell by his expression, that he didn't understand. She couldn't expect him to. He hadn't walked in her shoes, didn't know what she'd done, the things she'd had to set aside when she'd become a mother.

Gabe finished his soup, took out the sandwiches, and munched on a few celery sticks before he gave Dani an observant look. "If you had the opportunity to paint, and have your work on display in a gallery, would you take it? Would you take the chance and the risk, and try to paint something that was entirely your own?"

Dani didn't have to think about it or consider her response. "No, Gabe. I gave up the art world when I had Seth."

"How old were you when he was born?"

She sighed. Eventually, people asked about her age. It wasn't like she was hiding the truth, but she still felt that prick of shame for what she'd done when she'd been so naïve, and gullible, and trusting. "I was sixteen when he was born."

Gabe stopped with the sandwich halfway to his mouth. His eyes widened as he gaped at her. "Sixteen? But you were still a kid."

"Yep. Sure was." Dani took a bite of her sandwich so she wouldn't have to say more. She didn't know why, based on the number of times she'd told the bare bones version of her story to friends who'd finally pried it out of her, but admitting it to Gabe bothered her.

Maybe because he looked at her like she was someone special. If he knew the whole story, she had a feeling he'd walk out the door and she'd never see him again. Maybe that

would be for the best since he'd be leaving soon anyway, and she highly doubted he'd stay in touch. Why would he? She was a nobody living in a nowhere town.

Despite the feed store clothes he wore and the old pickup he drove, she got the vibe that he'd experienced a lot of what life had to offer and would never be happy with a woman who worked as a server in a bar and grill. She was more inclined to call it a dive, but Owen had made great strides in changing the reputation of the Broken Bucket. If only he would change the name.

Gabe didn't ask more about her past as they ate. He did ask what scenes she had planned for each window, and what she'd painted last year.

When she'd finished her pear, and eaten one of the dozen oatmeal cookies he'd brought from Maudie's, she wiped her hands on a napkin, and started to rise from the table, but Gabe's hand on her arm kept her in her seat.

"Please, Dani, tell me your story. I just want to know what makes you such a sweet person and a great mom. I think your past influences who you are today."

Dani didn't feel like she could deny him when he put his request that way.

She sighed and leaned back in the chair. "It's not a great story, Gabe. In fact, I know you'll think less of me. Also, I haven't told it to anyone, not even my close friends here in Summer Creek. At least not the whole story. Seth doesn't know, and I want to keep it that way."

"Whatever you share remains confidential, Dani. It's not my place to tell anyone anything. How did you end up a mother at just sixteen?"

"The answer to that question is stupidity. Plain and simple, I was a stupid, fickle girl."

At Gabe's disbelieving look, she continued. "It's true. I guess I should tell you the whole story. When I was tiny, maybe three or so, my dad left. Just walked out the door and never came back. My mom did the best she could to raise me,

but she was flighty to start with, and having my father leave sure didn't help. We moved around all the time. When she was in between jobs or boyfriends, we'd move in with my grandmother. Grandma was the only stable place and person in my life. When I was fourteen, my mom died of an overdose. Grandma said it was accidental, but I'm pretty sure it was on purpose. We were living at Grandma's at the time and she got full custody of me. I've always loved art. It was the one thing I had that I could take with me every time we moved. No matter where we lived, I could take out a notebook and pencil, or watercolor paints if we could afford them, and escape into creating the world around me like I wanted it to be. I'd decided by the time I was ten I wanted to be an art historian. I didn't think I'd ever be good enough on my own to make it as an artist, but an art historian was something I knew I'd be good at. And it would give me the chance to explore the world. I wanted to see The Louvre, and the Sistine Chapel, and visit the Vatican City."

"They're all great places," Gabe mumbled, then took a drink. He looked like he hoped Dani hadn't heard him, but she had. Now wasn't the time to question him, though. Not when she felt a deep need to finally tell someone the whole story of her past.

"My counselor at school knew about my dreams, and she somehow managed to talk the nearby university into letting me take a few art classes. I had breezed through my regular classes at school and took tests to skip several classes, so I was basically bored at high school and needed to be academically challenged. She thought if I could take classes in a subject that interested me, it would help cement my future."

"What happened? Did you go to the university?"

Dani scoffed. "I sure did. I had three afternoon classes there. I loved them. Absolutely loved them. I thought I was so mature and clever and on my way to being somebody. I tried to dress so I looked older, and made myself act more mature, and less like a giggly teenager. When anyone asked, I told them I was eighteen. Miss Dani Latham was proud of herself. Too proud. Too arrogant. That's when I got stupid. One of my

professors started paying a lot of attention to me, praising me as being brilliant. He started taking me out to dinner, touching my cheek, or giving me a hug here and there. The professor charmed me, then he seduced me. I believed him when he told me he'd marry me at the end of the school year. I was already planning what my wedding dress would look like when I realized I was pregnant. I was frantic. Terrified. Too ashamed to tell my grandmother, so I went to a clinic, and they confirmed what I already knew. When I went to the professor and told him we had to get married right away, he threatened me. Told me if I didn't terminate the 'problem,' as he called it, he'd see to it I was terminated. I'd been such an idiot. I'm sure I wasn't the first student he seduced, and I doubt I was the last. I've felt terrible for years about not speaking out. Basically, I was a coward who slunk off in the shadows when he threatened me. I should have gone to the police, or at least the dean of the school. He never had any intention of marrying me because he was already married with three kids. Married!"

Gabe put his hand over hers and gave it a comforting squeeze. "What did you do?"

"What could I do? I dropped out of school and got my GED before Seth arrived. Once he was born, I got a job waitressing at a twenty-four-hour diner up the street from my grandmother's house. I worked nights and she worked days, so one of us was always with Seth. When he was six months old, Grandma had a fatal heart attack at work. I couldn't afford to keep up the rent, and I had nowhere else to go, so I packed up grandma's car, sold what I could for cash, and left."

"Where were you living when all this happened?"

"Utah. My silly little teenage mind thought running away would solve all my problems, and I could start fresh somewhere else. What I failed to consider was how expensive it would be to relocate, and how hard it was, still is, for a single mother to find work, or a place to live, or adequate childcare, or health care, or ..."

Dani stopped and drew in a calming breath. "I decided I'd like to live on the coast, paint the ocean, you know. So, I was on my way there. I drove out of Burns heading to Bend, and I

don't know why or how it happened, but I made a wrong turn and ended up in Summer Creek just as my car ran out of gas. I coasted into the gas station and the first person I met was our current mayor. He was there talking with the owner, drinking coffee. When he saw me, saw Seth in the car, he asked if I was planning to stick around town for a while. He said he had a room for rent over his garage if I were interested. I was afraid he'd turn out like the professor and refused. I filled the tank with gas, but something compelled me to stay in Summer Creek. That first night, Seth and I slept in the car behind City Hall. The next morning, I asked at every business if anyone was hiring, but no one was. Out of desperation, I went to the Broken Bucket which was more bar than grill at the time. The man who owned it then was Owen's uncle. He took one look at me and said, 'How old are you kid? And don't you dare lie to me.' I told him I was sixteen with a seven-month-old baby and would work hard for him if he gave me a chance. Thankfully, he did. After another night in the car, I walked over to the mayor's house, knocked on his door, and asked if that room was still available. He looked at Seth, shook his head, and told me the room was taken, but he had a house for rent. We walked over to it, he opened the door, and in that instant, I knew everything was going to be all right. I've been in the house and here in Summer Creek ever since. No matter what anyone says, I'm convinced God guided us here."

Gabe studied her for the length of several heartbeats, not saying a word, but his hand caressed hers as he held it. That one gentle touch reassured her that he wasn't going to walk away.

"I'm sorry, Dani. I'm sorry you went through that all alone. I'm sorry you had to set aside your dreams. I'm sorry you've had to deal with so much loss and pain, but I'm glad you ended up in Summer Creek. If you hadn't, we might never have met, and that would be tragic." He grinned at her. "If you tell me the name of that professor, I'll hunt him down and take care of him for you."

"Byron Doyle isn't worth your time, Gabe, but thanks for that generous offer." Dani glanced at her watch and stood.



“Thank you for listening to me, Gabe, and not running out the door.”

“Why would I do that, Dani? You trusted someone, and they let you down. You weren’t stupid, you were young and misled by someone who preyed on your grief and need to feel loved. The one at fault is the professor. He committed a crime with a minor, not to mention the threats he made against you. If you ever want to press charges, I know an attorney.”

She shook her head. “No. I don’t want him to know about Seth. My son has no idea who fathered him, and it can stay that way from now until the end of time as far as I’m concerned. I’ve dodged Seth’s questions in the past, offering evasive answers, but he’s been asking more frequently. I hate to tell him the whole truth, but I fear I’ll have to tell him some of it, although he will never know that man’s name because I don’t want him to do something foolish like try to find him. He’d only be disappointed, and likely hurt.”

“Agreed.” Gabe stood, walked around the table, and pulled Dani into a hug, then he took a step back.

“What was that for?” she asked, trying to keep from bursting into tears. She rarely cried, but something about Gabe’s kindness made her teeter on the edge of losing control of her emotions.

“Because we’re friends and you needed a hug.”

“Thank you. And thanks for lunch. It was perfect.” Dani tossed the trash and went over to pick up her palette.

“If you and Seth don’t have other plans, would you like to come over for dinner tonight? I know you’ll be working the rest of the week.”

Dani studied him a moment, gauging the reason for the invitation, but couldn’t sense anything off. Gabe was trying to be a friend, and she decided she’d let him.

“That would be great. What time should we come over? What can we bring?”

“Bring one of the Christmas movies, and I’ll see you at six.”

“It’s a date,” Dani said, then blushed. “I mean, we’ll be there.”

Gabe grinned at her, shrugged into his coat, and left out the back door.

Dani released a sigh that seemed to come all the way up from her soul, then she smiled. She felt good, like a huge burden had lifted off her shoulders, as she returned to painting the windows. She’d finally told the whole story about her past, and Gabe hadn’t looked at her with condemnation or judgment, but concern and care.

Maybe she should sic him on the professor. She could almost picture the man’s face as Gabe walked up to him and punched him in his hawkish nose.

Seth stopped by when he got out of school and helped her finish the last window, which was mostly adding snow. Although her son had no interest in painting, Seth had gained enough skill from her that he could do some simple painting projects.

“Are we really going to have dinner in the big house by the feed store?” he asked for the third time as she washed out her brushes and stowed them in the fishing tackle box she used to carry her paint supplies.

“We sure are, but only if we hustle home so I can wash off all this paint.” Dani ruffled Seth’s hair, then the two of them yanked on their coats and walked home.

Seth plugged in the outdoor lights and collected the mail while Dani rushed to take a shower. She dressed in a pair of jeans, a navy-blue sweater, and blow-dried her hair, leaving it to hang in waves around her face. She applied a coat of mascara and one of lip gloss, indulged in a spritz of the expensive perfume Emery had given to her for Christmas last year, then hurried to dig out a holiday movie.

“I went out and started the SUV to warm it up,” Seth said as he rushed inside, stamping the snow from his boots on the doormat.

“Thanks, kiddo. I’ll grab my coat, and we’ll be set to go.”

Dani picked up her purse, rammed her arms into the sleeves of her coat, and she and Seth hurried out the door.

Seth chatted about school as she drove through town, turned at the feed store onto Second Avenue, and parked in front of the big Victorian house. It needed lights across the eaves and garlands on the porch. Maybe a few wreaths hanging from the doors. She envisioned it lit up with white lights and adorned with big red bows. It was a house that made her want to paint a winter scene.

“Are you sure he’s home?” Seth asked as they got out and started up the front walk.

“Yes. See the light on in the back? He must have heard us. The lights are coming on throughout the house.” A porch light flicked on before they reached the door. Gabe pulled it open and stepped back, welcoming them inside.

Seth waited for her to enter first, and Dani walked into the house with the strangest sense of *déjà vu*, like she’d returned to somewhere she was always meant to be. She looked down at the wood-inlaid floor shaped in a starburst pattern, then gazed at the grand spiral staircase and the stained glass skylight above it. She turned in a slow circle, lightheaded, with the most intense feeling of belonging. The only other time she’d experienced anything like this was the day she’d arrived in Summer Creek for the first time.

“Mom, are you okay? You don’t look good,” Seth said, placing a hand on her shoulder.

“Maybe you should sit down,” Gabe said, guiding her into the living room and helping her into an overstuffed chair. “Put your head between your knees.”

Dani did as Gabe suggested and took several deep breaths. The wooziness passed, and she raised her head.

“Mom! Are you gonna pass out or puke, or something?” Seth asked as he knelt on the floor beside her.

Mortified by his questions, and her near-fainting spell, she shook her head. “No, I’m fine now. Maybe I inhaled too many paint fumes today.”

Seth gave her a look that let her know he was aware that was not the cause of her problem, but thankfully kept that to himself.

Gabe's brow furrowed with worry. "We can do this another time if you don't feel well, Dani."

She shook her head and straightened in the chair. "No. I feel much better. I promise. Besides, Mr. Grouch, you've got a whole lot of Christmas shows to watch and not much time to do it. Christmas is only three weeks away, you know."

"Is that right?" Gabe grinned at her, and then at Seth. "Well, we better get to it then." He held out a hand to Dani, and she took it, letting him pull her upright. He helped her out of her coat while Seth removed his, and then Gabe hung them both in a closet near the entry.

"Can we see the house?" Seth asked, his curiosity evident on his face.

Dani glowered at him. She wondered if he'd left his manners at home or was just determined to embarrass her tonight.

"Let's eat first and give your mom a chance to rest a bit," Gabe said, offering her another concerned glance.

"Sounds good," Seth said, then settled an arm around her shoulders. "Mom's not usually a fainter."

"Seth Andrew! I have never fainted in my life, and I don't plan to start now." Dani gave him a motherly scowl and hoped he took the hint to reel in his commentary.

They followed as Gabe led the way into the kitchen where he had the makings for tacos spread out across a large marble counter.

"Wow," Dani whispered, walking around the spacious kitchen, envisioning the amazing things she could create with that much room and storage space available.

"Go ahead and help yourself. I've got lemonade, sweetened tea, bottled water, milk, cola, or I can make hot

chocolate or tea in the microwave.” Gabe opened the refrigerator door and removed a bottle of water.

“Water for me, please,” Dani said, then looked at Seth.

“Milk would be great, sir. Thank you.”

“You bet,” Gabe said, pouring two glasses of milk. “I thought we could eat and watch the movie at the same time, if that’s okay with both of you.”

“Sure,” Dani said, moving to stand beside Seth, and taking his hand in hers. “Do you mind if I ask a blessing on the meal?”

“Not at all.” Gabe smiled at her, then bowed his head as she offered a brief word of thanks for the meal and their time together.

After they filled their plates, Gabe led the way upstairs. Dani tried not to gape at the amazing architecture or the richly appointed house. If she’d pulled the ideal dream house from her head, this would be it. She could envision where art pieces would go, and where holiday decorations would hang. She shook her head to clear her thoughts just as Seth sucked in a gasp.

“Oh, man! Logan won’t believe this.” Seth grinned at her as they stepped into a media room with leather recliners set in a half circle around an enormous television.

“I left the movie downstairs,” Dani said, but Seth set his plate and glass of milk on a side table and dashed down to get it, and then bounded back up the stairs.

“Here it is,” he said, handing the movie to Gabe who slid it into a DVD player and clicked a few buttons. Snowflakes swirled on a blue background on the screen as the narrator began telling the story.

Dani ate her dinner and relaxed as they watched the movie. Although, if she admitted it, she spent far more time watching Gabe and his reactions, listening to his deep laughter, than she did the antics taking place on the screen.

At the end of the movie, Gabe glanced at her, and she smiled. “What do you think, Mr. Grouch? Are you ready to get your Christmas spirit on yet?”

“Not yet,” he said, pressing a button to eject her DVD and returning the case to Seth. “But I’m starting to warm up to the idea. Now, how about a tour of the house if you feel up to it?”

“Yes, please!” she and Seth said at the same time, making Gabe chuckle as he led them through all the rooms. On their way downstairs, they gathered their dishes. After leaving them in the kitchen, Gabe showed them the rest of the rooms on the main floor.

“Are you going to put up any decorations, Mr. Grou... I mean Mr. Gatlin?” Seth asked.

“I don’t think so. But hypothetically, what do you think I should have?”

Seth grinned. “You need garlands and wreaths, and what are those red flowers, Mom?”

“Poinsettias?”

“Yeah, poinsettias,” Seth said as they walked from the living room back into the foyer. The teen turned in a slow circle, his gaze fixed upward. “And mistletoe.”

Dani gave Seth a warning look, dreading where he was heading with the conversation, but he didn’t notice. She was sure the direction he was thinking couldn’t be anywhere good. Over the years, when he’d get in one of his “I want a daddy” moods, he’d try to get her to date someone in town. She hoped he wasn’t plotting ways to set her up with Gabe. That was never, ever going to work. Not ever.

“Mistletoe, huh?” Gabe asked, looking straight at Dani. “Did I hear something about a lighting contest? Are you two going to participate?”

“We put up the lights around the house,” Seth said, his forehead creasing as he considered Gabe’s question. “We have a few more strings of lights. Maybe we could put them around the fence or something.”

“What we have is sufficient, kiddo.” She raised an eyebrow at Gabe. “What about you? If you really want to get into the spirit of things, you should put up some lights outside. It’s cheerful on a dark winter night.”

“Cheerful,” he repeated, although he looked like his thoughts were a million miles away. He finally brought his focus back to them. “How about you two come help me festoon my yard, and we’ll enter the contest together?”

“Yes!” Seth cheered and fist-bumped Gabe.

Dani was far less enthusiastic, but nodded in agreement. “What kind of theme do you want to do?”

“Theme? Lights have a theme?”

“Well, you can’t just throw stuff out willy-nilly and expect to win.”

“I don’t know what to do to decorate. I’m a grouch, remember? You decide the theme, make a list of what you need, and I’ll get it. How about that for a plan?”

“Are you sure?” Dani asked, hesitant to step into something she was sure would be fun, but also force her to spend more time around the undeniably attractive man.

“I’m sure.” Gabe grinned at her again. “But remember you have to come help me set it up. I should probably give you my cell phone number so you can text over the supply list.”

She took Gabe’s phone and entered her contact information, then sent herself a text. “We’re set.”

“Thanks.” He tucked the phone back in his pocket as they moved closer to the door.

Dani stopped and gave him a long glance. “You are absolutely certain you want us to help decorate your yard?”

“Positive,” Gabe answered, emphasizing his words with a nod of his head. “Just promise you won’t leave me to do it myself. I’ve never even strung lights before.”

“We’ll come,” Seth assured him. “If we need help, I’m sure I could get Logan to come too.”

“Let’s take one thing at a time, son,” Dani said, nudging him toward the door. “Thank you for the tacos and a great evening, Gabe. It was nice to just hang out.”

“It was nice. I hope you’ll come back again soon.”

“We will,” Seth said, smirking at Dani before he grabbed his coat and raced outside with her keys.

“That kid is ...”

“Great,” Gabe said before Dani could finish speaking. “I really did have a nice time, Dani. Are you sure you feel well? I could drive you home if you aren’t up to it.”

“No, but thank you. I’m fine now.” Dani never lied and she’d just told a whopper.

She wasn’t fine. Wasn’t sure she’d ever be fine again. She was in love with this house, and even worse, she was falling in love with the man who temporarily lived there.



## Chapter Ten



“I know that, Eddie, but I’m not ready to come home. Can’t you put them off a while longer?” Gabe sat at the table in the breakfast nook, sipping coffee and eating oatmeal cookies for breakfast, while talking on his cell phone to his assistant.

“You can’t hide forever, boss. Eventually, you’ll have to come back like a big boy and resume your responsibilities,” she said in a scolding tone.

Eddie’s lecture didn’t inspire him to want to change his current course of action. Not when he was enjoying his time in

Summer Creek far more than he'd enjoyed anything for a long, long time.

Yesterday, having Dani and Seth at the house with him had felt so good, and so right. There was a part of him that felt like he'd always known them, and that they belonged together. He knew it was ridiculous and crazy, but it didn't change anything.

"Gabe! Are you even listening?"

"Yes, ma'am." He shifted his thoughts back to Eddie and the work that was piling up in Oklahoma City. Eddie was right in that he couldn't completely shirk all his duties on such short notice. "I will send a company-wide email that I'm taking time off and will reply to emails only. No calls. No texts. Put Mike in charge of the Cowan sale, and task Lorna with handling the Burgess project. If any major issues arise, you can let me know. Otherwise, everything else can wait until January. Will that keep things under control for now?"

"It will, and I'm glad to know you can be at least somewhat reasonable, Gabe. Your father has been storming around like a raving lunatic, and Monique isn't much better. Your mother has only been in once, and she was as pleasant as always. You might want to drop her an email. I think she'd appreciate it." Eddie sighed. "Are you really enjoying it there, Gabe?"

He grinned. "I really am, Ed. It's a great little town, full of good people. You might not believe it, but Dani and Seth are going to come decorate the yard for a Christmas lighting competition this week."

"You're right, I don't believe it. Aren't you supposed to be the town's new resident grouch?"

"Maybe my heart has already grown a size by just being here," he joked.

"No maybe about it," Eddie said dryly. "Behave yourself, and send me photos of the yard when it's all decorated. I loved the antelope pictures you sent. It looks like you're staying in a wild, beautiful place."

“It is, Eddie. I’ll have to bring you out here someday to see it.”

“Sure, boss. Now shut up, eat your cookies, and let me get back to work.”

Gabe wasn’t surprised when she disconnected the call. He dunked a cookie in his coffee and stared at the snow on the ground outside the window. He’d never built a snowman. Thrown snowballs. Gone sledding. None of it.

Now, he was experiencing some inexplicable need to do it all.

Gabe dunked another cookie. He blamed it on Dani. He didn’t know what it was about the lovely woman, but from the moment he’d met her, nothing in his life had been the same.

He recalled the heart-stopping concern he’d felt when she’d obviously been dizzy last night. Dani had seemed well and in good spirits when she and Seth had first arrived, but not long after, she’d gone pale and looked like she might collapse to the floor. After a few minutes of sitting with her head between her knees, she’d been fine, but it had scared him.

What if she had a brain tumor, or cancer, or some other fatal disease about to take her away from him?

He shook his head at his dire thoughts. Dani wasn’t his in the first place, and when he left Summer Creek, he’d likely never see her again anyway.

Why did the thought of that make him depressed, and fill him with loneliness?

Rather than examine the reasons, Gabe called J.T. and spoke with him for a while, making his friend laugh as he talked about Ethel the goat and some of the more colorful characters in town.

He’d just finished the conversation when he received a text from Dani with a list of supplies. The last line of her message read:

*Is this too much to spend? If so, we can leave off the last five items on the list.*

He quickly tapped out a reply.

*Nope. I'll take care of it today.*

If only she knew he could buy the entire town of Summer Creek and all the surrounding ranches and still have money left over. He didn't want her to find out. To Dani and Seth, he was just Gabe—a guy who'd come to town to check out an old house and had decided to stay there for a while. No one had questioned why he would stay, or had asked anything about his job. That was fine with him. The fewer questions the better.

He felt marginally guilty for deceiving people who were fast becoming friends, but he didn't see any way around it. Not if he wanted his identity to remain a secret.

Then again, anyone who wanted could search his name and eventually find photos of him connected to Daniels Realty and his family.

However, he didn't think anyone in Summer Creek would care enough to look.

Gabe finished a third cookie and his coffee, set the mug in the dishwasher, then thought about the day ahead of him. Dani had mentioned wanting pallets to make some signs. He drove over to Sinclair's, asked the manager if he could take some of the pallets that were out back, and worked not to grin as Jack Olsen practically ran outside to help him load them into his pickup.

"If you need more, just take whatever you want," Jack said as Gabe set the last of four pallets into the back of his pickup.

"Thanks. What's the best way to take them apart if you want to reuse the wood?"

"I'd use a prybar to loosen the nails and take them off that way. A few might splinter, but you should be able to get most of them loose."

"Okay. I reckon I need a prybar, and probably some wood screws. Do you have power tools?"

Jack grinned. “Sure do. Come inside, and I’ll get you set up.”

Gabe drove home with a sack full of screws, two different sizes of prybars, a hammer, an electric saw, and a cordless drill.

He sent Dani a text after he parked in the garage.

*What kind of signs are you planning to make?*

He only had time to step out of the pickup before a photo appeared from her in his messages. He tapped it and looked at the large sign. To him, it looked like the pallet strips had been attached to a frame, and then painted with a holiday message. After seeing what Dani was capable of creating with a paintbrush at her home and the restaurant, he knew the painting would be the easy part.

He sent a quick text.

*Great. Thanks!*

She replied immediately.

*What are you planning?*

He smiled as he tapped out another message.

*You’ll see! Come by this afternoon if you have time.*

She sent an emoji smiley face and a thumbs-up. He assumed that was good. Honestly, he felt like someone should teach a class about what all the emojis mean. He would gladly take a lesson. Maybe he could just ask Seth. Teenagers seemed to know everything about anything that was tech related.

Whatever happened to kids playing outside and riding their bikes for fun? Not that his childhood had been that way, but his friends had grown up with normal parents, and had spent more time playing in the fresh air than camped in front of an electronic screen.

Gabe sighed. He was starting to sound old. When he’d taken a moment to really study himself in the mirror this morning, he’d concluded he looked that way too. When had

those lines deepened around his eyes, and when had his chin gotten fuller?

Plastic surgery was something he'd never consider, although his father had gone under the knife more times than Gabe could keep track of. Maybe there were some exercises he could do to keep from looking like a middle-aged man who'd given up on himself.

Mindful of the cookies he'd eaten for breakfast, Gabe went into the house, and did fifty sit-ups, then did pushups until his arms began to quiver. He'd take a walk around town later, maybe, if he got one of the pallet signs completed before Dani came that afternoon. He wondered if she'd bring Seth with her.

Although Gabe had never spent much time around children, especially his bratty niece, he thought Seth seemed like an extraordinarily good kid. He was polite and mannerly, friendly and curious, and Gabe had found him to be intelligent. The teen could succeed in any number of career paths, but it seemed to him Seth was leaning toward a job where he could work with his hands.

Gabe mentally made a list of several professions that would make a decent living for the boy, although he'd never get rich at any of them. Then again, Gabe was starting to realize happiness and fulfillment trumped a fat bank account any day.

He got out his laptop, composed a succinct memo, and sent it to every person employed by the Daniels Corporation. It had taken him almost thirty minutes to find the right words to convey his expectations without revealing his plans.

While he had his laptop open, he pulled up the list of supplies Dani had texted to him, found a website where he could order everything, and paid extra to have it delivered the following day. He had no idea what half the stuff was that he was getting, but if Dani wanted it, he was buying it. He tripled the number of lights she'd requested and added something fun as a surprise for her. After studying images of holiday yard decorations, he added some spotlights to the order. He'd used

a personal credit card and hoped no one would think to trace the order being shipped to Summer Creek.

Before he changed his mind and minded his own business, he typed in the name of the professor who had lied to Dani and ruined her life. Gabe shook his head. She wouldn't say her life was ruined, just different. Anyone could see she doted on her son. Regardless of how Seth came to be, Dani loved her son and was a wonderful mother.

It didn't take long to find an article from four years ago about the father of a student storming into the school and fatally shooting the professor for getting his daughter pregnant, then threatening her. Gabe felt bad for the father who'd spend his life in prison, and for all the girls the professor had charmed and seduced. Apparently, after his death, a dozen women had come forward and said he'd made promises to each of them when they were underage, then threatened them when they said they'd go to the authorities. A photo of the professor made Gabe question what it was about him that drew in women. Well, young, impressionable girls was more like it. As he studied the image, he couldn't see any resemblance between the man and Seth, other than they shared the same hair and eye color.

Grateful the boy took after his mother, Gabe could only imagine how hard it would have been on Dani to daily have to look at a replica of the man who'd stolen her youth. Gabe saved a link to the article, in case he worked up the nerve to share it with Dani, then noticed he had twenty-three new emails.

With a groan, he began opening them one by one. A few were holiday wishes from some of the staff. He deleted them without replying. The people who sent them didn't care if he had a good holiday. They were just trying to win his favor, and likely a promotion.

He deleted the email from his sister without even reading it and scanned the email from Chadwick that had a list of other properties he wanted to be investigated in his quest to cut expenses. He copied the property information into a new email and sent it to the vice president of the realty division.

Arlo Anderson's father had been friends with Gabe's father for years. Arlo had been given the position of vice president based solely on Gabe's dad doing his friend a favor, providing Arlo with a cushy job. Gabe figured it was about time Arlo worked for the money that padded his bank account and pockets.

He detailed action steps for Arlo and clarified if they weren't followed to the letter, he would put a bug in Arlo's father's ear about the Hawaiian vacation Arlo took last February with a woman who wasn't his wife while pretending to be at a real estate convention in California. Gabe might act like he paid no attention to anything going on in the office, but he knew details they'd all be surprised to discover.

He read his father's rage-filled email and thought about ignoring it. Instead, he sent a brief message in response.

*I'll be back in January. If you need something beyond wanting to control every aspect of my life, email me. Happy Holidays!*

Gabe took perverse pleasure in imagining the fury on his father's face when he read the reply.

Once he'd responded to a few legitimate questions from two of his staff, Gabe turned off the laptop, laughed at Eddie's text message detailing the tantrum his father was throwing that could be heard all over the top floor of the building, then went out to the garage.

Thankful the space was heated, Gabe sat on the tailgate of the pickup as he pried a pallet apart. He took out his phone and watched a few do-it-yourself videos before he attempted to build a simple frame from pallet pieces. He then screwed the slats to the frame so they butted up against each other to make a solid surface. Pleased with his efforts, he leaned the pallet against a storage cabinet, brushed the sawdust off his hands and clothes, then decided to go out to the barn to see what was stored there.

He kept meaning to investigate it and hadn't yet. After trying the door and finding it locked, he used the house key,



and the side door swung open. He flicked on the lights and stepped inside, closing the door behind him.

The space was a little dusty and musty, but he could smell the lingering scent of horses and history in the air. The back of the barn had several stalls where he imagined the family's horses had once been kept. A tack room was still full of old saddles and bridles as well as harnesses. A storage room on the other side of the barn held all sorts of things—like a lawnmower, rakes and shovels, and a vast assortment of old tools.

Gabe picked up a vintage ball peen hammer and let the weight of the handle rest on his palm. Had his great-grandfather been the one who'd worn the wood smooth through years of use? He liked to think it connected him to his past to even consider such a thing.

He closed the door to the storage room and wandered down the aisle of the barn, glancing in the stalls. Most of them were empty. One held rotting bales of straw. Another had old wooden barrels that were empty, but Gabe wondered what had once filled them.

Gabe found another side door at the back of the barn and opened it. There weren't any windows in the space, so he felt along the wall until his hand connected with an old light switch. He flipped it up and light bathed a room that had been built to hold carriages and wagons. He knew that because there was a big farm wagon, two carriages, and a two-seater sleigh all still there.

Excited by his discovery, Gabe thought the sleigh would look perfect in the front lawn as part of the holiday décor Dani and Seth would help him install. The only problem was getting the sleigh from the back of the barn to the front of the house. It was far too heavy for him to move on his own, and he wouldn't ask Dani, but maybe Seth had some friends who could help. Or Gabe could perhaps ask Hud and Nate to help him move it. If it still proved too heavy, he might even be able to talk Hud into bringing in horses to pull it.

Then again, if he did that, Emery would likely come up with a plan to give sleigh rides or something along those lines, and Gabe wasn't that far into the Christmas spirit. Not yet.

Thoughts of the people in Summer Creek he was glad he'd met drew out his smile as Gabe returned to the house and ate leftover tacos for lunch, then tried not to pace the floor as he waited for Dani to arrive.

At a quarter past two, the doorbell rang, and he almost sprinted to the door. When he pulled it open, Dani stood there, cheeks rosy from the cold, blonde curls peeking out from beneath a red beret, and looking far too pretty for his addled brain to handle.

He stared at her, admiring her cheekbones, the cleft in her chin, her generous mouth. What would she do if he kissed her? Just a brush across the lips to see if they were as warm as they looked, or as cold as he expected they might be, considering the fact that he was sure she'd walked there because no vehicle was parked outside.

"May I come in, Mr. Grouch?" she asked with a teasing smile and humor dancing in her expressive hazel eyes.

"Sorry. Yes, please." Gabe felt like a dunce who needed a timeout in the corner as he moved back and let her enter.

"What did you want to show me?" she asked as her gaze roved around the entry again. Before she had a repeat of last night's episode of nearly fainting, he took her elbow in his hand and guided her through the house to the garage.

"I made something. If it isn't what you want, you don't have to take it. But if you want it, it's yours."

Now that she was here, Gabe felt unsure about his amateur efforts at making the pallet sign for her. Nevertheless, he walked around the pickup and showed her the sign as it rested against the storage cabinet.

"Is that ...?" she asked, hurrying over to study it. The finished piece was bigger than Gabe had originally planned, but based on the photo she'd shared, she wanted something big

enough to be a statement piece on a wall. The large sign was about three feet high and four feet wide.

Dani pulled it toward her, looked at the back of it, studying the frame Gabe had constructed, then gently let it rest back against the cabinet before she spun around and gave him an impetuous hug.

“It’s perfect! Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

Stunned by her hug and the way her soft vanilla fragrance invaded his senses, it took every bit of willpower he had not to hold her tight and kiss her the way he’d longed to since he’d met her last week.

“You’re welcome. Is it really what you were wanting?”

“Yes! It’s even better than I pictured in my head. What do I owe you for it?”

Gabe shook his head. “Nothing. I got the pallets from the feed store. It took less than a dollar’s worth of screws to put it together. I have more pallets. Do you need more signs?”

“Yes! Please!” Dani looked into the back of his pickup. “Will you show me how to make one?”

Gabe nodded. “How about we build one together?”

“Really?” she asked, looking from the pallets to him. “Do you have time?”

“Nothing but, Miss Christmas.”

Dani tilted her head. “That’s new. Why am I Miss Christmas?”

“Because you are full of cheer and spread happiness wherever you go.” Before Gabe said something he shouldn’t, he moved one of the pallets onto the tailgate and showed Dani how to pull the slats away from the boards, then they built a frame and attached the slats to it. When they finished, Dani was practically bouncing on the balls of her feet in excitement. She kept looking at the signs, hands clasped beneath her chin, as though she envisioned how they’d look when she finished painting them.

“Let’s go in and have something hot to drink,” he suggested, then led the way inside.

He turned on the fireplace in the family room, made a cup of tea for Dani in the microwave, and heated a cup of leftover coffee for himself, then they settled onto the couch in front of the fire.

Dani stretched her legs out toward the flames. Gabe was considering what her reaction would be if he started scooting closer to her on the couch when the doorbell rang. He had no idea who would be coming to see him, but he hurried to answer it just the same.

When he opened the door, Cricket Cole and Logan Knight stood on the porch, anticipation shining in their eyes. Cricket practically danced in excitement as she smiled at him.

The kid was adorable with her wild black curls going every direction, her big blue eyes, and a dark-blue coat with a pale pink fuzzy scarf around her neck. Whatever it was she wanted, he had a feeling it was going to prove impossible to tell her “no.”

“Hi, Mr. Grouch! I’m Cricket, and this is my cousin Logan. Do you ’member us from church?”

Gabe nodded solemnly. “I do remember you, Miss Cricket.” He held out a hand to Logan who shook it with a firm handshake. “What can I do for you two today?”

“Well, Mr. Grouch, we’re raising money for our school,” Cricket said, her hands and feet unable to be still as she talked. She shifted from one foot to the other and talked with her fuzzy mitten-covered hands. “Logan’s class is selling wreaths, and I’ve got candles, and we’re both selling tickets for a big gift basket.”

Gabe pretended to be considering the purchase of tickets, rubbing his fingers along his chin. “How big is the basket?” he asked, offering her a questioning glance.

Cricket threw her arms out to each side. “This big! It’s ginormous!”

“Ginormous, huh?” Gabe clicked his tongue in his cheek. “I don’t know. What kind of things are you raising money for at school?”

Logan placed a hand on Cricket’s shoulder. Gabe wasn’t sure if it was to quiet her or keep her from taking flight as she wiggled her arms with animated energy.

“Each class is holding a fundraiser to help with money for classroom supplies and stuff like that. The big raffle basket is to raise money for a new gym floor. The old one is starting to splinter, and it’s been repaired so many times, it is almost beyond redemption.”

“I see.” Gabe was enjoying the conversation with the kids far more than he’d expected. “I don’t know. I’m not from Summer Creek. Does that mean I should skip buying anything?”

Cricket lunged forward and caught his hand. He thought it looked odd, his big ol’ paw caught between two little pink mittens. She tugged on his fingers and his heartstrings. “Please, Mr. Grouch? It’s for ’portant stuff. Would you pretty please buy something from us?”

“Well ...” Gabe drew out the word, then smiled at the two students. “Maybe I should buy tickets from both of you. Would that be fair?”

“Oh, yes, Mr. Grouch.” Cricket whipped tickets out of her coat pocket. “How many do you want?”

“How about five from each of you?”

“Mr. Gatlin, the tickets are ten dollars each,” Logan said, giving him a dubious look. “Are you sure you want that many?”

“Yep. That sounds just right. Maybe I’ll win that big basket. What’s in it?” he asked as Logan and Cricket both counted out five tickets and handed them to him.

“There’s candy and popcorn, and a snowman with a big round belly, and hot chocolate with Santa mugs, and, and ...” Cricket looked at Logan when she couldn’t remember what else the basket included.

“Emery’s folks donated it,” Logan said. “I heard Mom and Dad say there was at least a thousand dollars’ worth of stuff in the basket.”

Gabe didn’t have to feign surprise as he took out his wallet and handed each child a fifty-dollar bill.

Although she hadn’t said anything, he felt Dani’s presence behind him as she came to see who was keeping him.

“Hi, Dani!” Cricket smiled and waved to her. “We’re talking to Mr. Grouch!”

“I see that, Cricket. Is he going to buy some of your candles?”

Cricket shrugged. “I hope so.” She widened those baby-blue eyes and looked like a puppy pleading for a treat as she gazed up at Gabe. “Will you buy a candle, Mr. Grouch?”

“What do they smell like? I don’t want anything stinky or too girly.”

“They smell like Christmas!” Cricket bounded down the steps and lifted a box from a little red wagon he hadn’t noticed as it rested at the base of the porch. She hefted it and carefully retraced her steps to the door.

“You can smell all the samples we have. I have to write down the order, then we’ll bring the candles to you later. Is that okay?”

“Sounds good to me, Cricket. Let’s see what you’ve got. You kids might as well come in out of the cold.” Gabe moved back so they could enter the house and took the box from Cricket.

Logan’s mouth fell open as his eyes trailed up the circular staircase and admired the skylight above it.

Cricket giggled and ran in a circle around the stairs. “These are just like Santa’s stairs, Mr. Grouch. I love them!”

Unable to hold back his grin, he nodded at Cricket and leaned toward her. “I love them too.” He winked at her, set the box on the table near the door, and began sniffing each candle.

“Smell them like this,” Dani said. She took a small jar candle from the box, lifted the lid and held it to her nose, then breathed in the fragrance. “The scent is stronger on the lid.”

Gabe picked up another jar, removed the lid, and held it to his nose. It smelled like peppermint and cozy fires. He set it aside, then sniffed the others. He noticed Dani seemed to favor a candle that smelled like pine trees and cinnamon.

“Can I get two of Kringle’s Candy Cane, and two Pinecone Palace candles?”

“Yep!” Cricket said, pulling an order-form pad from her pocket. Logan helped her fill it out, and give him the carbon copy of the receipt.

She gave him the total, and he handed over the cash. Cricket carefully tucked it into an envelope she had set in the box with the jars.

It looked like the kids had a system for keeping the raffle money and candle money separate. With Logan supervising, he was sure none of it would get lost before they made it home.

“Tell me about these wreaths, Logan. Are they fresh or fake?”

“Fresh, sir. The truck will be here on Thursday with them. We can bring them to you when we deliver the candles, if you want.”

Gabe looked at Dani. “How many do you think I need?”

She didn’t pause or give it a second of consideration before she blurted, “Twelve,” then she looked horrified by the number she’d uttered.

“Twelve?” he asked, curious why she chose that number. “Where would you put them, if you were hanging them?”

“One on each door, and hanging from the windows on the front side of the house.” Dani’s cheeks were red, and she looked embarrassed, as though she’d spoken out of turn. “But I’m sure Logan would be pleased if you purchased one.”

Gabe turned to Logan. “Do they come with ribbons or anything?”

“Yeah, Mr. Gatlin. They have red bows on them, and a hanger on the back. I have one in the wagon you can look at. Let me get it.”

Gabe waited as Logan retrieved the wreath and carried it inside. It smelled fresh and green and reminded him of camping trips he’d taken with his grandpa. He inhaled a deep breath, then looked at Logan. “Make it fourteen wreaths.”

“Fourteen?” Logan looked like he might break into a version of Cricket’s excited dance from earlier as he filled out an order form and gave Gabe a copy. Gabe paid for the wreaths and then waved as Logan hefted Cricket’s candle box and the two youngsters hurried back out to the wagon. He was just about to close the door when Cricket bounded back up the steps with a plastic food container in her mittened hands.

“I almost forgot, Mr. Grouch! Grammy and I made these for you.”

Gabe accepted the box holding powdered sugar-covered cookies. “Thank you, Cricket. That’s very kind of you.”

“You’re welcome! They are yummy in your tummy!” Cricket scurried down the steps, waved again, then skipped beside Logan as he pulled the wagon down the street.

Gabe stepped back inside and closed the door, took the lid off the container, and held it out to Dani. She lifted a cookie and bit into it, closing her eyes, then grinned as Gabe bit into one. The cookie was buttery and tender and almost melted in his mouth.

“Cricket is correct. They are yummy in my tummy,” Gabe said, reaching up and brushing a bit of powdered sugar away from Dani’s upper lip.

She froze while a look of panic crossed her features. He took a step back, not wanting her to feel threatened in any way, and popped the rest of the cookie into his mouth.

Dani glanced at her watch and gasped. “I’m going to be late for work if I don’t hurry.” She rushed back through the



house and grabbed her coat from where she'd left it in the kitchen. "Thanks for helping me with the signs, Gabe. I'll try to come back tomorrow and take them home. They should fit in the back of my SUV."

"Just leave them in the garage. You might as well paint them there, where it's warm and out of the weather." He grabbed his coat and tugged on his snow boots. "I'll drive you to work."

"No, you won't. I've already taken up enough of your time," Dani said as she hurried back through the house to the front door. "If you're sure it isn't a huge imposition, though, I'd like to leave the signs in your garage. It would be much easier to paint them there."

"Of course."

Dani opened the door and jogged down the steps. Gabe had to hurry to keep up with her. She glanced over at him and shook her head. "Do you listen to anything I say?"

He smirked. "Haven't you noticed I hang on your every word, Miss Christmas?"

Dani scoffed. "Only when it suits you." She glanced at her watch again and increased her already fast pace. "If you're coming with me, at least keep up, slowpoke."

Gabe grinned and broke into a jog as he hustled to catch up with her. Dani laughed and grabbed his hand as they ran down Railroad Way. Gabe had counted the blocks in town. It was only about a dozen long and five deep, so it didn't take long to reach the street that would take them to the Broken Bucket. They'd just turned the corner when a blur of fur plowed into them and knocked them into a snowbank. Gabe found himself on his back, staring up at the cloud-dotted sky with Dani sprawled across his chest.

He wasn't going to complain about her being there, but she braced her palms on either side of him and pushed up, looking down into his face to make sure he was uninjured.

"Are you hurt? Did I squish you?" she asked, worry lines creasing her brow. Her beret was askew and dusted with snow,

and snow clung to the curl that dangled close to his nose.

“I may never walk again,” he deadpanned, then grinned and wrapped his arms around her, rolling over in the snow, looking down into her beautiful face. His gaze zeroed in on her lips as they parted slightly. He started to lower his head toward hers, but a car honked and brought him back to reality.

Dani had to live in this town, and he wouldn't do anything to tarnish her sterling reputation. Although he'd only been here a week, he'd not heard anyone have anything negative to say about Dani. Most people thought she was kind and caring and worked too hard.

Gabe pushed himself to his feet, pulled Dani up to hers, and brushed the snow from the back of her coat.

Ethel the goat stood a few feet away, looking at them both with a smug expression on her goofy face.

“What was that about, Ethel, old girl?” Dani asked, patting the goat on the head as they continued toward the Broken Bucket. The goat rubbed against Dani's leg, then ran off in the direction of the grocery store.

Gabe walked Dani to the back door of the Broken Bucket. “Have a good shift, Dani. If you need a ride home, just call me.”

“Thanks, Gabe,” she said, standing on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek before she rushed inside the door.

He stared at it a moment, wishing he'd just gone ahead and kissed Dani. His lips still tingled for want of her, and he figured nothing would feel right in his world until he actually tasted her kiss.

Gabe strode across the street to the grocery store. He picked up a rotisserie chicken, surprised they carried them, then added a container of pasta salad from the deli. On a splurge, he selected a package of mint-topped brownies from the bakery and added a bag full of apples to his purchases.

He was standing in line when the music piped in throughout the store began to play a song about a character

who hated Christmas. When it ended, he was sure every eye in the store turned to look at him.

Gabe feigned ignorance as he grabbed his bags and hustled outside. He'd taken only a few steps across the parking lot when Ethel raced up to him.

"You are a sneaky one, Ethel. I like it," he said, grinning at the goat. He took an apple out of the bag and held it out for her. She greedily snatched it from him and ate it in a few bites. He gave her another one, followed by a friendly pat on her side, then walked home.

If the warm, tender feelings that had awakened inside him were what Christmas was supposed to be about, he concluded he might be on the verge of discovering what he'd been missing all these years.

## Chapter Eleven



“Keep her distracted, sweetie,” Emery instructed as she tried to slip a wreath with evergreens and holly around Ethel’s neck.

The goat twisted her head one way, then the other, but Emery persisted.

Cricket grabbed an apple from a basket Emery had set nearby and held it in her palm. “Come on, Ethel. You like apples.”

The goat took the whole apple in her mouth and tipped her head back as she crunched it. Emery shoved the wreath

over Ethel's head, caught it on a crooked horn, and quickly adjusted it.

"Progress," Emery said, and Cricket smiled.

"Why does Ethel need the wreath, Mommy?" Cricket asked as she fed Ethel another apple. She liked the goat, even if she sometimes smelled bad or nibbled on her clothes. Ethel was funny, and she made Cricket laugh at the way she liked to lick Mayor Kane's striped pole outside his barbershop.

"So, we can take a Christmas photo for the town's website. Ethel is our official mascot now. Uncle Nate and I think she should be the star of the photo."

"Ethel's a star!" Cricket patted the goat's neck and gave her another apple.

Emery picked up a brush and a wet towel and tried to clean the worst of the dirt off of Ethel. As she worked, Cricket watched Mr. Grouch come out of the barbershop and settle a cowboy hat on his head.

She'd liked him. He'd bought stuff from her and Logan the other day, and he was a nice man, even if he didn't like Christmas—at least not yet. Cricket was sure by the time Santa shimmied down her chimney, he'd love the holidays as much as she did. She had plans to help him. In fact, she had something for him in her mother's pickup.

"I'll be right back, Mommy!" Cricket skipped over to Emery's pickup, took out a red-and-green paper chain made from construction paper, and rushed back to where Ethel gnawed on a corner of Emery's coat while she was busy scrubbing at a grease spot on Ethel's head.

"Ethel, you stop that," Emery chided, tugging her coat out of the goat's mouth.

Cricket waved at Mr. Grouch as he crossed the street to the gas station. He glanced at her and waved, then looked ahead and jogged across the street toward them.

"Do you need some help?" he asked as Emery jerked her coat away from the goat again and rolled her eyes in disgust.

“Only if you are a goat whisperer,” Emery said, sounding frustrated.

Cricket looked from her mother to Mr. Grouch. “You talk to goats?” she asked, her eyes wide.

He chuckled and shook his head. “Only Ethel. She’s my buddy.” He patted the goat’s side and rubbed a hand along her neck. “What are you doing?”

“I need to take a Christmas photo for our website. Nate and I thought a photo of Ethel in front of the fountain with all the buildings in the background would be perfect, only Ethel seems to have other ideas.”

“She likes apples,” Gabe said, taking one from the basket and holding it out to her. Ethel stopped eating Emery’s coat to bite into the apple. Juice squirted out and landed on Cricket’s cheek.

“Ew, Ethel!” Cricket scrubbed her cheek with one mitten while moving the paper chain out of the goat’s reach.

“Is that a decoration for Ethel?” Gabe asked as he distracted the goat with another apple.

“No. I made this for you, Mr. Grouch.”

“His name is Mr. Gatlin, honey,” Emery gave her a look that Cricket didn’t like. It meant she was supposed to listen to her mother. But she liked the name “Grouch” better than “Gatlin.” It was more fun to say and fit in with Christmas.

“I made this for you, Mr. Grouch Gatlin.” Cricket offered the man her sweetest smile.

Emery huffed, but Cricket saw Mr. Grouch try to hide a grin.

“That was nice of you, Cricket. Where should I put it?” he asked, as he hunkered down by Ethel, trying to hold her still while Emery worked.

“On your Christmas tree, or over your kitchen window, or on your fireplace. Those are all good spots.”

“Thanks for the paper chain and those decorating tips. I’m looking forward to getting my candles and wreaths. Is tomorrow when they’ll get delivered?”

“Yes!” Cricket clasped her hands beneath her chin, picturing Mr. Grouch’s house with all the wreaths hanging from the doors and windows. It was going to be fantastic.

Emery had just given up trying to get Ethel clean and presentable when one of the Nelson kids arrived with a camera. Cricket knew the boy wanted to become a photographer, even if she didn’t understand what that meant, other than he liked to take photos.

While Gabe and Emery tried to get a red stocking cap on Ethel’s head, Cricket posed with one hand in the air. “Look at me, Mommy!”

“I see you, sweetheart. Can you do that again and stand right next to Ethel?”

“Yep!” Cricket posed next to the goat and giggled as Ethel started chewing on the wreath that hung around her neck.

“Now, one of Ethel by herself,” Emery instructed, trying to get Ethel to look at the camera by snapping her fingers.

Gabe took the paper chain Cricket still held and smiled at her. He had kind eyes. She knew his heart was already growing bigger, just like she’d hoped it would.

She watched as Ethel tilted her head to one side and looked at Mr. Grouch. He wiggled the paper chain and Ethel stretched her neck out toward it, although he kept it just beyond her reach.

“Okay, I think we should have something to work with,” the Nelson boy said, then he walked toward the grocery store his parents owned.

Cricket thought it would be fun to own a grocery store. There would always be lots and lots of good things to eat. But Cricket always had good things to eat at home, and she had a pony, and a kitten, and the ranch dogs, and her daddy and mommy and grandmother, and Uncle Nate and Aunt Jossy and

her cousins right across the road. Maybe a grocery store wasn't better than the ranch.

"Mommy, I gotta go," Cricket said, grabbing onto Emery's hand and tugging her toward the library where they had public restrooms.

"Thanks for your help, Mr. Gatlin," Emery said, waving at him as Cricket tugged her toward the library.

Cricket looked back. Mr. Grouch waved at her and held up his paper chain.

Yep. She could definitely see Christmas growing in his heart. Her plans were working.



## Chapter Twelve



Gabe walked home with a spring in his step. He wasn't sure he'd ever had one before. He didn't know what it was about Cricket Cole, but that kid sure made his heart feel like maple syrup that had been warmed and then had melted butter stirred into it. If he stayed in Summer Creek too much longer, he'd be in danger of turning into one of those people who cried at greeting card commercials.

"Nah. Not happening," Gabe said as he started up the front walk of his grandmother's house, Cricket's paper chain drifting in the breeze behind him.

“What’s not happening, Mr. Gatlin?” a deep voice asked from behind him, making him spin around in surprise. The paper chain slapped against his legs as he faced a big man wearing a police uniform. The breadth of the officer’s shoulders and chest, combined with his height, made Gabe wonder if the deputy had ever played football. He certainly looked like he could have been his own defense team.

“Afternoon, officer. May I help you with something?” Gabe assumed the man walking around the police car toward him was none other than Deputy Knox Strickland, but he waited for him to make an introduction.

“Mr. Gatlin? Gabe Gatlin?” the officer asked, crossing the distance between them in a few long strides.

Gabe himself wasn’t a small man. He stood on the upward side of six feet and was solidly built. But as he reached out a hand to the deputy, he felt dwarfed for the first time in his life.

“I’m Gabe Gatlin. Is there something I can do for you, Officer Strickland?” Gabe read the officer’s nametag, assured he’d made the correct identity.

“I just happened to see you coming down the street and thought I’d introduce myself. I’m Knox Strickland. I heard you’re in town checking out this property for a real estate firm.”

“That’s right. I came to evaluate the Lepiane home and decided to stay a little while.”

“Lip-ee-awn-ee?” Knox over-enunciated the name. “I guess we’ve been pronouncing it wrong all these years.”

“That seems to be the case. The original owners were Italian.” Gabe shut his mouth before he said something that would give away too many personal details. Not that he intended to pull the wool over the eyes of the deputy, but the fewer people who knew who he really was, the better.

“I see,” Knox said, looking around the property, as though he expected something illegal to be taking place there. “Do you think I could take a look at your identity, just to

confirm you are who you say and not someone squatting in an empty house? In all the years I've worked here, we've never had someone stay in the house before, and the maintenance crew was here just a month ago."

"Would you like to come inside? I can make a cup of coffee." Gabe didn't wait for an answer, but hurried up the porch steps, unlocked the door, and left the paper chain draped over the end of the stair banister.

A long, low whistle emanated from the deputy as he stepped inside and closed the door behind him. "Wow. This place is even more spectacular than I pictured."

"You've never seen inside?" Gabe asked as he took out his wallet, removed his identification, and handed it to Knox.

Knox read it, looked from it to Gabe, then handed it back with a nod. "Nope. Never been in here. I do, however, get two calls anytime someone will be at the house. The first is the maintenance crew to let me know they'll be here. They generally ask about fishing and hunting, depending on the season. The other call is from the property management firm in Bend that contracts the work with the maintenance crew to let me know the scheduled date. The reason for that is because it's a small town. People keep an eye on empty houses like this one. I just got off the phone not even an hour ago with the firm in Bend. Apparently, someone called and reported a stranger living in the house. They asked me to look into it."

"Oh, I see." Gabe led the way to the kitchen and started a pot of coffee. He removed his coat and tossed it over a chair in the nook, then looked back at Knox. "I am Gabe Gatlin. I work for Daniels Realty. I represent the family interest in this property. I suppose you should—" The ringtone he'd set for Eddie buzzed on his phone.

"Hey, Ed. Now isn't a great time. Can I—"

"I'm transferring a call to you from an office in Bend, Oregon, boss. They've had a bunch of nosy old bats calling to report unusual activity at a house in Summer Creek. You can straighten it out."

Before he could utter another word, he found himself speaking with the owner of the property management company.

“This is Mr. Gatlin,” he said, and assured the person on the other line he was the one at the property and all was well. On a whim, he asked them to stay on the line and handed the phone to Knox.

“Deputy Strickland,” Knox said, then gave Gabe a surprised glance. From the one-sided conversation, Gabe assumed the deputy had now been assured as to his identity. The call from the property management office couldn’t have come at a better time.

Gabe filled two cups with coffee and set them on the counter, then took the phone when Knox handed it back to him.

“Mrs. Waller was the one I spoke with earlier. She said she was going to call the corporate office and speak to the man in charge of this property. It appears that really is you.” Knox took a sip of coffee.

Gabe motioned for him to precede him to the table in the breakfast nook.

Knox took a seat and leaned back in the chair. “How long do you plan to be here, Mr. Gatlin?”

“Call me Gabe. As for the length of my stay, I’m uncertain. I originally intended to only spend a few days while I evaluated the property, but Summer Creek is growing on me. I have nowhere I have to be anytime soon, so I thought I’d stay here a few weeks and absorb the small-town atmosphere.”

Gabe couldn’t tell from the deputy’s blank expression if he believed him or not. If he had to, he’d tell Knox the whole story, but he preferred not to.

“I don’t know if you are aware of the fact that my wife and I are friends with Dani Latham.”

“She did mention that one day in passing.”

Knox scowled at him. “Then I feel it only fair to explain that Dani has had a hard life and doesn’t deserve to be strung along by someone who’ll be here today and break her heart tomorrow.”

The deputy had a point. One Gabe had considered himself. But no matter how much he tried, he just couldn’t seem to stay away from Dani or keep thoughts of her out of his head.

What could it hurt, to have a holiday romance?

Christmas would come and go, and life would return to normal when he went back to Oklahoma City. Wouldn’t it?

Knox took a long slurp of his coffee, then looked at him. “I heard Dani and Seth have entered your house in the community lighting contest. The judging is this Saturday. Don’t you need to set out a few decorations?”

Gabe smiled, aware it was the deputy’s way of letting him off the hook, at least for now.

“The lights will be here this afternoon. Dani and Seth plan to come help me put them up tomorrow between her shifts. Say, Deputy, would you know anyone who could help me move a sleigh?”

“A sleigh?” Knox asked, downing the rest of his coffee. “Let’s see it.”

Gabe retrieved his coat and led the way out to the barn, and into the carriage room at the back.

Knox whistled a second time as he brushed his hand over the tarp-covered seat of a carriage, then made his way to the sleigh. “This thing looks huge.”

“Yeah. I’d, uh ... I’d like to move it to the front yard, as a surprise for Dani. She seems to really be into this whole Christmas thing.”

Knox nodded. “She is. So is my wife, come to think of it.” He took out his phone and sent two text messages. “Do you think the family will put the property up for sale? There

are plenty of people looking for homes in Summer Creek, now that it's becoming a seasonal tourist destination."

The thought of some snooty tourist from a big city, someone like his sister, moving into the house and changing everything made Gabe feel sick to his stomach. He refused to sell the property to someone who would destroy it, instead of preserving it. In fact, Gabe had made up his mind not to sell it at all.

"I think the family will continue to keep it in their holdings. After all, it's been owned by descendants of the Lepiane family all these years."

"Yes, it has," Knox said, his tone sounding oddly cryptic. His phone beeped, and he sent another text.

"Where do you want this thing?" Knox pulled the tarp that had covered the sleigh off to the side.

"The front yard, so the turret is centered behind it when you look at it from the street." Gabe opened the double doors and propped them so they wouldn't slam shut. He looked up and saw two men walk into the building. Parker Princeton didn't seem the least bit interested in the antique modes of transportation, but Nate Knight lifted the tarp on the farm wagon and took a gander at it.

"Hey, thanks for coming," Knox said, shaking hands with Parker, then Nate. "Gabe needs a little muscle to get this sleigh into the front yard. I think if we get it onto the snow, it will push relatively easy."

"You think," Nate said, as though he'd been involved in previous projects that had not gone according to plan.

"Just roll up those designer sleeves and lift," Knox said, goading Nate.

Parker and Nate took the front while Gabe and Knox lifted the back of the sleigh.

For a moment, Gabe thought he might stagger under the weight, or his appendix might explode. Was that a thing? Maybe it was a bursting hernia? The sleigh weighed far more than he'd anticipated.

Gabe lifted weights and tried to stay in shape, but right now he felt as though his arms were made of limp noodles as the four of them maneuvered the sleigh past a carriage and toward the double doors. When they were able to set it down outside, they all breathed a sigh of relief. Knox let them catch their breath, then he pointed toward the front of the house. “Keep going. We should be able to push it across the snow.”

Gabe sure hoped pushing was an option or he might embarrass himself by collapsing face-first in the snow. Knox wouldn't have to worry about him being in the house because he'd be dead and the only one who might possibly mourn him would be Eddie. And that was only if she got over being peeved at him for running away in the first place.

Parker and Nate maneuvered the front of the sleigh around so it was pointed toward the house, then Gabe and Knox gave it a shove. It slid forward a few feet.

“I'll guide you,” Nate volunteered, while Parker came around to the back and helped push.

“Why are we moving this ten-thousand-pound relic?” Parker grunted between pushing.

“Because Dani and Seth are decorating Gabe's yard for the community lighting contest,” Knox wheezed in response.

“Okay.” Parker let the matter drop as though if Dani were involved, there wasn't a need to ask further questions.

Nate directed them around the corner of the house. From there, they had a straight shot to the front yard.

Nate and Parker argued about the best placement, although neither of them seemed to think Gabe should get a vote. He could have spoken up but he kept his thoughts to himself as Knox stepped in and shoved the sleigh so it sat with the turret centered behind it.

“Not bad,” Nate said, then grinned. He glanced at his watch and backed toward the street. “I need to get going, but I hope the decorating goes well, Gabe. See you later.”

“Your wife will dump all the paperwork on me again if I'm not back soon,” Parker said, smirking at Knox, then

turning to shake Gabe's hand. "Good luck."

"Thank you for your help!" Gabe called after the two men as they walked down the street.

"Thanks for the coffee and clarifying a few things, Gabe," Knox said, offering him a friendly smile.

"You're welcome, Deputy Strickland." Gabe took the hand the deputy held out to him and shook it.

"Call me Knox. All my friends do," he said, then walked around his patrol car and slid behind the wheel. He waved once, then drove down the street.

Gabe breathed a sigh of relief and retreated inside the house. He was not cut out for a life of subterfuge. The garland from Cricket caught his eye as he walked past the stairs. The colorful decoration, made from crooked pieces of construction paper that were held together with globs of glue, made him smile. He picked it up, thinking about how glad he was he'd decided to remain in Summer Creek for the holidays.



## Chapter Thirteen



Dani was just clocking out after the lunch shift when her phone buzzed. She answered it without looking at the screen as she tossed her shoes in her locker and took out her snow boots.

She held the phone to her ear with her shoulder and tugged on a boot. “This is Dani.”

“Hi, Dani. It’s Gabe. I wanted to let you know I have the decorations if you still want to come festoon my lawn for the contest on Saturday.”

Dani smiled, picturing Gabe sitting at the table in the breakfast nook of his house sipping coffee and frowning as he thought about what to do with the lights and the other things she hoped he'd ordered.

Hurriedly yanking on her other boot, she picked up her coat. "I suppose I can try to work that into my busy, packed schedule."

"Oh, you don't have to, Dani. I can figure it out."

She laughed, moved the phone to her hand, grabbed her purse, and headed outside. "I'm teasing, Gabe. I could come over this afternoon, if that works for you."

"Actually, that would be great. What do I need to have ready?"

"Start by plugging in the lights to make sure they work. Do you have a ladder?"

"I found one in the barn. It isn't new, but it will get the job done. What else?"

Dani tried to think of everything she'd need. "Did you get the outdoor power strips?"

"Sure did."

She smiled, thinking of the surprise she had for him at home. "I'll run by the house and then be right over."

"See you soon." Gabe disconnected the call.

Dani almost jogged the four blocks to her house. She flattened the back seat of her SUV, loaded her surprise for Gabe, and drove to his house. As she pulled up in front of his place, her jaw dropped open, and she gaped at the beautiful burgundy two-seater sleigh that graced the front yard in front of the turret. If Emery found out about it, Gabe's sleigh might mysteriously disappear in the night.

Although Dani had been excited before about the decorations, the sleigh added an unexpected element of amazement to the yard.

Gabe stepped outside and waved at her. It was then she noticed the boxes spread out on the porch and a red sign post with directions to Mr. Grouch's house, City Hall, or the mountains. She laughed and clapped her hands when she saw it.

"I love the sign post, Gabe, but the sleigh is awesome. Where on earth did you find it?"

"In the barn. I finally looked through it and found the sleigh under a tarp. A few of your friends helped me move it yesterday."

"I have pretty great friends," she said, walking over to the sleigh and running her hand over the velvet upholstery. "Won't sitting out in the weather ruin the seats?"

"I gave them a coat of waterproofing spray. They'll need to be replaced anyway. It looks like more than one mouse tried to make a nest in the seat stuffing."

"Once we fill the sleigh with presents, no one will see it."

"Presents?" Gabe asked, giving her one of his I-don't-understand looks.

"Remember in the movies, there's a sleigh full of gifts. We should fill the sleigh with presents. We can wrap empty boxes."

"Great idea. But won't the snow make the paper disintegrate?"

"We could use plastic holiday tablecloths. They have them at Neil's."

Gabe nodded. "Good plan. We can send Seth to pick some up when he gets out of school. He is coming here after school, isn't he?"

"Yes. He's bringing Logan with him to help." Dani gave the sleigh one more loving pat, then returned to the back of her SUV. Gabe followed her. "I made something I hope you like. Seth and Logan helped."

She opened the hatch and pulled out a wooden cutout of The Grinch wearing a Santa coat and hat in a sneaky pose, and

one of his dog, Max, tongue lolling out in happiness.

“They look just like in the movie. How did you make these?” Gabe asked, lifting the heavy cutout, and carrying it to the porch.

“Seth and Logan cut the wood in their shop class. I painted them.” Dani felt gratified to see the way Gabe grinned as he set up the character and stepped back to admire it.

He glanced over his shoulder at her with a smile that made his dimples pop out in a manner she found entirely too appealing. “You all did a good job. This is great!”

“I hope it will be. Now, let’s get busy stringing those lights. They won’t hang themselves.”

Dani was shocked to discover Gabe had ordered many more lights than she’d requested. She’d had no idea what kind of budget to set for the decorations, so had veered toward conservative. However, Gabe didn’t appear to be concerned with the costs.

Instead of the inexpensive, single-strand lights she’d requested for the house, he’d ordered LED strands of warm-white icicle lights. Originally, she’d planned to string lights along the eaves on the ground floor of the house, but since they had so many, she could envision the entire house outlined with lights, or at least the front of the house.

“How tall is that ladder?” she asked as Gabe set up the ladder that had been leaning against the base of the porch.

“I guess we’ll find out.” He extended it as far as it would go, just reaching the upper eaves.

He glanced at her and placed a hand on the ladder. “I’ll hold it so you don’t fall.”

She shook her head. “Oh no, my friend. I wouldn’t dare deprive you of the opportunity to climb all the way up there to hang the lights. Do you have something to attach them with?”

Gabe held up a small box of cup hooks. “Are you sure we have to hang lights on the second story?” He looked up and then back at her with a pitiful expression on his face.

“Don’t tell me the mighty Gabe Gatlin is afraid of heights.” Dani moved close to him. “You know, legendary superheroes conquer their fears by facing them head-on.”

“First of all, I’m not a legendary anything. Second, I bet none of them faced their fears on a seventy-year-old ladder that may or may not hold my weight.”

Dani realized it could be dangerous for him and shifted gears from teasing to serious. “I can go up there, Gabe. It’ll be —”

“Whoa! Look at the sleigh,” Seth exclaimed as he and Logan ran into the yard.

“And the characters!” Logan pointed to the wooden cutouts she’d painted. “It looks so good, Dani.”

“Thanks, Logan. Would one of you boys climb up the ladder and start hanging the lights?”

“I’ll go,” Logan volunteered. He tossed his backpack on the porch, took the box of hooks from Gabe and tucked it into his pocket, then threaded one end of the lights through his belt loop and scaled the ladder like a long-legged monkey.

Gabe held the ladder steady and kept a close eye on Logan as he reached for the box of hooks in his pocket. “Hey, there are already hooks up here. It looks like someone painted over them.”

“That’s good, Logan. Go ahead and start hanging the lights.” Gabe fed the lights up to him while Dani sent Seth to the store to buy plastic tablecloths. They had plenty of boxes at the Broken Bucket she could wrap to use as pretend gifts.

Dani began winding lights around the porch posts and stringing them along the railings. She hurried, knowing she would soon have to return to work.

By the time Seth returned with the tablecloths, Logan had finished stringing the lights around the turret and across the bay window that stuck out above the front entry.

“I’ll help you, Mom,” Seth said, grabbing a string of lights and going to work on the opposite side of the porch

from the point where the front steps divided it.

Fifteen minutes later, she stepped back to study their handiwork. “I have to get going, but we’ll be able to finish this tomorrow. It’s looking great, Gabe. I can get boxes at work to wrap for the sleigh.”

“I’ll take care of the boxes. How hard can it be to wrap them?”

“Hard,” Seth and Logan said in unison.

Dani kissed Seth’s cheek, waved at Gabe and Logan, then hurried to her vehicle and drove to work. The whole time she was at work, she wished she could be with Gabe and the boys.

Seth had texted that Gabe had invited him to stay for dinner, so he and Logan were helping him wrap the boxes.

Dani wondered how Logan would get home, but assumed either Nate would pick him up, or Gabe would drive him out to the Lazy J Ranch.

If she didn’t know better, she would have said Gabe fit into the community like he was meant to be there. Like he’d always been part of Summer Creek.

The following afternoon, she was antsy to get off work and rush over to Gabe’s house to see what they’d accomplished after she’d left.

Seth had been unusually quiet when she’d asked him questions about what they’d done. All he’d said was Gabe had asked him to ride along while he drove Logan home, then they’d talked about football and basketball on the way back.

Dani knew both boys planned to go over to Gabe’s again after school. Logan would be delivering the wreaths he’d sold to Gabe, and Cricket wanted to drop off the candles Gabe had ordered.

The way Gabe had interacted with Logan and Cricket the other day had really touched her. He hadn’t treated them like little kids but had given them his full attention, asking questions and making them work to sell their products before he generously purchased what they were selling.

Dani hoped Gabe wasn't going to go broke before he left Summer Creek. She assumed he made a good wage doing whatever it was he did for the real estate company he worked for, but the old pickup he drove made her wonder if the vehicle held sentimental value.

At any rate, she supposed it wasn't any of her business how or what he spent his money on.

She clocked out of work and drove straight to Gabe's house. For a moment, she sat in her vehicle, imagining what the house would look like at night, all lit up. It was going to be incredible.

Before she could step foot out of the SUV, Gabe opened the front door of the house and waved to her, motioning for her to come in.

She hurried around the SUV and up the front walk, making note of the assortment of badly wrapped gifts piled into the sleigh. They actually looked like something one might find in a whimsical tale, if the package had been run over by a herd of drunken reindeer and stomped on by Santa a few times.

Amused by the imaginative direction of her thoughts, she rushed up the porch steps and inside the door Gabe had left open.

"Everything looks great," she called as she walked through the entry.

"Thanks!" Gabe's reply carried from the direction of the kitchen. "Have you had lunch?"

"I grabbed a bite." Dani walked into the breakfast nook where Gabe sat in a chair pulling on his snow boots.

With his head bent over as he tightened the laces on his boots, she fought the urge to brush her hands through his thick hair.

For a moment, one indulgent moment, she let herself dream of how wonderful it would feel to be in Gabe's arms, to be loved by him. The day Ethel had plowed into them and knocked them into a snowbank, Dani hadn't wanted to get up.

If she'd been able to choose, she would have stayed right there with Gabe, pressed against his solid chest, his strong arms wrapped around her.

But it wasn't meant to be.

Before she was ready, he'd head back to his life wherever it was he'd come from, and she'd remain in Summer Creek where she'd grow old and gray and be a doting grandmother to Seth's children when he came to visit. She had no doubt in her mind Seth would one day move away and spread his wings. She wouldn't hold him back, even if it would break her heart to let him go.

However, she had a few more years before she needed to worry about Seth leaving.

The handsome cowboy grinning at her with such kissable lips and tempting dimples while his blue eyes danced with heat was a whole other matter.

Gabe had told her he'd grown up in Oklahoma City but spent time on a ranch with his grandparents. She had no reason to doubt him, but anytime she tried to get him to talk about his past, he always managed to move the conversation in a different direction.

Perhaps just enjoying her time with him was enough. Goodness only knew when an equally handsome man who made her heart race every time he said her name would show up in Summer Creek.

Who was she kidding? There was no one like Gabe, no one who could take the place of him.

"Ready to get back at it?" he asked, drawing her back to the moment.

"Sure," she said, following him outside.

"I thought we could get hooks in place, ready to hang the wreaths when Logan shows up with them." Gabe handed her a handful of hooks from his coat pocket.

Dani noticed he'd added single strands of white lights that outlined the front windows. She wondered if he'd cleaned



out all the stores in Summer Creek or had driven into Burns to pick them up. Regardless of where he'd gotten them, she knew they were going to look great.

She pushed in a hook over a window, then stepped back to make certain it was centered. "Thank you for letting Seth stay last night and go with you to drop off Logan. He had a great time."

"He's such a good kid, Dani." Gabe bent his knees and peeked under the eave of the porch as he stood on a step stool installing a heavy hook that would hold a wreath directly above the front porch steps. "You've done a wonderful job raising him."

She shook her head. "Sometimes I feel like we grew up together."

"I think you probably had to grow up overnight, but that's not all bad. There are some people who go their entire lives and never grow up."

The tone of his voice as he spoke made Dani question if someone he knew were that way. Someone who had once been close to him.

"So, we'll hang wreaths, and set out the characters I painted." Dani pushed in another hook along a front window. "What else?"

"That ought to do it." Gabe stretched over, standing on one foot, to reach the next spot where he wanted to install a hook. "Thank you for guiding me through this, and having Seth and Logan help."

Dani looked back at him. "Those two boys invited themselves to help, but I'm glad they were helpful. Did you watch another Christmas show last night?"

"We did," Gabe said, then grunted as the stool started to tip over. He jumped off and landed on his feet before he gave her a boyish grin. "We watched what I guess you'd call an animated special about Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer."

"Oh, I love that one with Burl Ives singing. What did you think of Rudolph and Hermey, and the Island of Misfit Toys?"

Dani moved over to the next window and worked to push in the hook with cold fingers.

“It was okay.”

She turned her head and stared at him. “Just okay? What rating are we giving all the Christmas shows you’ve never watched? So far, I’ve heard ‘okay,’ ‘fine,’ and ‘not bad.’”

Gabe grinned at her again, and her traitorous knees quivered.

“That covers it,” he said, tipping his nose in the air.

“Are you a movie critic in your other, secret life?”

He scowled and tripped over an extension cord, righting himself on a porch post. “What makes you think I have a secret life?”

“Well, you ...”

“We’re here!” Cricket Cole proclaimed as she, Logan, and Seth piled out of Nell Cole’s vehicle.

“Nell!” Dani hurried to greet the older woman. “Did you get pressed into delivery service today?”

Nell nodded as she opened the back of her SUV. Logan and Seth each lifted out a large box of wreaths, while she picked up a box with Gabe’s candle order.

“Something like that. I need to get these kids moving with the deliveries, or we’ll be out after dark,” Nell said, setting the candles on the porch, then reaching out a hand to Gabe. “Nell Cole. I was gone last Sunday and didn’t meet you at church. Welcome to Summer Creek.”

Gabe shook her hand and offered her a smile. “It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Cole. Thanks for being the delivery driver.”

“My pleasure.” Nell gave Dani a hug, then caught Cricket’s hand in hers. “Come on, baby girl. We need to get going.”

Cricket jogged to keep up with Nell, her curls bouncing around her with every step. “Bye, Mr. Grouch. I hope you like the candles, and they make your house all smelly-good!”

Gabe grinned and winked at her, then turned to take a box of wreaths from Logan.

“That’s all of them,” Seth said, placing another box on top of those already piled on the porch. He wrapped an arm around Dani’s shoulders and gave her an imploring look. “Mom, can I go with Logan? Please? I’ll be home before dark. I already finished all my homework in study hall today.”

“Okay, but be home by seven. There’s a casserole in the fridge you can warm up for dinner. And please take your clothes out of the dryer and to your room.”

“Thanks, Mom!” Seth kissed her cheek, then leaped off the porch with Logan. The two teens ran to climb inside the SUV.

Nell tooted the horn and drove off while Dani looked at the boxes full of wreaths. “Might as well get started.”

It didn’t take long to hang all the wreaths. Dani stepped into the yard to study how everything looked.

Gabe moved beside her. “Thanks for helping, Dani. I sure appreciate it. Do you think we have a chance at winning the contest?”

Dani shrugged and walked up the porch steps. She fluffed a red bow on the wreath hanging from the front door. “I don’t know. This is the first year they’ve had a lighting competition since I’ve lived in Summer Creek.”

“Don’t tell me. It was Emery’s idea.”

Dani grinned and again stepped back to survey her handiwork. “Nate’s, but it’s practically the same thing.”

Gabe chuckled, then glanced at his watch. “I guess it’s about time for you to head to work. When would you like to paint the pallet signs?”

So excited about the lights and decorations, Dani had almost forgotten the pallet signs were there. “I could come in the morning after I drop Seth at school if you wouldn’t mind.”

“Not at all. I’ll see if I can get that last sign put together. Is four enough, or do you want more?”

“Four is plenty,” Dani said, backing toward the porch steps and away from the temptation of Gabe Gatlin. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“In the morning,” he echoed. He moved toward her, but Dani turned and raced down the steps, out to her SUV, and off to work.

At least there she kept busy enough that only every other thought was of Gabe.

## Chapter Fourteen



“Are you sure, Owen?” Dani asked a third time as her boss nearly shoved her out the door.

“I’m sure, Dani. Now go. Seth will be waiting for you,” Owen said as Dani removed her apron. “Besides, I’m going to close at seven regardless of who’s here.”

The community tree lighting was set for six Saturday evening, followed by the Christmas lighting competition.

Dani had assumed she’d miss both events, but she’d really, really wanted to be there, not only for Seth but for

Gabe. She wasn't sure if her son or their resident grouch was more excited about the Lepiane house being judged in the competition.

She hadn't asked for the time off, but when she'd clocked in for the lunch shift, Owen had told her to leave at five-thirty. He figured once the tree-lighting ceremony began, there wouldn't be many customers coming in anyway.

Still, she felt bad leaving him shorthanded for an hour and a half, but longing to be part of the holiday excitement won out.

"Thanks again, Owen," she said, tossing him a grateful smile as she rushed out the door and jogged home.

Seth had spent the afternoon with Logan, helping Emery and Nate get ready for the lighting ceremony. Dani assumed her son was probably right in the thick of the action and loving every minute of it.

She rushed to take a shower, washing away the smells of the restaurant as she soaped her hair and lathered her skin with a vanilla-scented bodywash she'd picked up on a Black Friday sale a few years ago. She saved it for special occasions, and tonight was one in her opinion.

After hurriedly blow-drying her hair, she added a few chunky curls, then dressed in a pair of black skinny jeans, a soft white sweater, and a pair of knee-high thick-soled boots she'd given three applications of water-resistant spray. After adding a few coats of mascara, she painted her lips with red lipstick, added a hint of blush, and gave herself a scrutinizing glance in the mirror.

"Still plain ol' Dani," she said, wondering if she'd thought she might magically turn into a princess or something. "Fat chance of that happening, girl."

Dani took a long, dark-red coat from the small coat closet by the front door. She'd found it at a thrift store in Bend four summers ago. Because they'd been in the midst of a heat wave, she'd been able to purchase a brand-name four-hundred-dollar coat with the tags still attached for twenty bucks. The

design of the coat was classic and would never go out of style. She'd been almost giddy when she'd found a beret that matched the color of the coat to perfection, and she loved wearing the set during the holiday season when she wanted to dress up and feel festive.

She moved in front of a mirror hanging on the wall above the couch and set the beret at a jaunty angle.

After looping a white scarf around her neck—one she'd made from chunky yarn in a class the pastor's wife had taught at the church last February—Dani grabbed her keys and wallet, and then rushed out the door.

Rather than drive, she pulled on a pair of black insulated gloves, shoved her hands into her pockets, and walked to City Hall, where the tree lighting would take place. She arrived with five minutes to spare. Seth and Logan kept Cricket entertained as they waited for the ceremony to begin.

Dani felt the hair on the back of her neck prickle in a tantalizing way and slowly turned around to see Gabe standing a few feet away. He wore his black cowboy hat, a western-cut shearling coat, and a bright-blue shirt that made his eyes even bluer.

“Hi,” she said, smiling at him in greeting.

Gabe gaped at her for a long moment before he crossed the distance between them and kissed her cheek. “You look amazing, Miss Christmas. Like a holiday wish come true.”

Dani blushed, acutely aware of the many people watching their every move. Mrs. Dunigan and Mrs. Finley gawked at them as though she and Gabe had locked lips in a heated exchange instead of a friendly peck of greeting.

“I didn't think you'd be able to make it.” Gabe settled a possessive hand at the small of her back.

Dani liked the feel of the slight pressure of his hand resting there—liked being close enough to him to stand that way. She breathed in his masculine scent and let the warmth of him surround her as they waited for the festivities to begin.

“Owen is closing early and let me leave before the others. I felt bad, just not bad enough to stay.”

Gabe chuckled as he moved to stand behind her. His body blocked the slight breeze that carried a frosty chill.

“Good evening, Summer Creek!” the mayor boomed into the portable microphone he held in his hands as he stood on the steps of City Hall. A huge pine tree located on the side of the building that had been planted there at the end of World War II was adorned with lights. “Are you ready for our first tree lighting in more years than we want to think about?”

“Yes!” the crowd cheered, some people whistling and clapping. Dani saw Seth looking around. When his gaze landed on her, he waved as he stood with Logan and Chris Hobkins. Much to her delight, Chris’ grandmother stood on one side of him, leaning on her cane as Chris kept a supportive arm around her. Maybe her son and Logan had been good influences on the boy.

She smiled at Seth, glad he was having a good time and turned her attention back to the mayor.

“We’re so pleased and excited to see so many gathered here as we light the tree. If any of you feel up to braving the cold, right after the tree lighting we’ll embark on the residential lighting competition. The judges will walk from house to house where the lights will be turned on and we’ll all get to experience the “wow” factor of seeing each home’s lights come to life.” The mayor smiled at the crowd, then glanced at Emery who nodded her head. “We’ve had a request to allow a special guest here in Summer Creek to be the one who lights the community tree.”

Dani almost laughed when the sounds of a song about a Christmas-hating grinch boomed over a speaker system Nate had mentioned installing.

She heard Gabe blow out an exasperated breath, but he good-naturedly waved a hand to the crowd.

“Come on up here, Gabe Gatlin, also known around town as Mr. Grouch.” The mayor motioned for Gabe to join him on



the steps.

Gabe gave Dani a helpless look, then started toward the mayor. He stopped in front of Cricket Cole, held out a hand to her, and followed as she scampered up the steps. She beamed with excitement as Gabe hunkered down beside her and held out a box with a big button on top.

“Let’s start the countdown,” Mayor Kane boomed. “Ten. Nine. Eight.”

Dani joined her voice to those gathered around her. When they said “one,” Cricket and Gabe both put their hands on the button and pushed.

The lights on the tree twinkled through the darkness, spiraling around from the bottom to the top, as the crowd broke into enthusiastic cheers.

“Give a big thanks to Liam Lake of Sugar Loaf Electric for illuminating our tree this year.”

“Go, Liam!” Dani shouted, along with several others.

Liam waved his hat in the air, clearly not accustomed to the attention.

“Just follow the judges, and we’ll begin the lighting competition shortly. After that, any who are interested are welcome to join us in the community meeting room for hot cider and cookies while the senior-citizen choir performs a few carols.”

Dani watched as Cricket threw her arms around Gabe’s neck and gave him a tight squeeze. The childish, loving action touched Dani’s heart, and she blinked away tears. Gabe hugged Cricket, awkwardly patted her back, then stood and handed the button back to the mayor.

Cricket tugged on Gabe’s hand and led him over to where Emery stood with Hud’s arms around her. Dani saw him shake hands with Hud and nod politely to Emery before he said something that made Logan smile, then he headed back toward her.

Dani thought if she lived to be a hundred, she'd never get tired of watching Gabe. He was a tall, strongly built man, but he moved with grace. There was that whole devilishly handsome thing he had going on too. More important than looks though, she knew he was a good person, a kind man. He had to be to take in stride such a public ribbing about being a grouch.

Guilt pricked at Dani since she was the one who'd started all the grouch nonsense, but somehow it fit Gabe.

“Well, that was fun. Shall we follow along and watch the other houses light up, or do you want to go straight to my house?” he asked as he moved beside her.

Dani had been at his place both this morning and during her afternoon break to work on painting the signs she planned to give as gifts. The first one turned out better than she'd hoped.

Gabe had been fussing with the decorations outside while she painted. Dani had noticed he didn't have anything beyond Cricket's paper chain decorating the interior of the house. He'd not even lit any of the fundraiser candles yet, too preoccupied with the lights outside. It was as if he needed everything to be perfect for his first Christmas lighting experience.

Even with her mother moving around and her life so unsettled as a child, Dani had at least known the magic and wonder of Christmas. She couldn't begin to fathom what it would have been like to experience none of that as a child. To not know what it was to believe in something—someone—she couldn't see. She liked to think when she'd believed with all her heart that Santa would make her dreams come true, it led to her believing in God's ability to keep her safe under His wings.

Dani looked at Gabe as he awaited her response. “I'd love to go along and see all the houses if you don't mind.”

“Nope.” He grinned and leaned closer to her, lowering his voice. “I kinda want to check out the competition.”

She wrapped her hand around his arm and then fell in step with the crowd following the lighting competition judges—who turned out to be Pastor Markle, Doctor Johnson, and Barbara Miller.

From City Hall, they made their way to the houses located in Dani's neighborhood. The first house they stopped at belonged to the bank manager, Katie Garland. The theme was winterscape, and she had dozens of snowflake-shaped lights and LED lights that looked like icicles dripping from the eaves. A family of snowmen, made of white lights attached to frames, filled the front lawn. The crowd clapped and headed off to the next house. The themes varied from a nativity to a house that had every inflatable Christmas yard decoration Dani had ever seen crowded across the front lawn.

Gabe raised his eyebrows and offered Dani a dubious expression at the house that had placed a lone sign in the yard made of old-fashioned bulb lights that said "Pick me."

When they turned onto Gabe's street, he squeezed Dani's hand and hurried ahead. She saw Logan and Seth join him as he took a flashlight from his pocket and illuminated what looked like a power strip. Seth flicked a switch, and the lights along the upper eaves kicked on, then those around the second-story windows. The lights trailed down the sides of the house, then the lights on the main floor began to glow.

The song about a character that despised Christmas played in the background and the crowd laughed as a spotlight came on, shining on the cutouts Dani had painted. Another light highlighted the street sign. The final set of lights wound around the sleigh, outlining it.

A light came on in the back of the sleigh, and Cricket Cole, wearing a blonde wig fashioned into a whimsical style, popped up from behind a box and yelled, "Merry Christmas, everyone!"

The crowd cheered, whistled, and applauded with such enthusiasm it almost hurt Dani's ears. She looked over at Gabe as he stood on the porch and saw him give Seth and Logan high fives while smiling broadly.

No matter who won tonight, she knew the moment would be one Gabe and her son would never forget.

Only three more houses entered the contest, then the judges returned to City Hall to make their decision.

“Can we get cider and cookies, Mom?” Seth asked as he walked with Dani and Gabe toward City Hall.

The only way she’d kept herself from reaching out and holding Gabe’s hand had been to shove her hands in her pockets and leave them there. “Sure, honey. That sounds good. We can listen to the choir and find out who won our illustrious lighting contest.”

Gabe bumped her elbow with his. “Thank you for talking me into doing this, Dani. It was the most fun I’ve had in a while.”

“You’re welcome. If you’re looking for more holiday entertainment though, you could join us next week. We’re going to go into the woods to get our Christmas tree.”

“I’d love that. Do I need a lumberjack outfit?” he asked in a voice she knew meant he was teasing. Even though they’d only known each other a short time, it seemed like Gabe had been her friend forever. She could look at him and know if he were happy, sad, contemplating something, or even hungry. She knew the sound of his voice, even in a crowd, and she knew the foods he preferred. That his favorite color was dark blue, his favorite expression was “seriously,” and that he would shrivel up and expire without his daily coffee.

“No outfits, just a willingness to trek through the woods and maybe help carry out a tree.”

“Sounds like fun. Count me in.”

They entered the community room where it seemed half the town had gathered, all anxious for the results of the lighting competition. While they waited for the judges to announce the winner, a group of women from the senior-citizen group performed a handful of carols while the crowd enjoyed cookies and cider provided by the Early Bird Café.

The singers had just finished a lovely rendition of “The First Noel” when the judges walked into the room and silence fell over the crowd.

“The third-place winner of our first lighting competition is Katie Garland with her winterscape!” Pastor Markle announced. “The second-place prize goes to Judy Brimley for the theme of delivering Christmas! Our first-place winner is none other than our resident grouch! Let’s hear it for Gabe Gatlin and his crew!”

The crowd clapped and cheered. Seth and Logan fist-bumped each other, while Cricket looked like she might explode with bottled-up excitement.

“It was nice of you to involve the kids. Cricket is thrilled to have been a part of it.” Dani leaned close to Gabe so he could hear her over the noise of the crowd.

“The kids added to the fun. Besides, a grouch has to have a sidekick, doesn’t he?” Gabe’s breath was warm on her neck as he bent down so close, his lips almost touched her ear.

A shiver of awareness, of wanting, rocked through her, but Dani did her best to ignore it. She glanced at Seth, then back at Gabe. “If you think you could put up with us a little while longer, would you like to come over and watch a movie?”

“Another Christmas movie?” he asked with a goofy grin.

“Is there any other kind this time of year?”

“Apparently not,” he deadpanned, then gave her a nod of appreciation. “I’d like that, Dani. Thanks.”

Seth asked if Logan could spend the night, and Dani agreed, especially since Seth had spent so much time out at the Lazy J Ranch.

The four of them walked to Dani’s house. She plugged in the outdoor lights, turned the heat up a notch, and made a pot of hot chocolate while Seth and Logan chose the movie. Dani had brought home leftover pizza from the Broken Bucket along with a dessert Owen called “brookies” that combined brownie batter with chocolate-chip cookie dough. She set a

pizza in the oven to warm, checked her hair in the reflection of the kitchen window after removing the beret, and jumped when she felt a hand slide around her waist.

“If I didn’t mention it before, you are stunningly beautiful, Miss Christmas. That ruby shade of red is definitely your color. From head to toe, you just look like Christmas and joy and love all wrapped into one magnificent package.”

Embarrassed by his profuse praise, Dani ducked her head, but Gabe used the knuckle of his bent index finger to push up her chin. He looked into her eyes, capturing her gaze.

She didn’t know what it was about him, but she felt powerless to look away.

“I’m not given to flattery, Dani. You can ask Eddie. I tell things like they are. Maybe I’m a bit punchy from the festivities, or it could be that the cold is slowly freezing my brain cells one by one, but you are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever encountered because your beauty begins in your heart and spreads outward.”

“Gabe, I ...” Dani was saved from having to reply by Seth and Logan asking if the pizza was ready.

“You’re going to love this movie, Gabe,” Seth said when they settled in to watch *National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation*.

“What’s it about?” he asked, smiling at Seth, then winking at Dani.

“There’s this guy who just wants to make a happy holiday for his family and all this crazy stuff happens. There’s even this scene where he can’t get the lights to work.” Seth laughed. “Oh, man, is it funny.”

Dani settled back against the couch cushions and scooted closer to Gabe. With the boys on the floor, gazes focused forward on the television, Gabe slid his hand over hers, lifted her fingers, and kissed the back of her hand.

Only Dani knew how much that simple touch of affection affected her. How much she wanted Gabe to kiss her, hold her, love her, and never leave.

She silently reminded herself to be grateful.

She was grateful she'd met Gabe. She was grateful for the wonderful experiences he'd brought into her life and Seth's. She was thankful—so thankful—to be sitting next to him on a Saturday evening, watching an old movie, and listening to him laugh with Seth and Logan. It felt like the most natural thing in the world for them to be together, relaxing and enjoying what might seem like an ordinary moment to most, but to her, was one that bordered on magical.

When Dani rested her head on Gabe's shoulder, he slipped his arm around her, and she knew a level of contentment she'd never experienced.

For tonight, it was enough.

## Chapter Fifteen



“I can’t believe you won the lighting contest, Mr. Grouchy Britches.”

Gabe laughed as he looked at Eddie on the screen of his phone as they did a video chat. He’d called her as soon as he’d awakened that morning, hoping to catch her before she went into the office. Eddie had just pulled into the parking garage and spoke to him from her car.

“What’s so hard to believe? You saw the video Dani took of the lighting. The house looked incredible, didn’t it?”



Eddie nodded. “It did. The truly incredible thing is how much fun you appear to be having. Being in Summer Creek has been good for you, Gabe. I think you should stay there through Christmas.”

“I probably will. I figure I’ll drive to Boise and fly back around the thirtieth.” Gabe abruptly changed subjects. “I called the company in Bend that’s been taking care of hiring the maintenance crews to see if they had more detail about who hired them in the first place. Someone from our office contacted them fifteen years ago to start taking care of the house, but the contact name they have is Susan Jones. I don’t recall ever having a Susan Jones working for us. Do you?”

“No, and that sounds odd. Maybe whoever took down the info back then got the name wrong.” Eddie shrugged. “Did you talk to the maintenance crew?”

“Yeah. I spoke with the two guys who usually come three times a year. The last time they came, there was a request for the house to be cleaned inside from top to bottom, the beds made with linens that were shipped from a store in Portland, and for the place made ready for someone to use. I wonder who gave that directive?”

“I’ll see what I can find out, but don’t hold your breath.” Eddie gave him a sly smile. “Now, tell me more about Dani and Seth. From the photos you’ve shared, she’s gorgeous, boss. Far prettier than any of those empty-ended ninnies your sister insists accompany you to events.”

“Agreed. Part of what makes Dani so lovely is the fact that she has no idea how gorgeous she is. She’s a sweet person and a great mother. She’s had a hard time, but she doesn’t seem to dwell on the past. I’ve yet to meet anyone in town who doesn’t adore her.”

“That says a lot about her right there.” Eddie’s smile wilted a bit. “Don’t break her heart, Gabe. If you aren’t planning to continue the relationship after you leave, don’t give her a reason to miss you. It wouldn’t be fair to her or Seth. If you think you can figure out a way to continue the

relationship after you return here, then give them the best Christmas all three of you have ever had.”

Gabe knew Eddie spoke the truth. It wasn't fair to Dani or Seth to get more involved with them than he already was, but he couldn't seem to help himself.

Sunday morning had found him once again at church, sitting next to Dani. After the service, he'd joined them for lunch with Zadie and Knox. That evening, he'd driven Dani and Seth to Burns where they'd enjoyed Mexican food for dinner and drove around to look at the lights on homes there before they returned to Dani's house and watched the cutest Christmas cartoon about a family of mice and a clockmaker. The simple, sweet message of the show really touched his heart.

Seth and Logan had taken it upon themselves to make a must-watch list of Christmas movies and shows for Gabe. He'd made it a goal to check one off the list each day.

He'd hoped to watch another movie with Dani and Seth on Monday, but they'd had dentist appointments in Burns and were gone all day. On Tuesday, Dani had said she was tied up with projects and couldn't get together. On Wednesday, Gabe had been invited by Hud Cole to come out to Summer Creek Ranch. He'd spent a blissful day riding horses with the rancher as they worked cattle and separated off several head to sell.

Gabe had no idea what had prompted Hud's invitation. Maybe the man had simply wanted to see if he actually knew how to ride a horse or work cattle. When they'd finished the task, Hud had given him a hearty handshake and told him he'd be welcome at the ranch anytime.

He took that as high praise, since Emery had mentioned in passing that Hud didn't like strangers hanging around the property.

This morning as soon as he'd awakened, Gabe had decided to check in with Eddie. After he spoke with her, he planned to see if he could catch up with Dani. If nothing else, he could go to the Broken Bucket for lunch and find her there.

“Well, what are you going to do, Gabe?” Eddie asked, giving him a searching look and yanking him from his musings.

“About what?” he asked, being purposely obtuse.

“About Summer Creek. About the house. About Dani and Seth, and the fact that you love both of them.”

Gabe started to protest, but Eddie shook a finger at him.

“Don’t you dare deny it, Gabriel Gatlin! You love that woman and her son. You love being in Summer Creek. And you love that house. You can lie to yourself, but I know you too well. You forget I’ve been around since you were just a tiny little scamp.”

He sighed and ran a hand over his head. “I don’t know what I’m going to do, Eddie. You’re right. Dani deserves someone who will never break her heart. Someone who’ll stick around all the time. But my life is in Oklahoma City and at the ranch near Keyes. How could I possibly make a relationship with her work? It’s not like I could stay here and telecommute.”

Eddie quirked a penciled-in eyebrow. “Why couldn’t you? All those meetings you go to, you could very well handle just like this. On a computer screen. You do have a corporate jet at your disposal for those meetings you must do in person. If you pull on your big boy britches and ask, maybe Dani wouldn’t mind living in Oklahoma City part of the year. However, until you talk to her about it, about your feelings, you’ll never know what might be.”

The wise woman had given him too much to think about this early in the day. He hadn’t evaluated long-term possibilities with Dani. Hadn’t allowed himself to consider what they could work out if they tried because he’d been too busy enjoying each day with her.

Could Gabe make it work? Could he really have the best of both worlds?

It was definitely something to consider.

“Okay. Now that you’ve dissected my personal life, I wanted to touch base on those projects you mentioned in the email yesterday.” Gabe shifted into business-manager mode and spoke with Eddie for another fifteen minutes before they disconnected the call.

Gabe took a shower, then went downstairs to the kitchen, brewed a pot of coffee, and looked out the window. Frost had coated every surface during the night, and sunlight skimmed across the frozen crystals, making the world look like it danced with a million refractions of light.

Despite the chill in the air, he stepped out onto the back porch in his sock feet, snapped a few photos, and sent one to Eddie as he returned inside.

She replied immediately.

*Winter beauty in God’s creation.*

Gabe agreed with her. In the few weeks he’d been in Summer Creek, he’d realized the biggest thing missing from his life wasn’t sleep, or quiet from the demands of his job and family. It was God.

His grandparents had given him a Christian foundation, but after they both had passed, Gabe had walked away from it.

Now that he’d recognized that need in his life, he felt so different inside. Like his entire view had shifted and he could see things more clearly, from such a different perspective that was far less cynical.

Gabe knew he needed to come clean with Dani about who he really was, about why he was in Summer Creek. Until he did, he would be living a lie and he knew it was wrong. But he wasn’t yet quite ready to divulge details he was certain would alter their budding relationship.

One of his favorite moments had happened the night of the lighting competition when they’d gone back to Dani’s house and watched the ridiculous Chevy Chase movie with Logan and Seth. Gabe didn’t know when he’d ever laughed so much or enjoyed an evening more. Part of what had made it so memorable was the moment Dani had rested her head on his

shoulder and cuddled close to him for the remainder of the evening. They'd held hands, but more importantly, he'd felt as though they'd silently agreed to hold each other's hearts.

They still hadn't even shared a real kiss, or done more than exchange a few hugs, but what he felt for Dani went far beyond the physical attraction that sizzled between them. For the first time in his life, he felt a soul-deep connection to someone. And that someone was Dani.

Gabe could pack up and leave Summer Creek. He could never set foot in the town again. But he would never forget Dani and the way she made him feel. He loved knowing that he could walk over to her house and he'd be welcomed. Or he could drop by the Broken Bucket while she was working and she'd seat him at his favorite corner table and stop by to chat every opportunity she could.

Of all the places Gabe had been in his life, including the luxurious home where he'd grown up and the penthouse apartment where he currently lived, no place, not even his grandparents' ranch, felt as much like home as the house where his grandmother had been raised in Summer Creek.

Gabe sighed, his thoughts rolling and tumbling around in his head until he knew he needed a distraction before he drove himself nuts.

He poured a second cup of coffee, made scrambled eggs and microwaved a few sausage patties for breakfast, made a mental note to order a toaster next time he was online, and decided he'd go see if Dani were home. If luck were with him, maybe he could talk her into going for a drive just to look at the way the world was dipped in a frosty coat of white.

Despite their proximity to the mountains, Gabe had yet to venture up into them. He'd spent most of his time in Summer Creek except for a few trips to Burns.

He wondered if next Monday he might talk Dani into going to Bend for the day. There wasn't anything Gabe particularly needed, but he'd looked up some of the restaurants and shops there and thought Dani might enjoy a day away.

With a plan in mind, he laced on his snow boots, shrugged into his chore coat, and pulled a stocking cap over his head. He looped a scarf around his neck, a gift from Mrs. Dunigan. The cunning old gal had managed to squeeze his bicep three times as she delivered the gift at church yesterday. Knox had warned him the woman had hands like an octopus, and to never turn his back on her.

At the time, Gabe thought the deputy was joking, but he quickly concluded Knox's warning likely came from traumatizing experience.

Gabe grinned as he chose a different route to Dani's home. Today, he walked past the back side of the gas station, then turned at the corner and started past the antique store. A Christmas display in the window caught his eye.

The purple-haired Mrs. Russell waved at him and hurried to unlock the door. The store wouldn't open for an hour, but she motioned for him to step inside.

Gabe pulled off the stocking cap and tucked it in his pocket as Buddy, the woman's gigantic dog, lumbered toward him from the back.

"Good morning, Mrs. Russell. How does this day find you and Buddy?" Gabe asked politely.

"Doing great. Buddy managed to walk here this morning without chasing every squirrel in the county, and it's such a pretty day outside."

Gabe nodded. "It is a lovely day."

She pointed to the window display. "Did I see you eyeing something?"

A sudden feeling of obligation to purchase something drew him over to the window. The colorful dishes he'd spied earlier didn't hold his interest. However, beneath a child's wooden bench that held a few toys from the 1960s, he spied the perfect thing for Dani.

A set of six china dessert plates with a matching platter featured a deep-green hue around the outer third of the otherwise creamy-white plate. Hand-painted holly berries and

gold trim gave them an elegant appearance that made him think of Dani.

“How about these holly plates, Mrs. Russell? Do you know anything about them?”

“I do,” she said, picking up one of the dessert plates and handing it to him. “These were made by Tressemanes and Vogt Limoges. This particular pattern was produced in the early 1900s and is quite a find these days. One of our dear elderly residents who passed away a few years ago spent a lifetime collecting beautiful dishes. Her rotten kids didn’t want any of them, so I gave them a hundred dollars for the whole shooting match. If I had a candy dish in this pattern, I could get around eight hundred dollars for it in an online auction.”

Gabe’s eyebrows shot up toward his hairline. “Seriously? How much for this set?”

Mrs. Russell eyed him as Buddy walked over and woofed softly, as though giving Gabe encouragement. “For our own Mr. Grouch, I’ll let you have them for seventy-five.”

“Each?” he asked, more than willing to pay it.

“No. For the set.”

Gabe smiled and handed the plate back to her. “I’ll take them. Any chance you could put them in a box so they won’t break?”

“Of course. I even have some holiday storage boxes on those shelves over there.”

Gabe wandered through the piles of old tools, dishes, baking equipment, vintage clothes, and antique furniture to a shelf that held Victorian-replica wrapping paper, sturdy storage boxes with heavy lids in Christmas designs, and Christmas ornaments. He thought about buying ornaments for Seth and Dani, but he wanted to wait until he saw their tree to make sure he wasn’t duplicating something they already owned.

He chose a ruby-red storage box with a green and red plaid flip-top lid that had a red satin bow on the front. It would be perfect to hold the dishes.

“I found one, Mrs. Russell,” he said, carrying it to the front counter where she was wrapping the dishes in tissue paper, then in a layer of bubble wrap.

“That one is perfect, Gabe. She loves that hue of red.”

Gabe forced himself not to roll his eyes. Did everyone in town know he was interested in Dani? Probably. The answer was probably.

While Mrs. Russell packed the dishes, Gabe wandered through the store a second time. His gaze landed on a box of vintage Christmas ornaments. The shiny, colorful glass orbs had star indentations in their sides. He thought they’d been quite popular in the 1960s.

Eddie had showed him a picture of her tree last year and wistfully lamented about the few old ornaments she had left that had belonged to her parents. If he weren’t mistaken, they were like these ornaments. Even if they weren’t the same, he was sure Eddie would love the ornaments. She tended to treasure anything from the decade when she was born.

Gabe carried the ornaments to the front counter.

“Another excellent choice. Same recipient?” Mrs. Russell asked.

“Nope. These are for my aunt. She loves this kind of stuff. Can you possibly pack these so they won’t break? I’ll need to mail it to her.”

“Absolutely, Gabe. If you like, I can mail it for you.”

“That would be fantastic. I’ll pick out another box for you to pack them in.”

Gabe chose a storage box for Eddie’s gift. On his way back to the counter, he snagged a Christmas card from a display.

Cagey Mrs. Russell talked him into buying chocolates she ordered from a company in Seattle. First, she’d given him a taste of a creamy chocolate mint that was one of the best he’d ever eaten. Then she’d pointed to a display that held boxes of the chocolates. He chose a small variety box for Eddie. He



bought a box of mint chocolates for himself, and selected one of pomegranate truffles for Dani based solely on the color of the packaging.

“Okay, Mrs. Russell, that is it for today. How much do I owe you?”

She gave him the total, and he pulled cash from his wallet. When she started to make change, he shook his head. “You keep it. I appreciate you mailing Aunt Eddie’s gift for me.”

“Of course. Happy to do it. I have a bunch of other boxes to get on their way today anyway.”

Although Eddie wasn’t related to Gabe by blood, she had been like an aunt to him when he was younger, and she was more than that to him now. Without Eddie, he was sure the entire office, as well as his life, would fall completely apart.

Gabe knew Eddie would receive the holiday bonus that went to all the employees, and she’d get the gift certificate to a spa he’d arranged for her to receive along with a large holiday centerpiece next week. But this personal gift would mean more to her than all of that.

He quickly wrote a note on the card, sealed it, and set it in the box with the candy and ornaments Mrs. Russell had carefully wrapped in bubble wrap.

Gabe wrote down Eddie’s address for Mrs. Russell, gave Buddy a good scratch on his back and patted the dog’s huge head, then gathered the bag that held the candy and the box with the dishes.

“Thanks for letting me come in before you were even open, Mrs. Russell. I appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome, Gabe. Stop by anytime. I’m always happy to take your money,” she said with a wink.

Gabe left with a wave and continued to Dani’s house. As he walked, he thought about how appearances could be so deceiving. He hadn’t really given Mrs. Russell the time of day, even though he hadn’t been rude to her, before stopping in her store. With her purple hair cut in a spiky style, the vibrant,

strange clothes she wore, and her dog that looked more like a small buffalo, Gabe had been a little wary of the eccentric woman. But Mrs. Russell turned out to be kind and helpful, with a great sense of humor.

Another lesson learned: give people a chance and reserve judgment. Always.

As he neared the vet clinic, Ethel ran across the street and greeted him with what he thought of as her happy bleat. When she rubbed her head against his leg, he shifted the bag of candy to the hand that held the box with the dishes, giving him a free hand to pet her as he stopped on the sidewalk outside Dani's house.

"Are you enjoying the sunshine, Ethel?" he asked, rubbing between her crooked horns. She looked up at him with her soulful eyes. If goats could smile, he was sure that's what the expression on her face meant.

He took an apple from his pocket and gave it to her. Since discovering how much Ethel liked them, he never left the house without one. When he was walking around town, she'd most always find him, and he'd give her a treat. Dani accused him of trying to become Ethel's favorite human. She wouldn't have been entirely wrong.

Gabe grinned as Ethel trotted off crunching her apple, then he strode to Dani's front door. He tapped once, heard her yell, "come in," and turned the knob, smiling at the wreath hanging on her door that matched those he had at his house.

The wreaths hanging in front of all the windows of his house were such a cheerful sight each time he arrived home. He had felt bad when he'd realized Seth had also been selling wreaths, but the boy didn't seem to mind that he'd purchased his from Logan.

"Hello?" Gabe called as he wiped his boots on the mat by the door.

"I'm in the kitchen," Dani replied as she leaned around the counter.

He could see she had flour on her cheeks and her hair was wadded into a knot on top of her head, but the sight of her stole his breath away. She looked delectable.

“What brings you by?” she asked.

“I haven’t seen you all week and wanted to see how things are going.” Gabe set the dish box and candy on the floor as he removed his boots, tugged off his stocking cap and his coat, and left them by the door.

He lifted the candy and dishes and walked over to Dani’s kitchen. Cookies and bowls of cookie dough covered every available surface.

“Whatcha got there?” Dani asked as she dropped mounds of dough onto a paper-lined baking sheet.

“Let’s call it an almost Christmas gift.”

She looked up at him with laughter in her gorgeous hazel eyes. “There’s no such thing.”

“Sure there is. Mr. Grouch has declared it is so.”

Laughter spilled out of her, making him smile. “Mr. Grouch is getting a little bit of a big head after his successful entry into the world of holiday illumination.”

He grinned, catching the reference to a movie they’d watched. “I don’t know any such thing, Miss Christmas.” Gabe inhaled a deep breath, savoring the scent of Dani along with the delicious aromas of holiday baking.

Suddenly, he was nine years old, sitting at the kitchen table, helping his mom frost the sugar cookies she always made. No sprinkles at their house, but carefully decorated cookies that looked as good as they tasted.

Dani slid a sheet of cookies into the oven and removed another to rest on a cooling rack she’d set up so it bridged the sink.

“How can I help?” Gabe asked, setting the gifts he’d brought on a chair at the table that was covered in cookie boxes and tins, some of them already packed with treats. He rolled up the sleeves of his flannel shirt and glanced around.

“I’m just getting ready to make sugar cookies. You can keep an eye on the cookies in the oven. They need to come out in seven minutes.”

“Why don’t you set the timer?” he asked, walking over to the stove.

“Because I don’t have one. The timer on the stove has never worked, and I didn’t see the need to spend money on one when I can keep an eye on the clock.”

He pilfered an oatmeal cookie studded with cranberries, pecans, and white-chocolate pieces, and set a timer on his watch to go off in six minutes.

“You’re a snitcher, Mr. Grouch,” Dani sing-songed as she creamed butter, then broke two eggs and added them to her mixing bowl.

“You’re making sugar cookies?” he asked as she added both granulated and powdered sugar to the batter. His mother never made them this way. He couldn’t explain why, but he needed Dani to make them the way he remembered from his childhood.

“Yep. I got this recipe from a friend. It’s always so good, and they are super-easy to make.” She poured in vanilla, then added a dash of lemon juice.

“Sugar cookies don’t have powdered sugar or lemon juice,” he said, frowning as she mixed in flour and baking powder.

She raised an eyebrow in question at his surly tone. “My sugar cookies do.”

Gabe opened his mouth to argue, then snapped it shut. However, when she’d finished mixing the dough and began pressing it into a rectangular baking pan, he couldn’t keep his thoughts from shooting out of his mouth.

“You’re doing it all wrong!”

Dani’s eyes widened in surprise as she finished pressing the dough into the pan with the back of a spoon and slid it into the oven after removing the cookies she’d had baking. As she

moved the pan that had been on the cooling rack over the sink to the top of the microwave, setting the hot sheet of cookies in its place, the timer on his watch beeped.

When she finished, she fisted her hands on her hips and stared at Gabe. He felt like squirming as she pinned him with a motherly glare. “Little boys who get cranky and don’t mind their manners get sent home without any cookies.”

Gabe held his hands up in front of him, in a gesture of peace. “I’m sorry, Dani. I don’t know what came over me. I guess it’s this whole Christmas thing.”

He slumped onto a tall stool at her eating bar and sighed.

Dani didn’t press him as she began creaming sugar and butter together in the mixing bowl she’d just emptied.

“Want to talk about the Christmas thing?” she finally asked.

Gabe toyed with an Elf on the Shelf toy that looked like it had been to a war zone and barely survived. One foot had been singed. There was a blue permanent-marker streak on its face, and the top of its hat was frayed, like it had been dropped into the garbage disposal or a paper shredder. Seth had told him that when he was little Dani used to hide it around the house with fun notes for him to find during the whole month of December. Seth assured him he was too old now for such silliness, but Gabe knew Dani had still been hiding the well-loved elf every day.

Traditions.

Dani and Seth were all about traditions and love, and taking care of each other out of joy, not simply a sense of responsibility.

Gabe realized why the sugar cookies had left him so upset. It was because it was the only holiday tradition he’d ever had with his family. Correction. With his mother. He looked at Dani and saw her watching him as she stirred batter that smelled like gingerbread.

“I’m sorry, Dani. It’s just the only Christmas-like tradition I ever had with my family was baking cookies with

my mom. She always made sugar cookies, and we'd spend all afternoon decorating them until they looked like something worthy of a food-magazine spread. I loved that time with her and having that one thing we did together. No matter where we were for Christmas, or what my dad and sister were doing, Mom and I would bake sugar cookies."

Dani nodded in understanding. "It's nice you had that tradition you shared together, Gabe. Did you make other kinds of cookies?"

"Sometimes, but always sugar cookies." He reached across the counter and grabbed her hand, holding it between both of his. "I'm truly sorry for living up to my reputation. I didn't mean to turn all grouchy on you."

A smile lifted the corner of her lips, and she held out a pinch of cookie dough for him to sample.

He popped it in his mouth and nodded. "I taste molasses."

"Yep. Soft and chewy molasses cookies. My grandma used to make them. So, I totally understand that tradition thing. Do you remember the recipe your mom used?"

"I think I can remember it." Gabe walked over to where Dani kept a notepad and paper in the breakfast nook on a wide corner shelf she and Seth used as a desk. He closed his eyes and envisioned the ingredients his mother used for the cookies, then jotted them on the paper.

"What shapes did your mom use for the cookies?" Dani asked as she dropped balls of dough onto a baking sheet lined with parchment.

"Trees and stars, and a candy cane are what I remember. I liked to make the red and white stripes on the candy-cane cookies because I didn't have to be as careful in decorating them as the others."

At the word "careful," Dani gave him another questioning glance, but turned away to slide more cookies into the oven.

"Okay. How about we whip up a batch of your traditional sugar cookies and bake them, then have a taste test to see

which one you like best? You have to be honest, though, about which one you like the most.”

“You’re on. You are going to love these cookies,” Gabe said, taking the bowl Dani handed to him and following the recipe he’d written down. Dani suggested he measure out baking powder instead of the baking soda he’d jotted down, and he added the pinch of salt she encouraged him to use.

An hour later, he sat with a star-shaped sugar cookie in one hand and one of Dani’s sugar cookie bars with frosting and red and green sprinkles across the top in the other.

“Time for a taste test,” she said, taking a bite from a broken candy-cane cookie.

With great expectation, Gabe bit into the sugar cookie he’d made. It tasted exactly like he remembered from his childhood. The cookie was crispy and crunchy, not too sweet, and lightly browned on the edges. Dani had given him frosting to spread over the cookies, but he hadn’t attempted to do any decorating of his would-be masterpieces. Then he bit into Dani’s version of a sugar cookie. The bar was thick and flavorful, soft and chewy, and utterly wonderful.

Rather like the woman who’d baked it. Utterly wonderful.

She’d given up part of her limited baking time to help him make something from his childhood just because she was a nice person.

“Thank you, Dani.” Gabe accepted the glass of milk she handed to him.

“What’s the verdict, Grouchy Gabe?” she asked with a knowing smile. She knew him, knew what he liked, and was aware of his answer without him saying anything.

“Mine are definitely the best,” he said, waiting as her smug expression changed to one of shock.

He chuckled and took another bite from a sugar-cookie bar. “These are so good, Dani. Seriously. You could market these things and make a fortune.”

“Nope. They are just a special holiday treat. I’m sorry the cookies you made aren’t like you remembered.”

“Oh, they taste exactly like my mom’s cookies. I guess my tastes have evolved and changed as I’ve grown up. I much prefer something soft and sweet to what I’ve always known.” He hoped she caught his double meaning as he held her gaze. “I will acknowledge that change can be a delicious, unexpected, marvelous thing.”

“It certainly can,” Dani agreed, then glanced at the clock. “I need to get all this cleaned up and head to work.”

Gabe stood and picked up an empty bowl, carrying it over to the sink. He lifted the sheet of cookies cooling on the rack there and looked around. Dani laughed, took it from him, and set it on top of the refrigerator.

“The joys of a small kitchen,” she said, turning around and bumping against his chest.

Gabe set the bowl he still held in the sink, wrapped his arms around her before she could get away, and offered her a slow, lazy grin. “The joys of a small kitchen,” he repeated, implying something far different than what she’d meant.

He lowered his head toward hers and, before anyone else could interrupt them, or Dani came to her senses and shoved him out into the snow, he kissed her. Kissed her softly, tenderly, almost reverently at first. Then one kiss led to two, and before he knew it, he’d lifted her off her feet while her arms twined around the back of his neck and she was fully involved in the kiss, returning the passion and yearning he poured out to her.

When he finally broke off the kiss, breathing hard and aware his world had just been significantly altered, he tipped his forehead to rest against hers. “That was the most amazing kiss I’ve ever experienced. Thank you, Dani.”

She gaped at him, appearing undone, like she teetered on the edge of tears. Gabe worried he’d frightened her, or hurt her, or had destroyed a friendship he treasured with the fiery exchange that had just passed between them.



Dani placed her hand on his cheek and offered him a soft smile. “I’ve never been kissed like that, Gabe. It was the way I’ve always wanted to be kissed, dreamed of being kissed. I ... it made me ...” She stopped and drew in a breath. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure.” He offered her a crooked grin. “Anytime you want to repeat it, my lips are ready and waiting.”

She smiled, as he knew she would, and patted his shoulder. “I really do need to get to work.”

“I know. Don’t worry about the mess. I can clean up. Where do all the cookies go?”

“There’s a box of resealable bags in the bottom drawer by the stove. If you bag them all, I can do something with them later. And thank you.”

She kissed his cheek. Then, when he set her on her feet, she hurried into her bedroom. He heard the click of the door and wished he could follow her.

By sheer force of will, he redirected his thoughts to bagging cookies. He used the gallon-sized bags to corral the dozens of cookies. He had half a soft brown sugar cookie hanging halfway out of his mouth when Dani hurried back into the kitchen in a Broken Bucket polo shirt, her hair in a high ponytail. She’d washed her face, and added a swipe of mascara, making her look so different from the woman who had flour on her cheeks earlier.

“Don’t make yourself sick,” she said, offering him an admonishing look as she gathered her cell phone and tucked it into her purse. She bent over to pick up a paper that had fallen on the floor beneath the table and noticed the box he’d set on the chair earlier.

“I forgot about the almost-Christmas gift you brought,” she said, glancing back at him. “Do I get to open it now?”

“Do you have time?” Gabe asked, wiping his hands on a damp dish towel and walking around the counter. He lifted the box and held it, since there wasn’t anywhere to set it at the moment.

“I always have time for presents, Mr. Grouch.” Dani tossed him a cheeky smile as she lifted the lid, removed the bubble wrap, and unwound tissue paper from one of the dessert plates. She sucked in a gulp and looked from the plate to Gabe. “I can’t keep this. It’s far too nice. Too expensive. This is an antique, isn’t it?”

Gabe nodded. He’d recognized the Limoges name, but all he knew was the set looked like Dani and she had to have them. “I was walking past the antique store this morning, and Mrs. Russell invited me inside. There are six dessert plates and a matching serving platter. I just thought they looked like you. Beautiful and exquisite, and brimming with Christmas cheer.”

Dani carefully rewrapped the plate and set it in the box, then took the box from him. She scooted cookie tins and boxes over until there was room for the box on the table. Setting it down, she then turned and threw her arms around him, giving him a tight hug.

“It’s the nicest gift I’ve ever received, Gabe. Thank you so much for it. And for being you.” When she released him and took a step back, tears shimmered in her eyes. “Truly. Thank you, Gabe.”

“If you’re that pleased with the dishes, wait until you try the candy.”

Dani laughed and took the bag of pomegranate truffles from him. She opened it and dropped a few in her purse, then popped one in her mouth. “Oh, wow! Different, but so good. Thank you, Gabe.”

She glanced at the clock, then raced to the door, grabbed her coat, shoved her feet into her snow boots, and waved. “I’ll see you later, and thank you!” She blew him a kiss and took off at a jog down the street as she pulled on her coat.

Gabe stood at the front window, watching as she gave Ethel an affectionate pat on her way across the street, heading in the direction of the Broken Bucket.

He returned to the kitchen, surveying what looked like the bakery at Santa’s workshop the day after Christmas, and

sighed. “Time for a little cleanup.”

As he stored more cookies in resealable bags and washed bowls and baking pans, he sampled the variety of sweets. In addition to the cookies, Dani had made fudge, toffee, and peppermint bark. He searched until he found the proper places to put everything away. After wiping down the counter and mopping the floor, he felt downright domestic, and a little sick to his stomach from indulging in far too many sweets.

Gabe made sure the stove was off and the cookies were all lined up in bags on the counter before he pulled on his coat and boots. He locked the door behind him and moseyed home, certain he wouldn't need to eat another cookie the entire holiday season.

He thought again of how he'd behaved earlier, snapping at Dani about the cookies, and her reaction of kindness, letting him figure out for himself that change could indeed be a beautiful thing.

## Chapter Sixteen



Gabe was up bright and early Saturday morning. Dani had invited him to go with her and Seth to get their Christmas tree in the woods.

Since he had a pickup with four-wheel drive, he'd offered to take his vehicle. Dani wanted to leave at about seven, so they'd arrive in the woods with plenty of time to find the perfect tree and still get back to Summer Creek before her lunch shift.

Gabe brewed a pot of coffee and filled a Tundra thermos with it, then he ate a quick breakfast of instant oatmeal. He'd

progressed from eating sugar-laden cold cereal to something slightly healthier this week. After he'd gorged himself on Dani's cookies, he'd stayed away from sugary snacks the past few days.

Last night, Gabe had gathered what he thought he might need for the morning adventure and stowed it in a large canvas tote bag in the pickup.

He grinned, thinking of Jack Olsen's reaction to seeing him, once again, at the Sinclair store yesterday. Gabe was in there so often, some of the customers had started asking him where to find things. Yesterday afternoon, he'd gone in to get a couple of hand saws and ended up buying a small chain saw, along with rope, a folding shovel, supplies for starting a quick campfire, and a no-tip tree stand, in case Dani needed one.

Jack had sold him two tree permits, something Gabe hadn't even realized he'd need, along with a permit for cutting firewood. The fireplace in the living room burned wood, and Gabe thought it might be fun one evening to build a fire there.

At a quarter to seven, Gabe drove to Dani's house. From inside her home, yellow globes of light shone through the windows, breaking through the shadowy darkness, since dawn had barely begun to arrive.

He parked behind Dani's SUV, hurried up the walk, and was raising his hand to knock on the door when it swung open and Seth greeted him with an excited grin.

"Hi, Gabe! It's cool you're going with us today."

"I'm grateful for the invitation." Gabe pointed a thumb over his shoulder toward the pickup. "Do you have any gear to load?"

"Just a rope and a saw," Seth said, reaching for a worn duffel bag.

"I've got both, so we should be set."

"Awesome!" Seth turned and hollered toward his mother's closed bedroom door. "Mom! Gabe is here! Can we go now?"

Dani didn't reply, but a moment later her door opened. She stepped into the living room looking so cute, Gabe shoved his hands into his pockets to keep from pulling her to him and kissing her until he was senseless. With her hair in two braids, worn jeans tucked into her snow boots, and a white turtleneck beneath a blue-and-white snowflake sweater, she looked like a winter dream Gabe could only hope would come true.

"Ready to go?" he asked, hoping he could refrain from doing anything he shouldn't today, like catching her alone behind a grove of trees and kissing her until ... Gabe yanked his thoughts back in line.

Dani smiled and walked into the kitchen. She returned with a tote bag full of snacks over her shoulder and an insulated travel mug in each hand. "We're ready. Did you bring coffee?"

"Of course," he said, assuming that was a given. He'd filled a big thermos, expecting to share it with Seth, but Dani handed her son one of the travel mugs. As Seth walked past him, Gabe could smell the distinctive aroma of coffee.

"Let's go!" Seth charged ahead and held open the pickup door.

Until that moment, Gabe hadn't considered how the three of them would ride in the pickup. Seth was tall enough that he wouldn't fit in the back seat unless he turned sideways, and Gabe sure didn't want Dani back there.

The pickup had a bench seat, so he decided they'd all just ride in the front.

Dani looked from Seth, to the seat, to Gabe, then set the snack bag in the back seat. "I can ride back there," she offered, but Seth tugged on her arm.

"We can all ride up front, Mom. I know you get carsick in the back. Besides, no one bigger than Cricket could fit comfortably back there." Seth gave her a nudge to get in the front of the pickup.

Gabe hid a grin as he hurried around and climbed behind the wheel. The pickup had a manual transmission, but Dani

managed what could have been an awkward situation if she'd attempted to straddle it by sitting at a slight angle, her feet pointed toward Seth and her shoulder pressed against Gabe's.

When Gabe shifted and followed the road out of town that wound into the mountains, he glanced at her and she winked.

"We need Christmas tunes," Seth said, popping a CD into the player.

Soon, the cab was filled with a playlist of Christmas songs that covered classics to country twang to pop versions of carols.

Gabe tapped his thumb on the steering wheel, enjoying the time spent with Dani and Seth. He tried not to think about the warmth of Dani pressed to his shoulder or the scent of her filling his nose.

For now, it was enough to be off on a grand adventure with the woman he loved and the boy he admired.

"See that sign up there?" Dani asked when they'd been on the road for about twenty minutes. About five minutes earlier, they'd entered what Gabe would have referred to as a forest. Thankfully, the roads were clear, and the sky that had lightened with the dawn teased him into thinking it would be a sunny day.

"I see it. Turn left or right?"

"Left. The place we're going is only about a mile up the road."

"Got it." Gabe turned off the highway onto what had to be a forest service road. It had been plowed, but the snow was packed on the surface and was slick. He put the pickup in four-wheel drive and slowed as they rounded a bend in the road. Up ahead, he could see vehicles parked on the side of the road, and people standing around a big campfire that sent spirals of smoke into the frosty morning air.

It was then he recognized Hud Cole.

"We aren't doing this all alone?" he asked Dani.

“No. The Cole family makes it quite an experience. Last year, they invited us to join them when they found out we cut our own tree every year. Seth and Logan had a great time.”

“It was so cool! Parker brought snowmobiles, and we got to ride all over.” Seth leaned forward, his expression relaying his excitement.

“Looks like he brought them again,” Gabe observed, pointing to a long trailer behind Parker’s pickup that had his outdoor-guide logo on the sides. Two snowmobiles zoomed into the campground and stopped.

“There’s Logan and Poppy!” Seth waved out the window.

“The princess rides a snowmobile?” Gabe asked, slightly awed.

“The princess does a lot of things you wouldn’t expect her to do. That’s what makes Poppy special.”

Gabe nodded and parked by a pickup he recognized as Hud’s. Seth hardly waited until the vehicle had stopped moving to bail out and hurry over to Logan. The two friends shared a fist-bump, then began an intense inspection of the snowmobile Logan had been riding.

“I think I forgot to tell you the others would be here. I’m sorry,” Dani said, looking at him as he got out and held a hand out to her. She took his hand and squeezed it as she maneuvered around the gear shift and swung her legs around to the door.

“It’s no biggie, Dani. Looks to me like a fun gathering, but you have to be at work at the usual time, don’t you?”

“I do, but the rest of them will stay and play for a while. They usually cut a few cords of wood and deliver them to families who need a hand.”

“That’s kind of them.”

“It is kind—” Dani grinned—“and it gives them an excuse to stay out here and play longer.”

“Well, there is that,” Gabe said dryly, then followed Dani over to where Jossy and Zadie added wood to a roaring fire



that threw off welcome heat.

Gabe looked around, expecting to see Knox, but the deputy was absent.

“Knox is working today,” Dani whispered, as though she could read Gabe’s mind.

If she actually possessed the powers to do that, he’d likely get his face slapped multiple times before he took Dani home.

Cricket ran over to Gabe and tugged on his hand. It was then he noticed Emery and Nell were both absent, as was Jossy and Nate’s baby, Jacob.

“Hi, Mr. Grouch! I’m so glad you came today. We’re going to get our Christmas trees!” Cricket smiled at him, showing off gaps in her smile where baby teeth had fallen out. “I love Christmas trees! Do you love Christmas trees?”

“I love the smell of them,” Gabe said, grinning at Cricket. It was hard to remain in grouch mode with her exuberant energy tugging him into the holiday spirit. “Where’s your mom and grandma?”

“Mommy was tired and stayed home. Grammy is taking care of Jacob,” Cricket said, tugging on his hand again. “Let’s go find our trees!”

Hud walked over and swung Cricket onto his shoulder. “Don’t be quite so bossy, baby girl. Give Mr. Gatlin a chance to get a word in edgewise.”

Hud reached out and shook Gabe’s hand. “Have you ever hunted down a Christmas tree in the woods?”

Gabe shook his head. “Can’t say that I have, but it sounds like an experience worth enjoying.” He reached into his pockets, then pulled on his stocking cap and a pair of warm gloves.

“It’s a lot of fun,” Hud said, glancing around the group of laughing people. “Logan and Nate are going to ride the snowmobiles to find a good place to chop firewood while the rest of us look for the perfect Christmas tree.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Gabe glanced over at Dani, who was being hugged by Zadie and was laughing at something Poppy said. He wondered if he were in trouble when all the women turned and looked at him, then resumed their quiet conversation.

“Don’t mind them.” Hud offered him an encouraging look. “I think half the time they’re plotting to take over the world. The other half, I’m pretty sure they’re just comparing notes on the stupidity of the male species.”

Gabe chuckled. “That sounds about right.”

It only took half an hour of hiking straight up a hill to find a grove full of trees that were perfect for Christmas. Despite the permit Gabe had purchased for a tree, he hadn’t planned on cutting one for his house, but it seemed the women had other plans.

After he’d cut Dani’s tree, she pointed to a tall, slender tree.

“That would be perfect in the entry at your house, Gabe. You could place it by the stairs, and it could be such a beautiful focal point for anyone who comes over.”

Gabe had no intention of having company, beyond Dani, Seth, and maybe Logan and Cricket if they happened by again. He wasn’t concerned about decking his halls.

“It’s a grand fir tree,” Poppy said, brushing the snow from a few branches, removing a glove, then breaking off a needle and handing it to Gabe.

He inhaled the scent and smiled. It smelled like Christmas, or what he thought Christmas should smell like. In spite of his half-hearted protests, he cut down the tree and started dragging it and Dani’s tree back toward the pickup.

Parker walked with him, dragging along two trees. “One for home and one for the office. Pops already has so many fake trees at the florist shop they’re liable to take someone’s eye out if they aren’t careful.”

Gabe snickered, and they talked about snowmobiles, winter hunting, and if it ever got cold enough to go ice fishing

around Summer Creek.

Dani and Poppy walked behind them, pulling a tree for the community senior center located in City Hall's basement.

Jossy and Seth followed along behind them, each dragging a tree, while Zadie and Hud brought up the rear. Even Cricket tugged along a small two-foot tree. Gabe heard the little girl tell Poppy she was going to put it in her bedroom.

After the trees were loaded, Nate and Logan returned. Everyone gathered around the fire and warmed up before heading out to work on cutting firewood. Those who'd brought snacks and thermoses of hot drinks passed them around.

Gabe was munching on a handful of granola and sipping his coffee when Seth and Logan ran over to Dani, who was seated beside him on an old log.

"Can I please, please stay, Mom?" Seth begged. Logan nodded, as though that would urge her to agree. "Pretty please? I promise not to do anything dangerous, and I'll—"

Dani held up a hand, and Seth stopped in mid-sentence. She looked around Gabe to Jossy who sat on his other side and tipped her head behind in the direction of the two boys. Jossy and Dani both stood and walked out of earshot of the group before they engaged in a whispered conversation. Dani looked concerned, but Jossy put a hand on her arm and nodded, like she offered reassurance. Dani smiled, then they returned to the group.

When Dani slipped an arm around Seth's shoulders and said, "Okay," he whooped and gave Logan a high five.

"You will ask permission before you touch any equipment, especially a chain saw or the snowmobiles. If you get to ride on the snowmobile, you will not drive it recklessly. Pretend I'm sitting on it right behind you."

Seth grinned. "So, extra fast and take the corners on one ski."

The group laughed, including Gabe, as Dani playfully swatted her son, then kissed his cheek.

“Have a fun day, honey. If you aren’t home when I’m off this afternoon, we’ll decorate the tree tomorrow.”

“Sounds good, Mom. Thanks so much!” Seth gave her a big hug that lifted her off her feet, then raced off with Logan. Cricket tried to keep up with them, so the two boys stopped and waited for her to catch up, each of them taking one of her hands to help her through the snow.

“It’s nice how Seth and Logan watch out for her,” Gabe said as Dani resumed her seat beside him. “He’d make a great older brother someday.”

The words had barely left his mouth when Gabe realized they could be interpreted to mean something he hadn’t intended to imply.

Dani’s cheeks were red, but he wasn’t sure if it were from the cold, the fire, or embarrassment.

Gabe stared into the flames of the fire, wondering if he’d ever felt so comfortable and at peace around a group of people beyond J.T., Mike, and Tam. He knew he hadn’t, and the fact that he felt like he sat among friends wasn’t lost on him.

“You’ll come, won’t you?” Jossy asked, nudging Gabe’s arm with her elbow.

“I’m sorry, Jossy. I was off woolgathering.” He turned to study the woman who resembled a grown-up version of Cricket, from her blue eyes to her dark hair.

“We’re holding a sledding party and bonfire tomorrow afternoon. We hope you’ll come.”

Gabe had never been to a sledding party. The one bonfire he’d attended in college was a blur in his memory. It had been on the beach during spring break his junior year. There had been girls and surfboards, but beyond that, he had no idea if he’d enjoyed it or not.

“I’d love to come. May I bring something? What time does it start?”

“Come any time after two tomorrow. You can bring whatever you’d like to contribute. We’ll have a potluck supper

at five, and then the bonfire. It will wrap up before it gets too late so the kids can get home and in bed to be rested for school Monday morning.” Jossy gave him a cunning look, then leaned a little closer and dropped her voice. “I hope you’ll be bringing Dani. I’ve never seen her as happy as she’s been these past few weeks. Just don’t break her heart. If you do, you’ll have the entire town of Summer Creek gunning for you, and that includes a county deputy and a man who leads guided hunting expeditions for a living.”

“Warning noted.” Gabe grinned at Jossy, although he took her words seriously. Eddie had cautioned him the other day about breaking Dani’s heart.

Did anyone care about his?

If he couldn’t convince Dani to give a long-distance relationship a try when he had to return to his real life, he knew his heart would be splintered twice. Once because of losing her, and again by losing Seth.

The teen was such a great kid, so bright and driven, and he had such a big heart. If Gabe had ever had a son, he couldn’t imagine loving one more than he cared for Seth.

But Dani had become the light in his days, the dream in his heart, and the reason for his smile. Well, she and his return to acknowledging his faith in God. Between the two, Gabe felt like he was a brand-new person.

If the little matter of his deception about his identity weren’t hanging over his head, he’d be utterly at peace for the first time in his life. Gabe made a vow to himself that he’d tell them all the truth before Christmas Eve.

He laughed as Parker threw a snowball and hit Hud in the back of the head. Logan lobbed one at his dad who ducked, but it nailed Zadie instead. She declared war on both him and Seth.

Gabe watched, enthralled by the way the adults acted like kids and had just as much fun. He’d never been in a snowball fight that he could recall. Then Dani nailed him in the side of

the face with a soft snowball that exploded on impact, sending frozen crystals down his neck.

“You are in for it now, Miss Christmas!” He scooped up a handful of snow, packed it in a ball like he’d seen the others do, and tossed it at her. It caught her on the leg as she made a hasty retreat, dodging behind the safety of a towering pine tree. She leaned around it, stuck her tongue out at him, and threw two more snowballs. One of them skimmed the top of his head, almost tugging off his stocking cap. He snugged it down over his ears, formed a handful of snowballs, and was all set to chase after Dani when Seth and Logan pelted him with a volley of snowballs.

Gabe yelped, dove behind the log he’d been sitting on, and began rapidly assembling an arsenal. He felt more snowballs whiz by his head and scooted down lower. When he had a dozen snowballs, he got to his knees, took aim, and fired. He nailed Seth on the back, Logan on the side, caught Parker in the chest, and one hit the tree by Dani’s head, showering her face with snow. He’d just ducked back down to pack more snowballs when he heard a shrill whistle that brought everyone up short. The sound of a child crying carried in the descending quiet.

He hopped up to see Hud holding Cricket on a log by the fire as she cried and held her mitten to her mouth. When she pulled it back, it was bloody.

“What happened?” he asked Dani as she hurried out from behind the tree.

“I think she got caught in the crossfire and caught a snowball to the face.”

“I lost my tooth, Daddy! The tooth fairy won’t come if I can’t find it!” Cricket pointed to her mouth. Apparently, the snowball had knocked a loose tooth out into the snow.

Before the little girl slid into hysterical sobs, Seth and Logan started crawling around in the snow where she’d been standing when she got hit. All the adults, except for Hud and Jossy, who worked to calm Cricket, joined in the search. Gabe wasn’t even sure he’d recognize a baby tooth if he did find it.

“Got it!” Dani shouted, holding up her hand, then hurrying over to Cricket. “Now the tooth fairy will come, Cricket.”

“Yay! Thank you, Dani.”

Cricket reached out for it, but Gabe took a clean handkerchief from his pocket and gave it to Dani. She set the tooth in it, then tied it into a neat little bundle so it wouldn't fall out.

“I think I better take that for safekeeping,” Hud said, slipping the tooth into his pocket and zipping it closed. He mouthed, “Thank you” to Dani, then took the napkin Zadie had packed with snow and held it to Cricket's gum. The bleeding had already almost stopped, but it looked far worse because of the blood stains on the little girl's mitten and the snow around her that had turned a bright crimson hue.

Dani glanced at her watch, then tugged on Gabe's hand. “We better get back if I'm going to get to work on time.”

“Sure,” Gabe said, then reached out to shake hands with Hud, Nate, and Parker, waved to the women, and grinned at Seth as he and Logan took a ride around the camp on the snowmobiles.

“He's going to have the best day,” Gabe said, giving the snowmobile a longing glance. He'd ridden them a few times when he'd been in Colorado on business, but the thought of living in a place where he could have his own to ride whenever he liked greatly appealed to him. The more he thought about it, the more he warmed to the idea of making Summer Creek his home.

In the past year or so, more and more of his interactions with his employees had been via phone calls, online meetings, or emails. There wasn't any reason he couldn't continue to interact with them that way. They could hold a quarterly in-person meeting. He could also do even more business meetings via video conferencing. It would save the company a lot of money when it came to travel expenses—which his father and Chadwick would love—but also allow him to be in one place most of the time. If that place happened to be

Summer Creek, in his ancestral home with Dani and Seth beside him, would that be such a bad thing?

More and more, Gabe played over the idea it would be the best thing that could happen to him. Suddenly, he realized Dani was no longer beside him and glanced over to her speaking with Zadie and Poppy, laughing at something one of the women had said.

“Mr. Grouch!” Cricket hopped off her father’s lap and ran over to him, throwing her arms around his legs and grinning up at him with a new gap in her smile. “Did you have fun?”

“I had a grand time, Cricket. Thanks for letting me join you.”

She nodded so vigorously, the strings on the stocking cap she was wearing swung around and slapped her cheeks, making her giggle. She looked up at him with those big blue eyes and Gabe wondered what it would be like to hold a daughter of his own, to look down in her little smiling face and see love and adoration there.

“Do you have decorations for your tree, Mr. Grouch?”

Gabe gave her a thoughtful look, then shook his head. “I don’t. Where do you think I should go to buy them?”

“Oh, you can’t buy them,” Cricket said. “I’ll make you some!”

“You don’t have to do that, Cricket.”

She tightened her arms around his legs as her grin widened. “I want to! I’ll give them to you tomorrow. Okay? Don’t decorate your tree today.”

Gabe held up his hand and crossed his heart. “I promise I will wait until tomorrow.”

“Yay!” Cricket squeezed his legs, then darted back around the fire to her father.

Gabe waved to the group as Dani joined him, and they hurried over to his pickup. He gave Dani a hand inside, slid behind the wheel, and backed around, and they were soon on the road to Summer Creek. Dani turned around in her seat



every few minutes to make sure the trees hadn't blown out, even though Gabe had tied them in with enough rope that he was sure he'd have to slice through it to get the trees out when they got to town.

"That was so fun, Dani. Thank you for inviting me," he said as they neared the outskirts of Summer Creek.

She turned from looking out the back window to him. "I had a great time too. Thanks for coming along, and thanks for driving. That's the biggest tree Seth and I have ever had. It's going to be awesome to decorate it."

"Biggest tree? But you go to the woods every year to get one, don't you?"

"We have since Seth was probably four or five, but I didn't get to go far off the road, and I'm not great at sawing them down. I used to have a small car, so we'd get a tree that would fit in the trunk, and then it was the back of the SUV. I just know if I tried to tie it on top, it would be like something from a comedy, with me dragging a rope and a tree stripped of all its needles down the road."

Gabe chuckled and squeezed her hand as he pulled up by her house. "I'm glad you can have a bigger one this year. Where will you set it?"

"Right in the front window. I usually move the rocking chair into my bedroom and that makes room for it there."

"Do you have a big-enough tree stand?"

"I do." Dani opened the door and hopped out. She unlocked the door to her house and raced inside, then returned with a large tree stand, the same no-tip style he'd purchased yesterday. "Will you help me get it into the stand and then in the house?"

"You bet." Gabe had never put a tree in a stand before, but Dani walked him through the process. He bounced the tree a few times to shake loose the snow clinging to the branches and any loose needles, while Dani moved the rocking chair.

When he carried the tree inside, he noticed she had placed a plastic tablecloth on the floor to set it on. He made a mental

note to pick one up for his tree.

“The plastic keeps sap off the floor?” he asked as he set the tree in the center of it right in front of the window.

“A little to the left, please,” she requested, pointing to the left with her head tilted to the right.

Gabe scooted it over. “There?”

“That’s perfect.” Dani pressed her hands together beneath her chin, unable to hide her pleasure and excitement. “The tablecloth does help with the sap, but it also keeps water off the floor if it spills or leaks from the stand. You have to keep the tree in water or it will dry up on you in a hurry.”

That was a detail Gabe hadn’t known, but it made sense.

Dani glanced at the clock as she hurried to yank off her coat and toss it on the couch. “I’ve got to change, Gabe. Talk to you later?”

“You can count on it, Miss Christmas.” Gabe caught the kiss she blew to him, then went outside and drove home where he set up his tree in the foyer. He sent Eddie a photo of the towering fir that made his house smell better than any fake holiday fragrance he’d ever experienced.

Eddie sent back a link.

Gabe clicked on it, and the sounds of Johnny Mathis singing “It’s Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas” filled the foyer with a cheerful tune.

Maybe it was beginning to look like Christmas at the Lepiane home and in Gabe’s heart.

## Chapter Seventeen



“**W**atch out! Watch out!” Dani screeched and squeezed her eyes shut as she held on to Gabe’s coat with a death grip.

The two of them careened down a sledding hill at the Lazy J Ranch on a plastic toboggan made for one child, not two grown adults. The hill was slightly icy, and the toboggan continued to gain speed instead of slowing down.

Gabe leaned far to the right to keep from plowing into Poppy as she made her way down the hill on a vintage-looking wooden sled.

They barely avoided a collision with two of the Nelson kids as they continued the hectic downhill pace.

“We’re going to have to bail or crash,” Gabe shouted, hoping Dani could hear him above the howling wails of fear whooshing in her ears. Ahead, a wooden fence would provide an abrupt and painful end to their ride if they didn’t stop before then. Gabe had visions of either smacking into a post or getting hit in the head by a railing.

“On the count of three, lean to the left,” he yelled. “One. Two. Three!”

Gabe dove to the left and dragged Dani along with him. The toboggan flipped in the air and came to rest standing upright in a pile of snow someone had banked at the base of the fence.

Dani sat up and brushed snow out of her face, spitting it from her mouth, then laughed. “That was great! Let’s do it again!”

For a few terrifying seconds, he’d thought they were going to be mortally wounded. His heart still pounded like he’d survived a brush with death, but Dani hopped to her feet, retrieved the toboggan, and stood over him, holding out a hand.

“Come on, Grouchy Gabe. Let’s give it another whirl.”

He groaned, but took her hand and lumbered to his feet. He could feel a bruise forming on his left hip, and another on his right side. Maybe the simple truth was he was too old for Dani. He was eleven years her senior. Right now, he felt like he might as well have been thirty years older. Maybe he should hang out with the blue-haired gang of seniors who rode in Mrs. Finley’s big boat of a car.

“Shall I call you ‘Grandpa Grouch?’” Dani teased as she jogged backward up the hill. Laughter and youthful energy poured from her, pulling him along in its zestful wake.

“I’m too old for this much excitement,” he said, placing his hands on his back and leaning forward like he was in extreme pain.

Dani stopped bouncing around and eyed him with a motherly gaze, searching for a visible injury.

Gabe added a pronounced limp to his step. “I might need assistance to get back up the hill.”

“I’m so sorry, Gabe. Of course.” She moved beside him, dropping the toboggan she carried and looping the rope handle over her wrist before she settled an arm around Gabe’s waist. “Lean on me if you need to. Does anything feel broken?”

“Everything,” he groaned, then purposely took a stumbling step, cushioning the fall as he landed on his back in the snow and pulled her on top of him. He grinned up at her as she shook her head at him.

She crossed her arms and propped herself on his chest, as though being there wasn’t sending her senses into a tailspin. His had gone loopy the moment they’d tumbled into the snow. “Nice moves, Gramps.”

Gabe chuckled and brushed a lock of hair behind her ear. “You ready to do this again?”

“Yes, but I get to steer this time.”

“Okay,” he said, waiting as Dani pushed up off him, touching him so many times he thought he might spontaneously combust before she got to her feet and started up the hill, pulling the toboggan with her. Gabe stood, took the toboggan rope from her and held it in one hand, and wrapped his other hand around her gloved fingers as they made their way to the top of the hill.

For the next trip down the hill, Gabe settled behind Dani, wrapping his hands around her slender waist and resting his chin on her shoulder. The vanilla scent of her mingled with the crisp, fresh December air in an intoxicating blend that left him feeling punchy.

Dani looked over her shoulder and grinned at him, then hollered to Seth. “Give us a good push, honey!”

Seth and Logan both pressed their hands against Gabe’s back and shoved with all their might. The toboggan caught air as they sailed down the hill and bumped along the icy path.

Dani squealed with excitement while Gabe prayed they made it to the bottom in one piece, preferably with his tailbone still intact.

Once again, they leaned to the side and tumbled off before they smacked into the fence. But this time, Dani knew he was teasing when he pretended to need her help getting back up the hill.

Cricket took pity on him as she rode down the hill, bailed off her little pink plastic saucer, and rushed to his side.

“I’ll help you, Mr. Grouch. Hold my hand.”

Gabe obediently took Cricket’s hand and let her think she pulled him up the hill. At the top, she patted him on the back and told him he did a good job. He worked to hide his smile as he thanked her, then looked around to see Dani and Zadie laughing at something Knox had said.

“Want to race?” Parker asked as he leaned on a toboggan identical to the one Gabe held in his hand.

“Sure. With or without the girls?”

“With, if they’re game.”

They waited until all the little ones were safely off the hill, then the two couples lined up at the top.

“No cheating, shoving, or unsportsmanlike behavior,” Nate intoned as he looked from Gabe to Parker. The two of them sat in the front of their toboggans. Poppy leaned against Parker’s back while Dani had a tight grip around Gabe’s waist. “On your mark. Get set. Go!”

Knox pushed the back of the toboggan with such force, Gabe and Dani flew ten feet out in the air before they landed with a thud and began a long, greasy slide down the hill. Hud had given Parker and Poppy a similarly hard shove that caused them to almost veer off the trail.

Parker and Poppy righted their toboggan, coming close to Gabe and Dani. Disregarding Nate’s rules, Parker scooped up snow in one hand and tossed it at Gabe, blinding him with a face full of snow. Gabe retaliated by dumping a handful down

the back of Parker's coat before Poppy could shove his hand away.

Cheers drifted down to them from the top of the hill. They were nearly to the bottom when Gabe heard a loud crack and looked over to see Parker and Poppy's toboggan split in two. Poppy spun off to the left and ended upside down in a shower of snow while Parker veered in front of Dani and Gabe, causing them all to crash, the three of them tumbling into a heap.

"Is everyone still alive?" Nate called from the top of the hill.

"We're all still breathing," Parker said, holding up a hand as he dug snow from his ears and wiped it from his eyes.

Dani's stocking cap looked like a big snowball, but she grinned so broadly, it was like looking into the sunshine as she turned the wattage of her smile on Gabe. "That scared me half to death, but what a ride!"

Gabe chuckled and got to his feet, then gave her a hand.

Poppy stood and shook snow from the neck of her coat, then picked up the broken piece of the toboggan. She carried it over to Parker and playfully swatted him with it. "The next time you get a crazy idea, test it out by yourself first."

"Yes, Wife," Parker said in a meek, obedient tone, then grabbed Poppy around the waist, spinning her in a circle and making her laugh.

"They are the cutest couple," Dani said for Gabe's ears only as they turned and started the trek up the hill.

Gabe couldn't help but agree. When they reached the top of the hill, Gabe took the good-natured ribbing from their friends, then gladly went to claim a seat by the bonfire.

Dani handed him a stick with a marshmallow speared on the end. "Have you ever had s'mores?"

"Can't say that I have. What do I do with this thing?" He wagged the marshmallow toward her. He'd gone camping

many times in his younger years, but he could never recall roasting marshmallows over a fire.

“Just follow my lead,” she said, showing him how to hold the marshmallow out so it toasted, but not holding it close enough to the flames that it caught fire. Once her marshmallow was cooked to a perfect golden brown, she slid it onto a piece of chocolate that rested on a graham cracker. She pulled it off the stick using a second graham cracker, then handed the whole thing to him. He gave her his half-burned, half-uncooked marshmallow, and bit into the treat.

“Mmm. That’s good.” Gabe held it out to her, offering her a bite. She took one, then licked away a bit of marshmallow clinging to her lip.

Gabe sat there, too mesmerized to move, until Cricket plopped down next to him and wiggled close. “I like s’mores, Mr. Grouch. Do you?”

“I do, Cricket. They are pretty yummy in your tummy.” He playfully patted his stomach, making her giggle.

Several people gathered around the fire, and someone began singing “Jingle Bells.” Soon the entire group was belting out carols. Pastor Markle asked a blessing on the meal when dusk settled around them, and they enjoyed a potluck supper eaten around the fire.

“We better head home, kiddo,” Dani said after they’d eaten their fill and Seth had gone for one more sledding run down the hill with Logan. Nate and Hud had strung lights from the top of the hill down to the fence so sledders could see, but Gabe could tell the party was at an end.

He shook hands with Parker. “We’ll have to try that race again, but maybe without the girls next time. I don’t want to traumatize Poppy or Dani.”

Parker grinned. “Agreed. You say the word, and we’ll see who wins.”

Gabe thanked Jossy and Nate for hosting the event and walked with Dani and Seth to their SUV. Dani had insisted on driving since there was more room in her vehicle, and she had



Seth's sled and their outdoor gear to bring along with the food she contributed to the meal.

Gabe had just opened Dani's door and was holding it for her when Cricket caught his attention, dragging a large garbage bag behind her.

"Wait, Mr. Grouch!" the little girl called, racing up to him and placing a hand on his arm. "I got your ornaments."

"My ornaments?" he asked, hunkering down so she didn't have to look up at him.

"Yes! I made them for your tree!"

"You did? Well, how about that. Thank you so much, Cricket. When I get it all decorated, will you come tell me how it looks?"

Cricket clapped her hands together. "Oh, yes! I'll come." She gave him a tight hug around his neck, causing a lump of emotion the size of an orange to lodge in his throat, then she bounded off to find her friend Jasmine.

Gabe watched her go, then stood and set the bag in the back of the SUV. Dani had asked him to drive, and he was glad for the focus it required. Otherwise, he was sure he would spend far too much time on the short drive into town reflecting on how much he'd missed out on by not having a family of his own.

Then he thought of his sister and her little terror of a daughter that was a miniature version of her. What if his child had turned out like that, not like sweet Cricket?

Gabe concluded how the parents raised the child had a huge impact on how they behaved.

They were nearly to town when Dani looked over at him. "Did you decorate your tree yet?"

Gabe shook his head. "Nope. I have no idea what I'm doing. Want to help?"

"Yes!" Seth shouted from the back seat, making Gabe look in the rearview mirror and grin.

Dani nodded in agreement. “Sure. We can help for a while. Do you have any decorations?”

“Just lights. Oh, I do have a spool of red ribbon left from when we decorated outside.”

“And whatever Cricket made,” Seth said, jabbing his thumb toward the back of the SUV.

Gabe turned down Railroad Way and drove to his house, parking at the curb. With no idea what to contribute to the community meal, he’d gone to the grocery store deli yesterday and purchased two big trays of ready-made sandwiches. There hadn’t been a single one left to bring home. The empty trays made him feel good to have contributed something others at least liked. Dani had taken plates of cookies and candy, along with a big chicken-noodle casserole, and a tray of fruit slices. Gabe had gotten the last apple slice and eaten more than his share of the cookies, but the cookie plates were empty. He wasn’t sure there had even been a full tablespoon of the casserole left, either. Apparently, playing outside all afternoon worked up a hearty appetite.

“Are we sitting out here for a reason, or going inside?” Seth asked as he stood holding the door of the SUV open and looking back inside at Gabe.

Gabe hadn’t realized Dani and Seth had both gotten out while he’d been lost in his thoughts. Seth had even retrieved Cricket’s bag of decorations.

Together, the three of them went up the walk and the porch steps. Gabe plugged in the lights outside. Seth backed up a few steps and grinned before he rushed into the house behind Gabe and Dani.

“Wow!” Dani said, staring at the towering fir tree. “Oh, that fragrance is fantastic.” She removed her coat, closed her eyes, and drew in a long breath.

Gabe wanted so badly to kiss her right then, but he took her coat from her, then Seth’s, and hung them in the closet, before he removed the coveralls he’d worn and hung them up, then toed off his boots.

Dani and Seth removed their boots, then the three of them opened Cricket's bag of decorations.

"There must be fifty yards of paper chains in there. I wonder who she got to help her with them." Dani pulled out one long continuous paper chain made of red and white strips of paper. Some of the paper links had been cut straight and other pieces were jagged. It was evident Cricket had cut some, and someone else had cut the others.

"Logan said she talked him, Jossy, Emery, and Nell into helping her yesterday. They glued the strips last night while they watched a movie."

"That's kind of all of them," Gabe said, helping Dani stretch out the chain that wound across the entry floor and trailed into the living room.

"Before we add it, let's do the lights." Dani took charge of decorating the tree. First, they added strings of white lights, and she showed Gabe how to place them in a vertical pattern on the tree instead of winding them around, so they were easier to remove. Seth went up the stairs and leaned over the railing to decorate the top portion of the tree that Gabe couldn't reach even when he stood on a step stool.

"Now the paper chain." Gabe helped Dani wind it around and around the tree until Seth took over and the last link was looped over the top.

"What else can we use, Mom?" Seth asked as he hurried downstairs.

"We can tie bows with the ribbon. We just need a sharp pair of scissors to cut it." Dani stepped back, tilted her head, and tapped her chin with her finger. "Hmm. What else?"

"How about popcorn strands?" Seth suggested.

"That's a great idea, kiddo." She looked at Gabe. "Do you have popcorn and a popcorn popper?"

"Nope. But I do have microwave popcorn. Will that work?"

Dani grinned. “Not ideal, but it will do. How about a needle and thread?”

Gabe gave her a look that expressed his disbelief that she thought he was that handy, then he remembered a little kit he kept in his travel bag in case a button fell off and no one was around to fix it. His grandmother had taught him to sew on buttons when he was Cricket’s age. “Actually, I do have something.”

He hurried upstairs and retrieved the sewing kit, then thought of something else that might work for decorations. He went to the room he was sure had been his grandmother’s and gathered all the smaller framed photos and carried them downstairs.

“What do you have there?” Dani asked.

“The photographs are of Alana Brown. She grew up in this house. Her brother was the last one to live here before he passed around thirty years ago.”

“These are wonderful, Gabe!” Dani studied each image, reverently setting them on the table in the foyer. “We could loop ribbon through the hangers on the back and use them on the tree. I see you have a sewing kit, so we can string that popcorn.”

“Can we watch *A Charlie Brown Christmas* while we string popcorn, Mom?” Seth asked. “It’s on Gabe’s must-watch list.”

He shrugged. “That much is true. Why don’t I make some hot chocolate while the popcorn pops, and we can multitask? Movie watching, popcorn stringing, and chocolate drinking.”

“Sounds great,” Dani said, leading the way to the kitchen, like she was as comfortable being there as she was at her own home.

Gabe tossed a bag of popcorn into the microwave while he filled a pan with milk and heated it on the stove.

Dani got out mugs, and Seth retrieved bowls for the popcorn. It took them two trips each to haul everything

upstairs to the media room, but they settled back to watch the classic based off the Charles M. Schulz cartoon.

Of course, Gabe had heard people talk about a Charlie Brown Christmas tree and assumed it meant a pathetic-looking tree. Watching the show, with Dani and Seth adding comments from time to time, gave him another level of perspective on what the holiday season was all about.

J.T. had been telling him for years he was missing out, and now he finally understood what his friends had been trying to get him to understand.

The holidays were nice with the pretty decorations and delicious treats, lights, and events to attend. But Christmas was about something in the heart. Something that warmed and filled, as well as blessed and cheered. Christmas was, as he recalled from the movies he'd recently watched, *something more*.

Entranced with the moment, with the woman beside him, and the boy singing along to the closing song, Gabe finally felt like he'd found the place in the world where he belonged. A place where he was loved and accepted.

"What did you think?" Seth asked as he looked over at Gabe.

"It was awesome, Seth. Thank you for suggesting it."

"It's always been one of my favorites," Seth said, stuffing a handful of popcorn in his mouth.

"Hey! How much of that did you eat versus string?" Dani asked, offering Seth an admonishing look.

He shrugged and held up a string that was twice as long as Gabe's pathetically short string.

Dani had strung at least three times as much as both of them combined.

"I think we should have enough. If not, Gabe can string more tomorrow," she said, winking at him as she carried the popcorn strings down to the tree while Seth and Gabe took the popcorn bowls and mugs to the kitchen.

After they added the popcorn strings, Dani showed Seth and Gabe how to loop ribbon through the picture-frame hangers, then they decided together where each one looked best. Dani tied several red bows, and they nestled them among the branches. When they finished, the three of them stepped back and studied the tree.

Gabe's heart felt like it might burst as he stood with one arm around Dani's waist and the other around Seth's shoulders. For the moment, for tonight, he wanted to pretend they were a family and always would be.

"Can we turn off the lights and look at it?" Seth asked.

"Sure." Gabe watched as Seth flicked the switch on the wall and the entry was bathed in darkness except for the white lights twinkling on the tree.

"It's beautiful," Dani whispered, as though to speak up might break the spell of wonder all three of them seemed to be under.

"It is beautiful," Gabe agreed. "Thank you for inviting me to go with you to get it, and helping me decorate it. This has been the best holiday season I've ever had, and I owe that all to the two of you."

Seth gave him an impulsive, quick hug, then turned the lights back on. "I have to send a photo to Logan."

"I'll help you clean up while he takes a few pics," Dani offered, "then we need to get home."

Gabe followed her toward the kitchen, but took her hand when they were out of sight of the entry and tugged her into the family room.

She gave him a confused look just before his hands bracketed her face and he gave her a tender kiss.

Dani sighed contentedly and leaned against him.

"I've wanted to do that all day," Gabe whispered, brushing a lock of hair behind her ear.

"I've wanted you to," she admitted with a shy smile. "But I really do need to get Seth home. He has school in the

morning.”

“But you have tomorrow off, don’t you?”

Dani nodded. “I do. I was planning to finish the last sign in your garage if you’ll let me come over.”

“You know you can come anytime, but I wondered if you’d go to Bend with me for the day. We could leave early, as soon as Seth goes to school, and be back in time for dinner. What do you think?”

She didn’t immediately agree. He could see she was considering his request, then she nodded her head. “I haven’t been to Bend in ages. I’d like that. What time do you want to leave? It takes about two hours to get there, and that’s only if the roads are good.”

“What time does Seth go to school?”

“He’s generally out the door around eight.”

Gabe smiled and slid his hands along her shoulders to her hands, rubbing his thumbs in light caressing circles across her wrists. “If we leave at eight, we’d arrive around ten, and all the stores should be open by then. We can eat lunch, do a little more shopping, then head back. If you have anywhere in particular you’d like to visit, just make a list and we’ll be sure to stop.”

“Really, Gabe?”

“Really.” He kissed her nose, then stepped back as they heard Seth coming down the hallway.

“Tomorrow, then.” Dani gave him a quick kiss on his cheek, then rushed out of the room. “Come on, kiddo. Time to get you home.”

Gabe joined them in the foyer and held Dani’s coat for her while Seth tugged on his, took Dani’s keys, and ran out to start the SUV.

“Seth wanted to know if you’d teach him how to drive. He’s got his permit, but every time he gets behind the wheel, it freaks me out so much he ends up in a panic, and that’s not fun for anyone.”

Gabe felt honored by the request. “I’d be happy to do that. Maybe next Saturday we could get in a practice session.”

“He’ll love it. Thank you, Gabe.”

He leaned toward her for a kiss, but the door opened, and Seth rushed inside, then placed his cold hands on the back of his mother’s neck.

She shrieked and did a little shivery dance, then winked at Gabe as she chased Seth outside.

Gabe watched them run out to the SUV. What had he gotten himself into? Falling in love was the last thing he’d expected to do when he’d arrived in Summer Creek only wanting to escape his family’s horrible holiday plans.

Now his heart was under threat of being lost to not just Dani, but also the whole idea of family that Summer Creek had implanted in his mind.



## Chapter Eighteen



“Mom?” Seth tapped on Dani’s bedroom door. “I’m leaving!”

“Wait!” Dani called, clumping over to the door with one tall black dress boot on, and the other still on the floor by her bed. She flung open the door and looked at Seth.

He grinned as he looked her over from head to toe and nodded approvingly. “You look great, Mom. Gabe’s gonna tell you that for sure.”

Dani felt her cheeks warm at thoughts of Gabe's praise and spending the day with him. She felt like she was playing with fire by spending more time with him, but seemed unable to stop herself from dancing closer and closer to the flame that flickered between the two of them.

"Are you sure you don't mind me spending time with Gabe?" she asked, smoothing a hand over Seth's mussed hair.

"I'm sure," he said, reaching up to rumple his hair. Dani had no doubt he'd spent far too long styling it to look that way and then she'd inadvertently messed it up. "I'm glad you met Gabe, Mom. He's a great guy, and you've been happier than I can remember since you two started hanging out together. Go. Have fun. Do something wild and crazy like buying something for yourself."

She pulled Seth into a hug. "You're a great kid. Have I ever told you that?"

"Once or twice." Seth hugged her back, then stepped just out of her reach. "Seriously, Mom. I want you to have fun today and not worry about anything. Logan and I are going over to Chris' house after school and taking some leftover decorations that Jossy sent into town. We're going to hang some lights and stuff."

"That's nice, kiddo. I hope you have fun. If you want, you can take a container of cookies over there with you."

"Thanks, Mom. I'll come grab one after school and leave my backpack here. If you want to stay in Bend and have dinner with Gabe, I can make my own."

"I'll be back for dinner, but thank you, honey, for being so sweet about this. I know I've never really dated before, so it might be a little awkward for all of us."

Seth grinned. "Especially if I accidentally catch you two almost kissing again."

Dani's face heated, and she started to ask Seth what he'd seen, but her son laughed and raced out the door. "Love you, Mom!" he called before he shut the door and jogged toward the corner.

“That kid,” Dani muttered to herself, then returned to the bedroom. When she had on both boots, she gave herself a critical look in the mirror. She’d carefully styled her hair into thick curls, applied lip gloss, a spritz of her favorite perfume, and three coats of mascara.

It had taken her more than an hour last night to decide what to wear. The black maxi dress with a small red floral print flattered her figure, and she liked the way it flowed when she walked. The black boots had good soles that would give her traction on the snow and ice, keep her feet warm, and still look somewhat fashionable.

She’d dug a classic black wool blazer from the back of her closet and used wadded-up masking tape to brush away any specks of lint or dust it had gathered since the last time she’d worn it. She’d found the jacket at a thrift store for a few bucks, even though it had a designer label.

When she’d needed to feel more grown up, she’d worn it with a pencil skirt and heels. It had been her go-to outfit for several parent-teacher conferences when Seth was little.

After giving the jacket a quick spray of perfume, she carried it to the living room and left it with her purse by the door. She hurried into the kitchen to make sure everything was turned off and the breakfast dishes had been placed in the dishwasher. She’d thought about putting something in the slow cooker for dinner, but had decided against it. For once, she intended to splurge and bring back something she and Seth rarely got to eat.

She put Seth’s coffee cup in the dishwasher, checked the locks on the back door, and had just returned to the kitchen when the doorbell rang.

Nerves jittered in her stomach, so she took a calming breath as she opened the door and looked into Gabe’s smiling face.

Those dimples nearly did her in every time he flashed them her way. He looked like he belonged in a western clothing advertisement with his black cowboy hat on his head. A blue shirt that accentuated the blue of his eyes was worn

beneath a black suit coat, along with a new pair of jeans and his black cowboy boots.

Dani was glad she'd opted for a dress instead of wearing jeans and a sweater. Other than church, she didn't often have an opportunity or reason to dress up.

"Good morning, beautiful," Gabe said, leaning in and kissing her cheek. "You look gorgeous. Is that a new dress?"

Dani blushed and shook her head. "Nope. Yard-sale find from a few summers ago." She wondered why she'd said that. She shouldn't feel the need to justify things she purchased for herself. Everyone had to have clothes to wear, but since she'd gotten in the habit of hoarding every penny for Seth's future, she always felt guilty if she spent money on herself.

Mindful that Seth would be upset if she didn't buy anything for herself today, she'd taken a little extra cash from the grocery fund for the week and tucked it into her purse. They had plenty of food in the house, and if they ran low, Owen never cared when she brought home leftovers—although she tried not to do it too often.

Dani grabbed her jacket and slipped it on, picked up her purse and the two soft-sided cooler bags she was taking along, then closed the door behind her, checking once to make sure it was locked.

"You really do look lovely, Dani." Gabe offered her his hand as they walked outside.

"Why don't we take my SUV? In case we do some shopping, there's more room."

Gabe nodded. "Are you sure?"

"Yes." Dani handed him her keys, and he unlocked the vehicle, helped her in, then started it. While it warmed, he pulled off the old piece of canvas she'd remembered to place over the windshield and tucked it into the back, then slid into the driver's seat.

Gabe blew on his fingers while Dani turned up the heat. "It's cold out this morning, but it looks like it will be a pretty day."

“It does look that way.”

Gabe pulled a U-turn and drove down to Main Street, then they headed toward the highway that ran between Burns and Bend.

Dani had no idea what they’d talk about for two hours, but Gabe asked her about the classes Seth was taking in school, then she asked questions about the real estate business. The next thing she knew, two hours had flown by and they were almost to Bend.

Gabe looked over at her. “Do you have a list of stores you want to visit?”

“Not really. The only two I’d like to go to are the bath-and-candle store and the warehouse store where things are cheap if you buy in bulk.”

Gabe tossed a disbelieving look her way. “That’s it? Just those two places?”

Dani nodded. She didn’t have money for a shopping spree, and window shopping was only depressing when you lived on a tight budget. “I’m positive. Is there somewhere you’d like to go?”

Gabe nodded, pulled out his phone, and hit a button that brought up a map. Dani listened as the phone gave them directions to a place she’d never heard of or visited. She rarely came to Bend. When she did, it was generally for a trip to the warehouse store to stock up on things she couldn’t get in Summer Creek or Burns.

“We’re here,” Gabe said, pointing to a building that had an art gallery sign hanging above the door. He got out and walked around the vehicle.

Excitement swept through Dani. She hadn’t been in an art gallery since she was a college student.

“Are you sure this is what you want to do?” she asked as Gabe opened her door and offered her his hand.

“Positive. Let’s go check it out.”

Together, they explored the gallery. Dani was surprised when Gabe didn't act like he wanted to be anywhere but where they were. He offered opinions on a few pieces she liked, and she studied one western art piece he seemed particularly enthralled with. The price on the piece was more than she earned at the Broken Bucket in a year.

When they left, Gabe drove them to another gallery that had bronze statues, and pottery pieces, as well as paintings, and fiber arts. They spent an hour there, and Dani fell in love with a Tom Browning winter scene.

"Wow, that's incredible," Gabe said as he stood beside her, studying the painting.

"I love the colors and the way the mountains cast shadows." She could have offered several technical observations as to why it was a wonderful piece, but she didn't feel words were necessary.

Before they left the gallery, she visited the restroom and returned to find Gabe chatting with the gallery owner while he waited for her.

From there, they went to lunch at an Italian restaurant where the spicy aromas hanging in the air made Dani's stomach growl with hunger. She'd been too nervous to eat breakfast, but now she was starving.

Gabe placed a hand on her back as the hostess seated them at a table by a window in the back where they could look outside, but have a little privacy too.

It almost seemed like Gabe had called ahead with a reservation. She'd been so distracted by her growling stomach and nerves, she hadn't paid attention to whether or not he'd given his name when they'd walked in.

Dani had a terrible time deciding what to order. The food was twice as expensive as what she'd planned to spend, but it all sounded good. She decided, just for today, to not worry about the cost and get something she wouldn't have the opportunity to eat at home. After an inner debate, she settled

on the veal piccata with ricotta gnudi in a browned butter-and-sage sauce.

“Nice choice,” Gabe said, smiling at her and handing the waitress his menu. “I’ll have the lasagna, please. Could we get the dinner salads and a basket of breadsticks?”

“Of course, sir.” The waitress gave Gabe a flirty smile, then swayed her broad hips all the way back to the kitchen.

Dani had never, ever been the jealous type. However, as the server brought their drinks, and then their orders, Dani felt like turning into a raging cavedweller and pummeling the woman who wouldn’t stop winking at and touching Gabe.

After the server stopped by their table for the third time in five minutes, Gabe waited until she’d walked off to lean toward Dani. “Is it just me, or is something wrong with her eye? It’s like she has a twitch or something?”

Dani started to giggle, and then laugh, and her anger disappeared in an instant. Gabe was clearly aware of what the woman was doing, but he’d just put Dani at ease by letting her know he wasn’t interested.

With a deep breath, Dani relaxed and enjoyed the delicious meal. She shared a few bites with Gabe, and he gave her a taste of the lasagna that was good, just not as wonderful as Owen’s. She texted her boss a photo of her plate and asked if he could make the ricotta gnudi because she loved the pillowy balls of cheesy goodness that tasted like a dumpling.

“Did you save room for dessert?” Gabe asked, looking across the table at her.

“Goodness no,” Dani said, leaning back after she’d eaten the last bite on her plate. She was so stuffed, she was sure she wouldn’t have room for dinner.

But two hours later, after they’d gone through a large gallery that had every art media she could think of and had swung by the bath and candle store where she used a coupon to buy a bottle of her favorite perfume, plus lotion and bodywash, Gabe pointed to a diner that had a “fresh pie” sign blinking in the window.

“Indulge me in a little something sweet,” he said as they walked across the parking lot.

Inside, Gabe ordered coffee and a slice of warm apple pie while Dani chose tea and a piece of coconut-cream pie.

When the server brought their drinks, Dani thought it odd she didn't receive a cup and hot water with a selection of tea bags. Instead, a mug was set in front of her that looked like Gabe's.

She assumed perhaps all the diner offered for hot tea was black and they served it by the pot, like coffee.

All it took was one sip for her to realize her assumptions were wrong. As she swallowed a drink of strong, black coffee, she had to force herself to keep it down. She grabbed the water glass and drank half of it, then popped a mint in her mouth, but she could still taste that horrible, bitter coffee.

“You look a little green, Dani. Is something wrong?” Gabe asked, reaching across the table and settling his hand over hers.

“Coffee. She gave me coffee instead of tea.” She rifled around in her purse for a stick of gum. She finally unearthed one and crammed it in her mouth, chewing rapidly to release the flavor.

“I'm so sorry. I didn't realize you had an acute allergy to it,” Gabe said, motioning to their server. “She ordered tea, and that's coffee.”

“Oh, my word! I'm sorry, hon. With the holidays, I think my brain took a vacation,” the woman said, taking the coffee mug and soon returning with a cup, a pot of hot water, and a little basket with a selection of teas.

Dani chewed the gum as she fixed a cup of peppermint tea, then added three packets of sugar. She took two sips and sat back. “I'm not allergic to coffee; I just greatly dislike the taste. It's been something I can't stand since I was pregnant with Seth. I'd just downed a big cup of it the first time I had morning sickness, and since then, I've avoided it.”



“Got it. No coffee for you. Ever.” Gabe took a drink of his, then held the cup out. “Sure you don’t want a swig?”

She shot him a death glower that made him smirk as the server set their slices of pie in front of them.

“Do you have any peppermints?” Gabe asked the woman.

The server took a few from her apron pocket and set them on the table.

“Thanks so much.” He offered the woman a charming smile, and she batted her fake eyelashes at him before she went to help another customer.

“Flirt,” Dani accused Gabe as she popped a peppermint in her mouth and sucked on it until she could no longer taste bitter acid. After the second peppermint she ate, she thought she could at least taste the pie and took a bite. It was creamy and good, but she thought Owen’s crust was flakier. She’d have to remember to tell him that tomorrow.

Although she’d been convinced she wouldn’t be able to eat a thing until tomorrow, she cleaned up her pie, drank her tea, and ate another peppermint. She started to reach for their bill, but Gabe grabbed it from her and went to pay it while she retreated to the restroom.

She’d tried to pay for her lunch also, but he’d acted almost insulted, reminding her they were on a date and he was an old-fashioned guy who believed in paying for the meal.

Old-fashioned was exactly how she would describe Gabe. He was a throwback to men who rarely seemed to exist today, or at least the ones who asked her out. Gabe was thoughtful and sweet, mannerly and kind. He never pushed boundaries with her or made her uncomfortable in any way.

Also in his favor was the way he treated her son with care and respect. He seemed to adore Cricket Cole, and he had bonded with Logan Knight. A man who was handsome, smart, interesting to talk to, good with kids, good-natured, and funny was a rare thing indeed. Almost as rare as the antique-china dessert set Gabe had brought her the other day for no other

reason than he'd been walking past the antique store and thought of her.

Dani had looked up the cost of the dishes online. If prices in online auction sites could be trusted, she could sell the dishes and afford new tires for her vehicle. Not that she'd ever get rid of them. They were beautiful and delicate, and unlike anything she'd ever seen, not to mention nicer than anything she owned.

After quickly touching up her lipstick, Dani joined Gabe by the door, and they returned to her SUV. He drove to the large warehouse store where she could buy everything in bulk and save a lot of money. Because of a lack of storage space, she ended up storing her bulk purchases in the attic in plastic totes. That way, she and Seth didn't have to trip over gigantic packs of toilet paper or bags of snacks, and the totes kept everything safe from creepy crawlies in the attic.

Dani led the way to the door, pulled one of the huge carts from the rack, flashed her membership card, and walked inside. Gabe looked around with interest, like he'd never been in a store like it.

With a shopping list in hand, Dani mostly stuck to it, only veering off twice. The first was in the book section. She saw a children's book she knew Cricket would love. Then in the candy aisle where she found a bag of chocolate-covered coconut almonds that were like an obsession with her. She rarely bought them because it was impossible for her to leave them alone. She generally divvied up the contents of the bag into little snack packs, then wrote the name of a month on each one, and tucked them into the back of her freezer. Once a month, she allowed herself the indulgence of the nuts. She'd run out of them back in September.

With only a tiny twinge of guilt, she added a bag to her cart, then went over to the deli and meat area.

"They have the best roasted chicken, and they are only five dollars each." Dani added one to her cart.

"Do you have anything planned for dinner?" Gabe asked as he eyed a package of ribs.

Half a rack was thirty dollars and far over her budget. “No. I thought I’d make soup and sandwiches when we get back.”

Gabe scoffed and rolled his eyes. “That won’t do at all. What’s Seth’s favorite food?”

“Food,” Dani said with a cheeky grin that made Gabe smile. “He loves barbecue, like brisket and pulled pork.”

“I’m on it,” Gabe said, taking his phone from his pocket as Dani grabbed the last of the items on her list and headed toward the checkout.

As the clerk rang up her purchases, Gabe stepped away, and she could see him speaking on the phone. He came back in time to take over pushing the heavy cart to the door and then loaded everything while he insisted she get inside the SUV and start it so it would warm up.

When he pulled out of the parking lot, he stopped and filled the SUV with gas, ignoring her attempts to give him cash to pay for it, then drove to a barbecue place she didn’t even know existed. He ran inside and returned with two bags full of food in insulated cooler bags that had the barbecue restaurant logo on the front of them.

“Anywhere else you want to stop at before we head back?” he asked as he started down the street that would take them out of town.

“Nope. I’m ready to head home.”

Dani was exhausted in a happy, good way. Spending the day with Gabe was unlike anything she’d ever experienced. She had no idea men could be so fun to hang out with, but she’d loved every moment of the day with him.

She closed her eyes, picturing the way he’d smiled at her over their lunch in the romantic atmosphere of the restaurant. The next thing she knew, Gabe was kissing her cheek.

“That’s nice,” she mumbled, half asleep, then turned her face toward him.

“I’d love to take you up on that kiss you’re offering, Miss Christmas, but Seth is running over here, and Logan is with him.”

“Oh!” Dani went from sleepy and dreaming of kissing Gabe to wide awake in an instant. She unfastened her seatbelt and stepped out of the vehicle before Gabe could get his door open.

“Hi, Mom! Did you have fun? Did you bring home dinner? Can Logan stay awhile?” Seth gave her a big hug, then hurried around to the back of the vehicle where Gabe was picking up bags from the warehouse store.

Seth and Logan grabbed them and carried them inside while Dani tried to pull herself together.

“Grab those bags of food. There are hungry boys in need of sustenance,” Gabe said, looking across the top of the SUV at her.

When he walked around the SUV and offered her his arm, she grabbed the restaurant bag and shut the door, then chanced a glance at him. He offered her a warm smile.

One that weakened her knees and her resolve.

Those darn dimples were going to be the death of her.

## Chapter Nineteen



“They’re going to love them, Dani.”

Gabe stepped behind her and studied the signs she’d been painting the last two weeks between her shifts at the restaurant, and yesterday when she had the day off. She’d painted four signs—one for each family she considered her closest friends. The signs were all different and personalized.

The one for Hud and Emery showed a sunset scene with the Summer Creek Ranch sign in the forefront and horses grazing in the pasture in the distance.

The sign for Jossy and Nate had a field of snow-covered cattle with a snow-laden sky and the Lazy J Brand visible on the cows closest to the front of the painting.

Parker and Poppy's sign had the lumber baron's house on a spring day with flowers blooming everywhere, and the Briden castle in the clouds in the background.

The sign she'd created for Knox and Zadie was different from all the others. It had vintage flourishes in the corners and looked like an antique sign that might have hung in a store window a hundred or so years ago. It read "Welcome to Christmas at the Strickland Home." Knox and Zadie's names were artfully incorporated into snowy trees in one corner of the painting.

"I hope they'll like them. I'll come get them this afternoon so I can wrap them. The paint should be dry on all of them by then." She turned and gave him a hug. "Thanks for letting me do this here. It would have been a challenge to find the space at home."

"My pleasure, Dani. It might have been selfish on my part to suggest you leave them here because it meant I got to see you more often."

"That's not all bad," she said in a low, seductive whisper, and placed her hands on the back of his head, drawing him down for a kiss.

Gabe readily obliged and engaged in a passionate exchange that left him feeling overheated and eager for more. He'd let Dani control the kisses, not wanting her to feel threatened in any way. Each day she grew a little bolder, a little hungrier, and the kisses lasted a little longer. By this time next year, maybe he could kiss her full-out without any reservation and not scare her half to death with the need he felt for her.

*Be grateful for whatever time and attention she gives you, Gabe.* There was that voice again. It seemed to speak to him with regularity in the time he'd been in Summer Creek. Maybe the voice had always been there, but he'd been too busy to acknowledge it or even listen.

Regardless, he was trying to do better and heed the advice it offered. He was grateful for Dani and all the blessings and joy she and Seth had brought into his life.

Dani brushed her fingers through his hair and smiled at him, then she gasped and glanced at her watch.

“I forgot I need to go make the last payment on Seth’s Christmas present at the feed store.” She backed away a few paces. “Do you want to go with me?”

“Sure. Let’s walk over, and then I’ll treat you to a hot chocolate at Whitey’s.”

“You’re on,” Dani said, following him inside the house where they put on their coats and bundled up against the cold.

Dani stopped to admire his tree. One afternoon when she came to work on the signs, she’d arrived with what seemed like a hundred candy canes and hung them on the branches of the tree. The next day, Cricket Cole and Logan Knight had knocked on his door and given him a box full of pine cones tied with red ribbons. The two kids laughed and had a grand time helping hang them on the tree.

Gabe was starting to think his Christmas tree was another community project. If Mrs. Russell and her behemoth canine showed up with ornaments, he’d know it was so.

“Do you think it will snow tonight?” Dani asked as they stepped outside. The wind that blew around them held a bite, and the skies overhead were a leaden-gray hue with dark clouds in the distance.

“It sure looks like a storm is rolling in.” A shiver trailed down Gabe’s spine, although he didn’t know what caused it. Maybe the mention of the storm. Or perhaps it was his growing anxiety about confessing the whole truth of who he was to Dani.

He’d meant to tell her the day they’d gone to Bend, but they’d had such a nice time he didn’t want anything to spoil it. Other than the coffee-instead-of-tea incident when he thought she was going to be sick right there at the table, it had been a fabulous day. They’d watched another Christmas movie that

evening with Seth and Logan as they ate the barbecue dinner he'd ordered in Bend.

Each day he saw Dani, he fully intended to tell her he was Gabe Gatlin, billionaire and heir to one of the largest oil companies in Oklahoma, as well as owner and president of a real estate company that mainly dealt in million-dollar land deals and commercial properties.

But then she'd smile at him, or tease him about being Mr. Grouch, and he'd forget everything beyond how good it felt to be with her. Dani was so real and open, and honest and genuine. She was unlike anyone he'd ever been around.

Finally, he admitted the truth to himself—he loved her. Truly loved her.

He was running out of time to meet the vow he'd made, though. Christmas Eve was four days away and he still needed to explain his full identity to her.

Tonight. He'd tell her tonight after he and Seth joined their friends for the community caroling escapade. Gabe planned to stop by the restaurant just before closing time and walk Dani home. It would be the perfect time, them alone in the quiet of the evening, to tell her what he'd been dreading to admit for weeks.

“Did you see Ethel today?” Dani asked as they walked across the street and headed toward the feed store.

“No. Why?” Gabe hoped the goat was fine. He'd stopped and fed her an apple yesterday and she seemed like crazy-Ethel then.

“This morning when I walked to work, she had a bright-red child's boot on one foot. When I tried to take it off, she gave me a stink-eye glower and ran off. I think she liked it.”

Gabe chuckled, picturing the loony goat thinking she was in high style, sporting a boot. He contemplated how she'd gotten it on as he walked into the feed store behind Dani.

Jack Olsen waved to him from the front counter like they were old friends. As many times as Gabe had been in the store



the past month, he felt like he and Jack were indeed more than acquaintances.

“I’ll go make the payment. Do you want to look around?” Dani asked as she backed toward the counter.

“I’ll browse a bit. I still have a few gifts to buy.” Gabe wanted to get something special for Seth, but he wasn’t sure what. The kid had a variety of interests and was good at many things, but unlike most boys his age, he didn’t have any one thing that he was laser-focused on, unless girls counted.

Dani seemed completely oblivious to the fact that Seth was infatuated with a girl in the grade ahead of him. In Gabe’s opinion, Seth was far too good for her, but it wasn’t his place to judge. If Seth ever asked the girl out and she accepted, Gabe was sure Dani would be in complete shock over what was happening. Most of the time, she seemed to forget that her son was closer to being a man than a child.

He couldn’t blame her, though. Seth and Dani were close, and it would be hard on her when he grew up and left the nest.

Gabe wandered around a Christmas display and almost bumped into an older man who was bent over, looking at a Tundra cooler that held an assortment of gifts available in the store.

“Mr. Sinclair?” Gabe asked, shocked to see the owner of the chain of stores standing right there in Summer Creek. “Jon, is that you?”

The older man looked at him, blinked a few times, then grinned. “Well, I’ll be. Gabe Gatlin. What in the world are you doing in Summer Creek? According to the gossip, you’ve disappeared and are in a rehab center in Europe.”

“Seriously?” Gabe asked, not at all surprised by the stories society’s wagging tongues spread.

Jon leaned closer to him and grinned. “Actually, my wife spoke to your mother a week or so ago. Jacqui told her you’d run away from home and refused to talk to anyone unless it was an emergency email. Is that true?”

Gabe shrugged. “That about sums it up.”

Jon laughed and slapped him on the back. “Son! You are forty-two. You don’t get to run away from home at your age.”

Gabe grinned and waggled an eyebrow. “Oh, yes, I do. It’s been the single best thing I’ve ever done.”

Jon shook his head. “I’d think you’re in the midst of a midlife crisis, but instead of cheating on a wife you don’t have or buying a sports car you don’t need, you ran away from home. How are your father and Monique handling it?”

“About like you’d expect. Monique calls at least once a day with a snotty message about fulfilling my family obligations and returning home immediately. Dad has threatened to fire me, disown me, or have a hit put out on me if I don’t, to quote him, ‘get your head back on straight and return posthaste.’ What he fails to remember is that Grandpa left the realty division to me, not the company. I elected to have a board, but ultimately Daniels Realty belongs to me, and there is nothing Dad or Monique can do about it.”

“So what brought you to Summer Creek?” Jon asked with interest.

“One of the things my father has been doing lately that is causing any number of issues is insisting Chadwick cut back expenses. Of course, Chadwick is like an obedient lapdog, doing whatever good ol’ Dad tells him to do. He came to my office one morning with a file on a property we’ve been maintaining for years, but no one knew where it was or what it was. I did some research and discovered it was my grandmother’s childhood home here in Summer Creek. When I couldn’t take another minute of Monique’s holiday plans, I basically disappeared. My assistant knows where I am, and I’ve taken care of the work that needed my attention, but I’m calling this a much-deserved vacation that wouldn’t be possible if my family knew where I was hiding. I’d sure appreciate it, sir, if you didn’t mention to your wife—who will surely tell my mother—that I’m in Summer Creek.”

“My lips are sealed, but you might want to at least get in touch with your mom.” Jon gave him a look of fatherly

wisdom. “Jacqui sounded quite worried about you. Even billionaire playboys need to be home for Christmas.”

A gasp behind him made Gabe spin around and look at Dani as she gaped at him. “Billionaire?” she asked on a breathless wheeze. “You’re a billionaire?”

Gabe shrugged. “That’s what my accountant tells me.”

Dani slapped his cheek and spun around so fast, Gabe barely had time to blink.

“Something tells me you deserved that,” Jon said, settling a hand on Gabe’s shoulder. “Want to tell me about it from the beginning?”

Gabe nodded and followed the older man into the office at the back of the store.

Two hours later, Gabe stood outside the Broken Bucket debating whether he should go inside and talk to Dani or wait until her shift was over.

Jon had assured him the sooner he cleared the air with Dani, the better it would be. He’d also encouraged Gabe, again, to reach out to his mother, even if he understood Gabe’s reasons for avoiding the rest of his family.

Gabe drew in a deep breath, walked inside before he could change his mind, and watched for Dani. He saw her in the bar, serving someone their meal before she disappeared into the kitchen.

As had become the tradition anytime he walked into the Broken Bucket, the customers would belt out the first few lines of a song about a grinch, and act like they were all in on some big joke. At first, Gabe had hated it, but as he’d come to know the people of Summer Creek, he realized it was their way of welcoming him as part of the community. Outsiders they didn’t like were treated with cool politeness and sent on their way. The fact that so many residents had gone out of their way to make him feel included was one more reason he wanted to stay in Summer Creek.

But if Dani weren’t part of the package, he’d leave and never look back. Never return. Never experience the joy that

had been waiting just beyond his reach.

When Dani reappeared in the bar, Gabe walked over to her, blocking her path of retreat to the kitchen.

She turned around, glowered at him, and tried to sidestep her way past him. He moved again and her gaze narrowed. He braced himself for a second stinging slap to his cheek, but she fisted her hands at her waist.

“What do you want?” she asked in a tone thick with anger.

“I want to talk to you. Please?” He followed as she grabbed a coat, one he thought belonged to old Bert Price, and stormed outside where they could talk without being overheard. “Please, Dani. If you’ll just give me a chance to explain, I think you’ll understand why I—”

She shook a finger in his face, cutting him off. “Why you what? Lied to me? Led me on a merry chase? Withheld pertinent information? Pretended to be just plain Gabe, the grouchy newcomer, as a big joke on everyone in town?” She threw her hands up in the air in frustration. “Who are you? What’s your real name?”

“My name is Gabe Gatlin. I work in real estate and often travel to evaluate properties. I did come here to check out the Lepiane house. That is all true.” He sighed and scrubbed a hand across the back of his neck. “What I didn’t tell you is that I am a billionaire, and the real estate company is mine. I inherited it from my grandfather. My father runs the oil business, and I manage the real estate side of things. It’s all under the Daniels Corporation based in Oklahoma City. I also didn’t tell you part of the reason I came here is because I just couldn’t handle one more holiday with my family. My dad and sister are tyrants on a good day, and I’d had all I could stomach. I went to a football game in Kansas City with my friends and decided to give myself a week off to come to Summer Creek and see the home where my grandmother was raised. Then I got here and fell in love with Summer Creek and all its quirky residents, and that crazy goat that will eat anything. I fell in love with that gorgeous old house and can’t

bear the thought of selling it. Mostly, though, I fell in love with you, Dani. With the happiness and joy you bring to others and the spirit of Christmas that you share with everyone around you. You are the reason I was tossing and turning at night, trying to figure out a way to not only tell you the truth, but to ask you if I stayed here, if I made Summer Creek my home, if you'd someday love me too. You've got to know I'm crazy about you, and Seth, and I just want to give you both all the happiness you deserve."

Dani was crying big tears that dripped down her cheeks, even though she didn't make a sound.

"Say something. Anything!" He reached for her, but she ducked away from him and shook her head.

"No, Gabe. No. You lied to me. I told you what happened before. I told you I'd never trust another man, but you made me trust you. You made me care. You made me love you when you watched silly Christmas cartoons with me and Seth and pretended like it meant something to you." Dani choked on a sob, but swallowed and took a step closer to him. Gabe could see angry sparks shooting from her eyes and the unmistakable hurt in her expression. "You lied to me, and that can't be undone, Gabe. Go home. Go home to your fancy life and forget we ever met."

"But, Dani, I don't care about any of that. It doesn't matter without you. I want to—"

"Just go!" she screamed and turned around, running back inside the Broken Bucket and slamming the door behind her.

Gabe looked over to see a dozen scowling faces watching him from the restaurant windows. Beautiful windows that reminded him of sharing lunch with Dani as she'd painted the incredible scenes.

A soul-deep sigh rolled out of Gabe. He couldn't stay in Summer Creek. There wasn't a single place that didn't remind him of Dani. Without her, he had no reason to remain.

With heavy steps, he walked back to the Lepiane house. For a long moment he stood outside, staring at the lights and

recalling how much fun it had been to decorate with Dani, Seth, and Logan. He trudged inside, and the Christmas tree lights twinkled at him, mocking his pain.

He thought about throwing the tree outside and ripping all the lights off the house, but that would upset Cricket, Seth, and Logan, and he wouldn't hurt those kids for anything in the world.

Feeling like he had aged fifty years in the past few hours, Gabe made his way upstairs, packed his things, and decided he'd leave in the morning.

Gabe took out his cell phone, dialed a number he hadn't called in a while, and waited as it rang twice.

"Hello," a soft voice answered.

"Mom, it's me. I'm coming home."

He spoke to his mother for almost half an hour, then called to have the corporate jet pick him up in Burns. His last call of the evening was to Knox Strickland, who agreed to give him a ride to the Burns airport.

"Are you sure this is what you want to do?" Knox questioned.

Gabe didn't lie. Not now when his heart felt like it had been torn wide open. "No, it isn't what I want to do, but Dani has made it clear I'm to leave and never come back."

"Maybe if you give her a few days to think about it, she'll change her mind."

"You're married, Knox. Do you really believe that?"

The deputy cleared his throat. "I'll be there before noon to pick you up."

"Thank you."

Gabe went downstairs and wrote a note for Seth, tucking his pickup keys into an envelope. He'd texted the boy earlier and let him know something had come up and to go caroling without him.

No one was to blame for the mess Gabe was in except himself, and he knew it. Angry for convincing himself Dani would accept his omission of the complete truth when he explained his reasons, he realized he'd known she'd react this way. It was why he'd kept putting it off. If he'd been upfront with her weeks ago, she probably would have accepted things and moved on.

But he'd destroyed her trust in him, and that was something that could never be repaired, no matter how much he wished otherwise.

Gabe hated to leave Summer Creek. To walk away from Dani and the love he was sure they shared. To leave Seth when Gabe was just beginning to understand what it meant to be a dad and not just a father. It made his heart hurt to think of closing the door on this house that he absolutely loved in a town that had become his home.

Maudlin and feeling more depressed and alone than he'd ever been in his life, Gabe wandered from one room to the next. He'd been planning how they'd decorate all the rooms next year. He'd even purchased the winter painting Dani had loved so much at the one art gallery, envisioning it hanging over the fireplace in the family room. He'd wanted to fill the walls with her art and the art she loved.

Gabe had dreamed of filling the rooms with their children, starting with Seth. In his mind, he'd pictured standing on the porch when they were old and gray, waiting for their grandchildren to arrive for a fun family holiday.

Gabe made his way upstairs, once again looking into each room. He stood for a long time in the room that had been his grandmother's. He opened a drawer and found a framed embroidery sampler that said, "When things seem the darkest, look up."

He set it back in the drawer and pondered the meaning. As he stepped back into the hall, his gaze landed on the doorway to the attic. He'd planned numerous times to go up there to see what treasures, if any, had been stuffed into the

space, but he'd been so distracted by everything else, he'd forgotten.

After a trip downstairs to retrieve a flashlight from the garage, he walked up the attic steps and found a light switch. When he turned it on, light bathed the unfinished room in shadows. Furniture from each generation filled the back half of the attic. Trunks and boxes were stacked head high. Gabe could spend weeks going through everything and still have plenty to sort through.

He couldn't explain it, but he was drawn to a small leather trunk that sat on top of a barrister bookcase crammed full of old books. Gabe blew off the dust on the trunk, sneezed twice, then opened the lid. Inside, he found letters from his grandmother to her brother, journals she'd kept, and notes she'd received from people she'd known in Summer Creek.

Gabe closed the lid on the little trunk and tucked it under his arm, taking it with him. He'd have plenty of time to read on the plane. With one more look around the attic, he went down the wooden steps, closed the door, and hoped he'd someday return to a place that had not just become his home, but where he'd be leaving his heart.



## Chapter Twenty



Cricket felt like an inflatable Santa someone had forgotten to plug in. She couldn't remember a Christmas ever being so gloomy. She'd heard her mother and Aunt Jossy talking with Grammy just that morning about how Owen had sent Dani home from work yesterday because she'd dripped tears in everyone's meals and he'd told her it made his food too salty.

Dani was such a pretty lady, and so nice. She was always kind to Cricket and made her feel important when they ate at the Broken Bucket. Cricket liked sitting near her at church,

too, because Dani always brought gum and offered Cricket a piece.

Nothing seemed happy now, though. Dani couldn't stop crying, and Seth had gotten mad at his mom. He'd spent the past two nights with Logan at the Lazy J Ranch. Aunt Jossy said he refused to talk to his mom until she stopped being stupid.

Cricket didn't think Dani was stupid, just miserable, because Mr. Grouch had left and no one knew when he'd come back.

Thoughts of never seeing Mr. Grouch again made Cricket want to cry too. She loved Mr. Grouch. He was funny and silly, and he made her laugh. She was so proud he'd decorated his pretty tree with her paper chain and the pine cones Logan had helped her tie ribbons around the tops. Mr. Grouch had bought candles from her and wreaths from Logan, and the two of them had tied for selling the most raffle tickets because Mr. Grouch had bought tickets from them twice.

The night of the lighting competition, Mr. Grouch had asked Cricket if she'd like to help with his entry and sit in the sleigh at his house. She'd had so much fun hiding behind the big boxes in the sleigh, then jumping out while she wore one of Poppy's blonde wigs.

Cricket had wanted to help Mr. Grouch find the spirit of Christmas, and to help his heart grow bigger and bigger. She'd tried her best to give him special memories of Christmas in Summer Creek, but he'd left before she'd figured out if it worked. She knew with his leaving right before Christmas was a sign it probably hadn't.

Instead of being happy that Christmas Eve was tomorrow, Cricket just wanted to climb onto her daddy's lap and be sad. But that would make her mommy and daddy, and grandma, and aunt and uncle and cousins upset, so Cricket wouldn't do that.

She'd tucked herself into the corner behind the couch with her cat, Luna, and pretended she was hiding in Mr. Grouch's house, waiting for him to come home. When he did,

she'd surprise him, and he'd be happy, and everyone would have a Merry Christmas.

Only, she wasn't there, and no one was in the room but her cat. Luna didn't care about Christmas at all.

"We have to do something, Logan. How much does a plane ticket cost?" Seth asked as he and Logan walked into the room, unaware of Cricket's presence.

"More than we have," Logan said, sighing.

Cricket remained very quiet and still as she heard the boys sit on the couch.

Seth sounded angry when he spoke again. "I have to do something to fix this. Mom is being stubborn and crazy, and she won't tell me what happened. All she would say is that Gabe isn't who we thought he was, and she never wants to see him again."

"Your mom is one of the nicest people in town, Seth. Do you really think it's her fault Gabe left?"

"Maybe. I don't know. Chris said he was walking past the Broken Bucket and heard Mom yelling at Gabe, telling him to leave and never come back. I don't think he'd make that up for no reason."

Cricket peeked around the end of the couch and watched Logan nod in agreement. "I thought they were in love. They acted like Mom and Dad, Uncle Hud and Aunt Emery, and all the other lovey-dovey people in town. What could have happened?"

Seth shrugged. "Mom was fine when I went to school the day before yesterday. When I got home, she was mad, and I could tell she'd been crying. She yelled at me for getting snow on the floor, which she never does, then went to work. I tried to talk to her when she came home that night, but she told me it wasn't any of my business and that Gabe wouldn't be back. Yesterday, when Knox brought me that note from Gabe, I thought she was going to go ballistic, like full-on missile explosion."

“I can’t believe Gabe gave you his pickup,” Logan said, with a hint of awe in his voice. “That’s really cool.”

“I know, which is why it’s so hard for me to accept the story that Gabe’s the bad guy in this, or that Mom never wants to see him again. She’s miserable without him. I’ve never seen her like this, Logan, which is why I have to do something to fix it.”

Cricket chose that moment to pop up from her hiding spot. Both boys sucked in a startled gasp. The expressions on their faces would have made her laugh in delight at catching them by surprise if she hadn’t been so worried about Mr. Grouch and Dani.

“We have to call Mr. Grouch, Seth. We need to tell him all the reasons he has to come home. We need him here. Christmas won’t be right if he’s gone, and your mommy needs him to be here so everyone can be happy. Let’s just call him.”

Seth shook his head. “It doesn’t work like that, Cricket. Mom says he’s some billionaire dude who doesn’t have time for unimportant people like us.”

“My Grandpa James and Grandma Lisa have billions and jillions of dollars, and they still have time for me. They come to visit and play with me, and I even get to stay at the hotel with them sometimes. Money doesn’t mean anything if you don’t have the people you love with you.” Cricket shook her finger at Seth. “You call Mr. Grouch right now. All of us will tell him he just has to come home because we all love him and miss him.”

Logan looked at Seth and shrugged. “It can’t hurt anything to try, can it?”

Seth gave Cricket another dubious look, so she scowled at him the way Aunt Jossy had taught her. “Call him.”

“Okay,” Seth said, his eyes widening as she continued to stare him down. “The worst that can happen is he’ll hang up on us.”

Cricket watched as Seth took out his phone and pushed a few buttons. “We have to squish together or he won’t be able

to see us,” she said, shoving Logan closer to Seth, then climbing on her cousin’s lap.

The phone rang three times before Gabe’s face popped up on the screen. He looked like he was in a glittery fairyland, as music blared in the background.

“Hey, kids! What’s up?” he asked, trying to sound upbeat, but Cricket could see the sadness in his eyes. “Hang on a second while I go somewhere I can hear you.”

Gabe turned his phone around so they could see the big party where Christmas trees glittered like they were decked out in diamonds and women in shiny dresses and men in suits danced on a gleaming floor. Gabe pushed open a door, then another, and turned the phone back to face him. “Okay, that’s better. Now, what’s going on? Is everyone okay? Are you guys okay?”

“No, sir. We aren’t okay,” Seth said, and his eyes welled with tears. “We’d very much like it if ...”

Cricket looked over and saw Seth trying to hold back tears. Logan didn’t look much better when she glanced up at him.

Boys were so useless sometimes.

Cricket decided she’d have to take care of matters herself.

“Mr. Grouch! We need you to come back!” she said, shouting at the phone, then realized he could hear her even if she didn’t yell, and lowered her voice. “Everyone is sad, and Christmas is ruined. We miss you, and we love you, and we want you to come home. Please? Pretty please come home to us, to all of us. Come home for Christmas?” She stuck her bottom lip out in an exaggerated pout and widened her eyes, hoping it would help her convince him how heartbroken they all were.

Gabe gave Cricket a long look. One that caused her to want to fidget, but she held still. Logan gave her a comforting squeeze that made her feel better, like she’d said the right thing.

“What about your mother, Seth?” Gabe asked. “Does she want me to come back?”

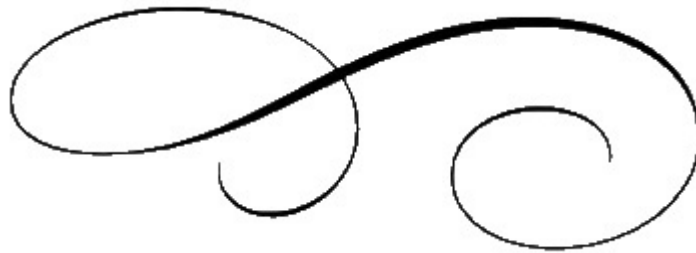
Seth nodded. “Yes, sir. She can’t stop crying. Owen sent her home because he said her salty tears were ruining his food. I don’t think she’s been out of her bedroom all day.”

“Are you sure? You’re absolutely sure she wants me to come back?”

Seth nodded again. “Please come home, Gabe. Nothing is right since you left. Will you please come back to Mom and me?”

“Okay, kiddo. I’ll be there as soon as I can, but let’s surprise your mom. I need the three of you to do a few things for me. Think you can handle it?”

Cricket clapped her hands together. “We can handle it, Mr. Grouch. What do you got?”



Gabe couldn’t think of a time in his life when he’d been more miserable than he was right now.

He missed Summer Creek and all the people there who’d become his friends. He missed the wonderful old house that tied him to his grandmother and a family of tough pioneer stock who’d come to the country from Italy with nothing and built up a good life in the remote Eastern Oregon town.

Gabe had read his grandmother’s letters to her brother. He’d poured over her journals and gone through the notes and letters from people in the community who’d kept in touch with her over the years. Through the writings, he’d gotten a clear picture of his grandmother and her family, and of the people who’d been her friends. He recognized a few names, like Mrs.

Finley and Mrs. Dunigan in some of the notes written decades ago.

By the time the corporate jet landed in Oklahoma City, Gabe was grieving his life in Summer Creek, but especially the loss of Dani and Seth.

He'd built up so many dreams that hadn't seemed all that impossible when he was in Summer Creek. Foolishly, he'd pinned his hopes on Dani forgiving him the one little transgression of leaving out a few details about his career and personal life.

In the grand scheme of things, he didn't know why they mattered so much, but they had. What he saw as an omission, Dani saw as a lie and betrayal of her trust. After what that idiot professor had done to her, he was sure she'd never forgive him and take him back.

On the trip to the airport, Gabe had told Knox the truth of who he was and why he was there. Knox had assured him he already knew everything.

"I wouldn't be a very good lawman if I didn't investigate a stranger who shows up in town and takes up residence in a house no one has been able to find out who owns," Knox had said with a grin. "I knew you were the billionaire grandson of Gabe Daniels. All I had to do was type in Daniels Realty and your name, and there you were, big as life, listed as the owner of one of the biggest real estate businesses in the country. However, it wasn't my place to drag your story out of you. As long as you weren't committing any crimes, I had no reason to bring it up. I sure hate to see you leave, Gabe. You've been good for the town, and especially good for Dani. I hope you find your way back here someday."

Gabe had thanked the deputy, all while wondering if Dani had wished she'd never met him, never let him into her life, or allowed him into Seth's.

Leaving the boy had been almost as hard as leaving his mother. Gabe wanted to help Seth become the best person he could be, but he realized to do that, he had to become a better

version of himself. He certainly hadn't been his best when he'd withheld the truth from Dani.

He prayed for wisdom and strength as the company car drove him from the airport to his apartment, acknowledging to himself he'd created his own trouble by believing his own lies.

When he stepped off the elevator into the penthouse, it had never felt as lonely, sterile, and bleak as it did in that moment. There was nothing personal here. Nothing that reflected his tastes and interests. The apartment was decorated to look good in magazine spreads and video interviews, not to be a comfortable home.

Gabe intended to change that. After the new year, he'd clear out anything he didn't like and start from scratch. He thought that same principle would be well applied at the office too. He'd put up with a lot of nonsense to keep his father and sister happy, but he was finished with that. If they continued to push him, he'd simply take the realty company from under the umbrella of Daniels Corporation and break all ties with Daniels Oil.

He tossed his bags on the bench by the door, kicked off his boots, and left his cowboy hat hanging on a hook next to three others in various shades of black and gray. Gabe walked into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator, and took out a bottle of water that cost more than a meal at the Early Bird Café. After draining the bottle in a few gulps, he then went to the bedroom, took a quick shower, and climbed into bed, exhausted beyond belief.

The following morning, he arrived at the office bright and early. Eddie squealed in surprise when she opened his office door and found him sitting at his desk, staring out the window and watching the sunrise.

"What on earth are you doing here?" she demanded as she marched across the room and planted herself in front of his view.

Gabe stood, placed his hand on her shoulder and turned her around. "Look at that, Eddie. It's beautiful, isn't it? The way the colors merge and blend across the sky, and that first



hint of gold as the sun edges into the horizon? Do you know how many of those I've never stopped to witness? Thousands of them. I feel like I've thumbed my nose at the Creator for years."

Eddie gaped at him like someone had taken over his body, then she turned and watched the sunrise with him.

She patted his back and said, "I'll go get your coffee, then we can discuss, at length, why you're here."

Gabe shook his head and pointed to a single-cup coffee machine sitting on his credenza. He'd picked it up on his way to work. "I can make my own coffee. Do you want a cup?"

Eddie staggered around the desk, sank onto a chair, and stared at him, pretending to be in shock. "What did you do with Gabe, and who are you?"

Gabe chuckled and handed her a cup of hot coffee, then popped a pod in the machine for himself. After he took a sip, he sat in his chair, leaned back, and nodded to the woman who had been far more than an assistant to him. In many ways, she'd filled the role of mother, aunt, counselor, friend, cheerleader, and business advisor.

"Eddie, maybe you should set that cup on the desk. I don't want you to burn yourself if you drop it, but there's something I need to tell you. Something I should have told you so many times over the years."

"What, Gabe?" She set her coffee cup on the desk and leaned forward, concern puckering her brow.

"You are an incredible person who has given so many years to this company, and I appreciate you more than you can know. I couldn't do this job, wouldn't be a success, without your help. More importantly, though, without your steady influence, I'd likely be a replica of Dad or Monique. Thank you for all you've done for me over the years."

Eddie sniffled a few times, took a handkerchief from her pocket, and dabbed at her eyes and then her nose. She drew in a shaky breath and looked back at him. "Well, aren't you full of surprises, Gabe? It's been my pleasure to watch you grow

up and turn into a fine man. There were a few years when I wasn't certain you'd ever amount to anything, but you turned yourself around, and I've been so proud of you. You're a kind, caring person. I hope nothing or no one ever changes that."

"Thanks, Eddie. I'm only going to say this once, but I love you like a favorite aunt and am so grateful for you."

"I love you too, you big dunce. Now, tell me what you did to upset Dani, because that is the only reason I can think of that you'd be here." Eddie leaned back in her chair and sipped her coffee while Gabe relayed the whole story.

"I warned you what would happen if you kept lying to that girl," Eddie said far too smugly for Gabe's liking.

"I didn't lie!" he exclaimed, then sighed and lowered his voice. "Actually, I realize not telling the whole truth is the same as lying, and I shouldn't have done it. That one thing has just cost me the woman I love, a great kid I wish was mine, and a house I didn't want to leave in a town that felt like home."

"Then go back, you dunderhead. Go back and convince Dani you're sorry and you'll never break her trust again. If you have to beg her every day for a year to take you back, do it. You don't just run away with your tail between your legs." She expelled an exasperated sigh. "Sometimes, you act too much like your grandfather."

Gabe sat up straighter in his chair and stared at her. "Explain that, please?"

Eddie stared into her coffee cup. "Your grandfather was a wonderful man, generous and kind, nothing like that idiot father of yours. But anytime life got hard, or things popped up he didn't want to deal with, he'd get in his pickup and take off. You have to remember that was before anyone had cell phones. The first few times he did it, the whole company was frantically searching for him, but we eventually realized it was his way of blowing off steam and getting his head into a place so he could come back and handle whatever was waiting for him. I thought you running away from Christmas with your family was your way of figuring out what to do with things

here, but now I'm wondering if you weren't so much running away from Monique and Jeffrey as you were running to Dani."

At his confused expression, Eddie smiled as though she were dealing with someone who was missing half their brain cells, patted his hand, and left his office.

Gabe hoped news of his return would not make it to his sister and father, but two hours later, both of them stormed into his office and spent fifteen minutes yelling over each other at him, even though he'd popped in a pair of earbuds and ignored their ranting.

When he looked up and found them both scowling at him, he removed the earbuds. "What was that?"

"I'm texting you the address of the Robertson's gala. Be there by seven. No excuses." Monique turned and flounced out of the office.

Gabe's father looked at him, shook his head like he had no idea where he'd gone wrong in raising him, and left.

After lunch, Gabe was still sitting in his chair, debating whether to go to the event or take the corporate jet to somewhere sunny when Eddie raced into his office and gave him such an enthusiastic hug, he had to grab the edge of his desk to keep his chair from tipping over.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" she said, kissing both of his cheeks, then the top of his head.

Gabe smirked. "Might I assume your Christmas gift arrived?"

"It did. Oh, Gabe! The ornaments are perfect! They are just like the ones my folks had that meant so much to me. Thank you for remembering and sending them. Where in the world did you find them?"

"There's a little antique store in Summer Creek run by a woman with purple hair who has a dog that looks like a baby buffalo."

Eddie grinned and hugged him again. "Might I assume you'll be attending the gala tonight?"

“Not because I want to, but I suppose I should put in an appearance.”

“I’ll make sure your tux is pressed and ready. Have you thought about what I said this morning?”

Gabe nodded. “You said a lot of things, but if you mean about Dani, I’ve thought of little else. I’ll get it all sorted out, Eddie, but thanks.”

She offered him a sympathetic look and left the room.

At six that evening, Gabe changed into the tuxedo Eddie had brought to his office, took the box of expensive French chocolates she’d had delivered for him to give as a gift to the hosts, and headed off to a party he had no intention of enjoying.

He’d only been there twenty minutes, lingering in the corners of the room, when Monique marched up to him and smacked his arm.

“I’ve seen potted plants with more personality than you’re exhibiting this evening. Before you turn the party into a wake, could you try and be a little more festive, Gabe? For goodness’ sake, we don’t want anyone to know you’re having a mental breakdown, or whatever it is you’re experiencing.”

Gabe thought about shoving one of the trays of appetizers into his sister’s mouth just to see if it would stop her incessant yammering for at least a few minutes, then decided it wouldn’t make a difference. He walked across the room and did his best to ignore the two women trying to get his attention when he thought he heard his phone ringing through the unbelievably loud music. The phone he’d purchased when he’d run away from Kansas City had been kept close at hand all day, in the hope someone from Summer Creek might call, even if he doubted they would.

He dug the phone out of his pocket not bothering to check the caller ID. Any distraction would be a welcome one.

When the faces of three children he adored popped up on the screen, Gabe knew he was going to return to Summer Creek. After the call ended, he sent a text for his driver to pick

him up and returned to his penthouse. He packed anything he thought he might need for the next few weeks, including his tux, then called to have the jet ready to fly him to Burns in the morning.

Gabe forced himself to rest, but could hardly sleep for the excitement thrumming through him. He was going to return to Summer Creek, and to Dani.

The next morning, Gabe could hardly wait to board the jet that would take him back to the woman and town he loved.

## Chapter Twenty-One



Dani curled into a ball in her bed and cried.

Gabe was gone. Forever.

Seth had stormed out of the house, threatening to never come back from Logan's, so mad at her for letting his hero leave, he wouldn't even listen to the reasons she broke things off with Gabe.

Even Ethel had glared at her like she'd committed an unforgivable crime and run off with a glower before Dani could pet her.

Yesterday, she couldn't stop crying no matter how much she tried. Owen had finally sent her home. She was all alone and heartbroken at a time that should have been the happiest of the year.

This was supposed to be the magical, amazing Christmas Dani had always dreamed of experiencing. Instead, she couldn't think of a time when she'd been more miserable. Not even when the professor had terrorized her and her grandmother had died had she felt such hopelessness.

Dani cried until she was sure no tears were left, then reasoned with herself. She couldn't spend the rest of her life hiding in her room. If she didn't get herself together, she'd be out of a job, and she couldn't do that. Not to Seth.

With determination lending her strength, she sat up, wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her white and red reindeer pajamas, and took a deep breath.

She replayed what had sent her world into a plummeting spiral. It had started when she'd gone to the feed store to make the final payment on Seth's Christmas present. While she took care of the payment and paperwork, she'd noticed Gabe speaking with an older gentleman he seemed to know. Dani hadn't recognized the man, though, so had walked over to introduce herself when she heard them talking about Gabe being a billionaire. A billionaire!

So many things suddenly made sense. Gabe seemed to have an unlimited supply of cash. Despite his clothing from the feed store, he carried himself like someone who'd grown up with money. The stories he'd shared of his family made much more sense too.

There was the slightest possibility she may have overreacted to finding out he wasn't exactly who she'd believed him to be.

In fairness, Gabe hadn't lied to her. He'd just let her think he was an employee of Daniels Realty, not the owner of it. She supposed his reasons for wanting to hide from his family made some sense, but still. He should have been adult enough to

create some boundaries with his family, especially in regard to the holidays.

However, if he'd done that, he wouldn't have come to Summer Creek, and she'd never have met him. No matter how upset she was with him at the moment, she couldn't regret meeting him. Not when she loved him so much.

She loved him not just for her, but also for Seth. Gabe had been easing into the role of the father figure Seth had longed for. The two of them got along so well, and she could easily picture them all blending into one happy family.

In her fantasies, she'd envisioned them living in the beautiful Lepiane house, experiencing their own version of a happily ever after. Then reality had arrived and yanked the rug out from under her, stomping all over her dreams.

Part of her knew her harsh reaction to Gabe was displaced anger from the way the professor had destroyed her plans for her future all those years ago. She'd been so young then, so naïve, she hadn't even known how to process or react to what he'd done.

Dani got out of bed, padded out of her room, and turned on the laptop she and Seth shared. She typed in the professor's name and read an article about his death at the hand of an enraged father. According to the article, other women had come forward and spoken about how the professor had manipulated and seduced them.

The tears rolled down her face again. She should have come forward years ago and pressed charges against him for what he'd done. Perhaps she could have saved other girls from going through the guilt and shame she'd experienced.

The rational part of her brain reminded her she had only been sixteen, orphaned, and living with an aging grandmother who didn't always act like she wanted her there. Dani had done the best she could at the time and prayed she'd be forgiven for not having owned the strength and wisdom to have done more.



Perhaps it shouldn't have made her feel better, but knowing Byron could never harm her son offered her a huge sense of relief. The weight of one burden she'd carried for fifteen years lifted, leaving her lighter.

Dani went back to her bedroom, showered and dressed for work, then returned to the kitchen to find Seth sitting at the laptop she'd mindlessly left open.

She couldn't very well convict Gabe for lying by omission when she'd done the same thing to her son.

"Who's this guy, Mom?" Seth asked as he turned the laptop toward her.

Dani sat beside him, took his hands in hers, and looked him in the eye. "He was the man who ... He was your father, Seth. That man was your father. He wasn't a good person, and that's why I shielded you from knowing about him. I didn't want you to ..." Dani took a deep breath. "I didn't want you to think less of me for getting involved with him. I should never have listened to his lies, or let him manipulate me, but I will never regret having you. And before you ask or even think it, believe me when I say you are nothing, absolutely nothing, like him. You are a light, and a joy, and the greatest gift of my life. I wouldn't change that for anything. I love you, kiddo, and no matter what the future brings, I always will. I'm sorry for not telling you about him sooner, but I just didn't want you to be hurt."

Seth hugged her and buried his face against her neck, like he had when he was little and scared. She rubbed his back and kissed the top of his head before he pulled away and looked at her with eyes full of regret.

"I'm sorry I got so upset with you, Mom. I just hated to see things end with Gabe. The happiest you've ever been was when you were with him. It felt like we were a family when we were together." He shrugged. "I just didn't want that to ever end."

"I know, honey." Dani stood, cupped his face with her hands, and kissed his forehead. "I'm going to go to work this

morning. We close at two, then maybe we can figure out something we can do to get back into the spirit of Christmas.”

The oddest expression passed over Seth’s face, but he looked away and nodded. “Sure, Mom. We can try.”

“What are you going to do this morning?” she asked as she took her cell phone off the charger and tucked it into her purse.

“I’ve got some Christmas things to do.”

“I do too. I’ll see you after lunch?” Dani ruffled his hair. “Are you sure you’re okay, baby? I know that’s a lot to digest.”

“I’ll be fine, Mom. I appreciate you finally telling me the truth.” Seth gave her another hug, then went to his room and shut the door.

Dani wavered between staying there to make sure Seth was okay after discovering the man who had fathered him was a truly terrible person and going to collect Seth’s Christmas present.

Seth would talk to her when he was ready, so she tugged on her coat, grabbed her purse and keys, and hurried outside to be greeted by a delivery truck driver, carrying a large box toward her.

“Merry Christmas,” the driver said, handing her the heavy oblong box, then returning to his truck and carrying two more boxes to her door.

Dani managed to wrangle everything inside, then took a moment to open the two boxes addressed to her. The large one held the painting of a winter landscape she’d greatly admired in a gallery in Bend. A note inside simply said, “Merry Christmas. With love, Gabe.”

Beneath her tree was a painting she’d made for him of the Lepiane house with the lights all aglow on a summer evening with a profusion of flowers blooming around it. She should throw it out in the snow, but just couldn’t make herself do it. Not when she’d worked so hard on the gift for Gabe.

Tears burned up her throat and stung her eyes but she forced them away and opened the second box. It was full of art supplies. Brushes. Paints. Canvases. The note tucked into the box drew out her tears.

*You shouldn't waste such an amazing talent.*

*Paint for you, Dani. Paint from your heart.*

*Love always,*

*Gabe*

Dani knew if she let her emotions get the best of her, she'd end up back in bed, sobbing like the world had ended. She could cry tonight after Seth was asleep. After she'd let him open whatever thoughtful, incredible gift Gabe had sent to her son, for she was certain the box with Seth's name was a gift from him.

No one had ever believed in her the way Gabe had. No one had ever made her feel like she could step into her dreams.

Maybe she would try painting for herself, from her heart, again.

But today, she had things she had to do. With one last look at the painting she'd set on the couch, she hurried to the feed store. Jack nodded at her, pulled a bag from beneath the counter behind him, and handed it to her while ringing up a pile of purchases for Sam Shelby.

"Merry Christmas!" Dani called as she rushed out the door.

She'd left the gifts she'd painted for her friends in Gabe's garage the day she'd gotten so angry with him. When she'd returned home that evening after work, she'd found the signs wrapped in a tarp and leaning against the front door.

The entire time she'd wrapped the signs in festive paper and added fluffy bows, she'd cried, remembering how much fun it had been to paint them with Gabe watching, encouraging her.

She drove out to Summer Creek Ranch and left gifts there with the Cole family, assuring Nell and Cricket she was fine.

She headed across the road to the Lazy J Ranch and spent a few minutes holding baby Jacob after she carried the gifts for the Knight family into the house. After that, she dropped off the gift for Poppy and Parker. Her last stop was Zadie and Knox's home, but no one was there. She left the package leaning against the door in the carport, knowing the couple would find it when they returned home.

Dani drove to the Broken Bucket, went inside, and tried to pretend it was just another day.

Owen gave her a studying glance when she walked into the kitchen.

"I thought I told you to take a few days off," he said as he stirred a huge pot of chicken and dumplings. It was a Christmas Eve tradition for him to offer a limited menu of three or four homestyle meals at lunch, then close at two in the afternoon, giving his employees the rest of Christmas Eve and all of Christmas Day off.

Dani could make it through one shift. She had to. If she stayed home, she'd had no doubt she'd spend the day crying.

"Work will help, Owen. I promise I won't cry on anything." She tried to pull off a joking smile, but couldn't quite make it work.

Much to her shock, Owen wiped his hands on a towel, then gave her a warm hug. "You are like a sister to me, Dani. If there's anything you need, or anything I can do, please let me know."

"I will, and thanks." She gave him a watery smile but managed to blink back the tears before they spilled over.

She went out front to make sure everything was ready to open when a little scrap of paper on the floor caught her attention. She thought it was a piece of napkin, but when she turned it over, she realized it was a fortune from a cookie. Owen had never had fortune cookies there, so she had no idea where it had come from. Curious, she read the message and winced.

*If you have something good in your life, don't let it go!*

“Too late for that,” she said, and dropped the fortune in her apron pocket. She hadn’t let Gabe go as much as she’d shoved him away. Yelled at him. Slapped his face.

Dani blew out a long breath.

She really regretted doing that. When she closed her eyes, the wounded expression on his face haunted her.

If she’d behaved like the sensible, reasonable adult she liked to think she was, she would have calmly listened to Gabe when he tried to explain his reasons for not being forthcoming about his identity.

Although it galled her to admit it, Dani knew part of the reason she was so upset was because Gabe Gatlin was someone so far out of her league, she knew he’d never give her the time of day if she happened to show up at his high-rise office in his fancy-schmancy life.

Even as she thought it, though, she knew it wasn’t true. The Gabe she knew would flash those dimples at her and welcome her with open arms. She might have dubbed him a grouch, but she was the one feeling like her heart needed to grow a few sizes.

Instead of brooding about what might have been if she hadn’t lost her temper and driven Gabe from her life, Dani decided to focus on all the reasons she had to be grateful.

She had Seth. She had a good job and a great boss. She had the afternoon off and all day tomorrow to celebrate her favorite holiday with the people she loved.

Although, with the exception of her son, the person she loved most was in Oklahoma, or wherever it was he’d gone, and nothing would be the same.

Gabe had brought so much into her life she hadn’t even realized was missing. He changed it in ways she’d never anticipated, and for that she was grateful. His ongoing encouragement of her art had inspired her to want to start painting again. She’d even picked up the business cards of a few of the owners from the galleries they’d visited in Bend.

Dani decided then to make it a goal to see if someone beyond Gabe might be interested in her work.

A tap on the window drew her thoughts back to the moment. Mrs. Dunigan and Mrs. Finley motioned for her to unlock the door. It was a few minutes early, but she certainly wasn't going to leave the old women out in the cold.

"Happy Christmas Eve!" Dani said, welcoming them inside.

Mrs. Dunigan swatted her with her mittens, and Dani blinked at her in surprise.

"What did you do to chase away our Gabe?" the woman asked in an accusing tone.

"Now, Abby, we talked about this." Mrs. Finley offered Dani an apologetic smile and shuffled over to a table close to the window offering a full view of the parking lot.

Mrs. Dunigan huffed indignantly but took a seat next to her friend.

The senior citizens of Summer Creek seemed to love the Christmas Eve lunch specials of chicken and dumplings, meatloaf and mashed potatoes, and ham and beans. Dessert was apple or pumpkin pie, or chocolate cake. The food was easy for Owen to prepare, and he offered the lowest price on the meals he could while still making enough money to cover the costs and pay the staff for being there.

By noon, the restaurant was packed, mostly with people in their retirement years. Bert Price sat at the table with Mrs. Finley and Mrs. Dunigan, making them both blush with his ongoing commentary. Dani was certain all three of them were enjoying it.

Despite the hectic pace of the restaurant, she still had time to dwell on what she'd done and how much she wished she could go back and listen to Gabe. If only she'd truly listened without yelling at him, and turning away from the love of a lifetime because of her stubborn pride.

At one, she was cleaning off a table when she heard the door open and felt the swirl of cold air around her that

announced another customer.

Before she could hustle over to greet them, the song, “You’re a Mean One, Mr. Grinch,” began to play on the music system, and everyone in the restaurant sang along.

Dani spun around and watched as Gabe strode toward her. His hat and shoulders were dusted with snow, and he looked like he’d walked right out of a western clothing commercial.

“Miss Christmas, it was suggested that you might not be against my return. Is that true?” Gabe asked, removing his hat and holding it in his hands.

Dani couldn’t speak around the emotion clogging her throat, so she nodded her head. Tears threatened to blind her, but she blinked them away.

Gabe grinned and set his hat on a nearby table, then took her hands in his. “Dani Latham, I came here not just to hide from my family for the holiday season, but to find my grandmother’s people. They’re here.” He looked around the restaurant.

Everyone stared at them, watching them like they were an afternoon soap opera and glancing away might result in missing a pivotal scene in the story.

Gabe cleared his throat. “I found not only my ancestors, but I discovered a place to belong, a town that accepted me as one of their own, friends I value, kids I cherish, and the woman I love.”

“You did?” Dani whispered.

“I did,” Gabe said, taking a step closer to her. “Home for me, Dani, is you. Whether that’s here, or in Oklahoma, or walking through The Louvre. You are my home, and you’ve become my best friend. You know me. You know my heart. At the end of the day, there is nothing I’d like more than to come home to you. To know your love is waiting to surround me. Do you think you could forgive your grouch for leaving out a few tiny little details about his life that seem so unimportant

when compared to something so grand and wonderful as falling in love with you?”

She nodded. “I forgive you, if you forgive me for pushing you away, and slapping your cheek.”

Gabe grinned. “Forgiven, on one condition.”

“A condition?” she asked, uncertain what he might have in mind. Her eyes widened when he got down on one knee, barely avoiding a glop of mashed potatoes she’d missed when she was cleaning the floor earlier.

“Dani, will you please do me the honor of allowing me to be a permanent part of your life—yours and Seth’s? Will you marry me? Will you spend the rest of your life with me, growing old together?”

“Say ‘yes!’” Mrs. Dunigan yelled.

“Say ‘yes,’ Mom!” Seth hollered from where he, Logan, and Cricket peeked around the corner by the kitchen.

“Yes, Gabe. Yes, yes, and yes!” Dani launched herself into his arms the moment he stood. It wasn’t until he’d kissed her thoroughly and then set her on her feet that she realized he held out a ring box.

“I was hoping you’d agree before I opened this,” he teased, pushing back the lid on a beautiful diamond set into a wide platinum band.

“It’s perfect,” Dani said, holding out her finger as Gabe slipped the ring on, then kissed her fingertips.

“Merry Christmas, Miss Christmas,” Gabe said, picking her up and swinging her around as everyone in the restaurant clapped and cheered.

“The merriest one ever, Mr. Grouch.” Dani smiled, then kissed him again.



## Chapter Twenty-Two



“Are you boys all dressed? I’m coming in!”

Gabe turned and watched as Mike finished tugging on his pants and Tam hastily shoved buttons through the buttonholes in his shirt as they dressed for his wedding in the media room at the Lepiane house. He smirked at his mother as she strode into the room, her hand almost covering her eyes.

“What are you doing, Mom?” Gabe asked, walking over to the door and gently nudging her into the hall.

“I wanted to speak with you, son. It won’t take long.” Jacqui Gatlin looked up at Gabe with eyes so like his own.

Observing the way Dani and Seth interacted was teaching him a greater appreciation for the bond between a mother and a son. Gabe was trying to have more patience with his mom.

“Let’s go downstairs. Maybe there’s less racket there.”

Gabe offered his mother his arm as they descended the stairs and went into the family room that was, surprisingly, empty. He smiled as he saw the Tom Browning painting hanging over the fireplace. Dani had thanked him for the gift with a profusion of kisses that made Seth roll his eyes. Christmas afternoon, they’d brought it to the house and hung it there. To Gabe, it was a reminder of a perfect day spent with the woman he would always love.

He turned to see his mother watching him with a look on her face he couldn’t recall seeing since he was quite young. Back then, she would take him camping or out to the ranch for a long weekend so they could ride. About the time he’d turned thirteen, they stopped spending as much time together, until they’d become more like strangers.

When tears filled her eyes, Gabe took a step closer to her, placing his hands on her arms. His mother was still a beautiful woman, owning the kind of timeless beauty that only improved with age.

“What is it, Mom?” he asked, growing concerned.

“I just wanted to tell you how proud I am of you, Gabe. I’ve always been proud of you, and I knew, given the opportunity, you’d find true happiness here.”

“Thank you, Mom. I appreciate that. It—” He stopped and stared at her, then brushed his hand along the back of his neck. “What do you mean ‘here?’”

She smiled and toyed with the pearl bracelet she wore. “Who do you think arranged to have this house maintained and updated through the years after Mama passed? And who do you think made sure that file with the expenses flew into the middle of Chadwick’s radar so he’d bring it to your

attention? Did you really think Santa's elves got this house ready for you, with furniture and linens on the bed?" She scoffed. "I just knew once you connected all the dots, you'd come here. Of course, I didn't realize you'd find the perfect woman for you so quickly, but I hoped. A mother always hopes."

Gabe placed his hands on his mother's arms again. "Are you telling me you tricked me into coming to Summer Creek, knowing this town would suck me in and claim me as its own?"

Jacqui laughed. "I wouldn't put it that way exactly, but if I'd come to you and asked you to visit Summer Creek, would you have come?"

"No. I wouldn't." Gabe was astounded by the lengths his mother had gone to just to get him to visit his grandmother's beloved childhood home. He gave his mother another questioning look. "You didn't know about Dani, did you?"

"No, of course not. But I just had this feeling, Gabe. Call it motherly intuition. Deep in my heart, I knew this was where you needed to be to find your happiness of a lifetime."

Happiness was certainly flowing in the home that had once been a place that had brought such joy to Gabe's grandmother, and he hoped it would ring with joy and laughter in the years to come.

Today, on the last day of December, Dani and Gabe prepared to exchange vows at the Summer Creek church that Poppy Princeton had taken charge of decorating. Cricket Cole would serve as the flower girl. Seth, who would stand up with Gabe, was in charge of the rings. J.T., Mike, and Tam had flown in with their families and would all stand up with Gabe as well. He'd been in all three of their weddings, and they'd promised to be there for him if and when he ever wed.

Dani had asked Zandie, Jossy, Poppy, and Emery to stand up with her, but as of yet, Gabe hadn't seen any of the girls. Seth and Logan were already at the church, greeting guests while Gabe and his friends hurriedly changed in the media room since his parents had taken over the master suite, and his

friends and their families filled the other guest rooms. Gabe had booked Eddie a luxurious suite at the Summer Creek Hotel, informing her she had to be there for the wedding. She and her husband had arrived yesterday and planned to spend a few days looking around the town before they returned to Oklahoma City.

Gabe knew he shouldn't have felt the relief he did that Monique had refused to travel to what she called a "hick town." In a series of nasty messages, she'd assured him Dani was a gold digger out to bleed him dry. His sister didn't need to know that Dani was the one who'd insisted on a prenuptial agreement that said if they ever split, she wouldn't take a dime of his money. Since Gabe intended to die with his wedding ring on his finger and Dani close to his side, he felt confident it would never be an issue.

"You really orchestrated all this?" he asked his mother.

She smiled and patted his cheek. "I did, honey. I just want you to be happy, and if that happiness is found here in Summer Creek, even better. I used to love it when Mom and Dad would bring me here in the summer. It always felt like a magical place full of love."

"It is a pretty great place, Mom." He kissed her cheek, then gave her a warm hug. "Thank you for getting me to come here. I can't imagine my life without Dani and Seth in it."

"You're welcome, son." She kissed his cheek, then wiped away the lipstick smudge with her thumb. "You better get moving. You've got a wedding taking place in less than twenty minutes."

Gabe glanced at his watch, noisily kissed his mother's cheek, then grinned. "Thanks, Mom, for your part in making my dreams come true. I can't begin to tell you how much this all means to me."

Jacqui offered him a knowing smile. "You don't have to tell me, baby. I can see it in your face. Have a blessed, joyful life with Dani, and if the two of you decide to give me more grandbabies, I would not object. They'll be beautiful."

Gabe rolled his eyes but grinned before hurrying back to his groomsmen.

By the time they gathered at the church, all Gabe could think about was Dani.

He watched her bridesmaids and Zadie, the matron of honor, walk down the aisle to soft music. Poppy had outdone herself decorating the church with white and ruby-red flowers, ribbons, and swags of evergreens. Everything looked elegant and classy.

All eyes shifted to the back as a traditional wedding song began. Dani appeared with Owen, who had offered to walk her down the aisle.

Gabe's bride-to-be looked like the angel he had first thought she'd appeared to be the night they'd met. With her hair pinned up in golden curls, and a white velvet dress gliding over her curves, Dani made him think of a celestial being. She carried a bouquet of white and red roses and approached Gabe with a smile full of light.

Pastor Markle performed the ceremony, and before Gabe quite knew what was happening, he'd said his vows and slipped the ring on Dani's finger.

"You may now kiss the bride," the pastor said.

Cricket Cole stepped beside him and tugged on Gabe's tux jacket.

When he gave her a curious look, she stage-whispered, "Look how big your heart is now. It's oozing love. Give her a good kiss, Mr. Grouch!"

The crowd chuckled, but Gabe followed Cricket's orders and shared a kiss with Dani filled with hope and wonder before they turned to greet their guests and ventured to the Broken Bucket for their reception.

Owen had insisted they have it there, and Poppy had again waved her magic wand and filled the space with flowers and greenery that made it seem like they'd stepped into a winter greenhouse full of twinkling white lights, fragrant flowers, and joy.

After they'd eaten a delicious lunch, cut the cake, and received toasts from Zadie and J.T., Gabe circled through the crowd, looking for his bride. He came across Cricket talking to his father as the two of them sat on chairs near the entry.

"I helped Mr. Grouch make his heart bigger so he could marry Dani," Cricket said, patting his father's arm. "Do you want me to help you, Mr. Grouch's daddy? I'm a good teacher. We could start with trying to make you smile."

Gabe walked away before he burst into laughter. He was just heading in the direction of the bar to see if Dani was in there when she strode toward him from the back hallway wearing a new ruby-red dress that floated around her and made him look forward to removing it later.

He held out a hand to her, and she took it without hesitation. "Are you ready for some sunshine and sandy beaches?" Gabe's jet was waiting in Burns to whisk them off to a tropical honeymoon on a private beach the corporation owned in the Cayman Islands.

"Absolutely ready!" She turned and used his hand to steady her as she stepped onto a chair, then gave her bouquet a wild toss. Gabe couldn't see who caught it, but there was laughter from the back of the crowd.

He lifted a long white coat from the rack by the door and held it for Dani, then rammed his arms into the sleeves of his. Together, they opened the door and rushed outside to the limo that would take them to the airport.

People swarmed outside, tossing birdseed and rose petals at them. Gabe caught his mother's eye and mouthed, "Thank you." She blew him a kiss that touched his already overflowing heart.

Gabe had told Seth to wait in the car so they could give him a private goodbye. They were almost there when Ethel ran up to them and bleated, as though offering her own words of congratulations. They stopped, and Gabe pulled an apple from his coat pocket, feeding it to the goat before they climbed into the car.

Dani gave Seth a big hug and kissed his cheek. “Don’t forget to behave while we’re gone. And text me at least once a day so I know you’re fine. And remember to brush your teeth, and say your prayers, and to thank Nate and Jossy for letting you stay with them.”

“Mom!” Seth rolled his eyes with teenage drama. Gabe hid a grin as Dani pulled her son into another suffocating squeeze and kissed his cheek. “Mom, enough. You need to let me get out of here so you can leave.”

Seth held his hand out to Gabe when Dani released him.

Gabe shook it, then gave Seth a fatherly hug. “I’m so proud of you, kid. No driving the pickup while we’re gone, and no burning down the house. Keep an eye on things until we’re back.”

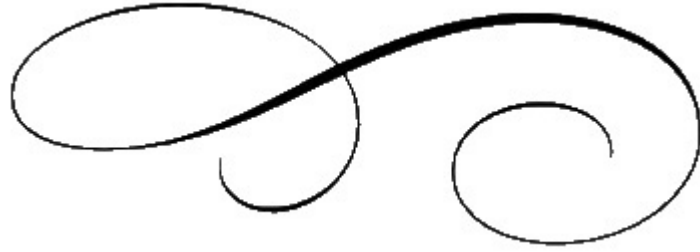
“I’m on it,” Seth said, then rubbed a hand over the leather coat Dani had purchased for his Christmas gift. “Thanks again for my coat, Mom, and for the pickup, and all the other gifts, Gabe. The toolbox is awesome. I love you guys and hope you have a great time.”

After Dani gave Seth one last hug, he got out of the car and waved as the limo pulled into the street, and they were finally on their way.

Gabe lifted Dani onto his lap, kissed her deeply, then smiled with all the love he felt in his heart shining in his eyes. “I love you so much, Miss Christmas. I’m so grateful for you and your sweet spirit that shines on everyone all the year through. You’ve taught me not just about Christmas, but how to love and be loved. Thank you.”

“It was wonderful experiencing Christmas with you, my handsome husband. I look forward to all the years ahead of us, and to all the beautiful moments yet to be savored. Thank you for loving me enough, Gabe, to come back home.”

“Home, my beautiful wife, will always be wherever you are.”



*Continue reading for a preview from **The Christmas  
Cowboy**,  
another sweet holiday romance full of cowboys and fun!*



# Grouchy Green Pie

*If you are looking for something fun to add to your holiday table, try this easy Grouchy Green Pie. It's sure to get comments!*

## **Grouchy Green Pie**

1 large box instant vanilla pudding

2 ½ cups cold milk

1 8-ounce package cream cheese, softened

½ cup powdered sugar

3 cups sweetened whipped cream (may substitute frozen topping like Cool Whip)

3 drops neon green food coloring

2 drops green food coloring

Oreo pie crust

Green sprinkles

Red heart sprinkles

Mix pudding with the milk and set aside.

Blend softened cream cheese with the powdered sugar. Fold in pudding, then add 1 cup of whipped cream and food coloring, and stir until combined. Spoon into the pie shell, cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate at least four hours, or overnight.

When ready to serve, top with remaining whipped cream and decorate with sprinkles. Refrigerate any leftovers.

Note: You may leave out the food coloring.

Yield: approximately 6-8 servings.

## Author's Note

When I wrote [Distracting the Deputy](#) with Knox and Zadie's story, I intentionally had Dani catch Zadie's bouquet. I wanted her to be the next Summer Creek resident to find her happily ever after.

Originally, I hadn't intended for her story to have a Christmas theme. But then I happened to see a fantastic photo by the amazing [Shana Bailey](#) that would be perfect for the cover, and that was when I decided to make it a Christmas romance. Thank you, Shana, for letting me buy this image and add the snow!

Just before I was ready to start writing the story, Captain Cavedweller and I had to make a seven-hour round trip drive, so we spent a lot of it brainstorming ideas for the story.

The first objective: the title. All the books in the Summer Creek series follow the same pattern for the titles. After thinking about it, Captain Cavedweller suggested making the hero a grinchy character. I wanted to use grinch in the title, but to avoid any potential legal issues, I went with grouch instead. So that's how Gabe the Grouch came to be!

However, Dani did guide Gabe—into the spirit of the season, into the middle of the town's holiday celebration, into feeling accepted and involved in the community, into friendships he didn't expect, and a love beyond anything he dreamed.

As CC drove and I took pages and pages of notes, we worked out Gabe's back story, why he wanted to escape his sister's holiday plans, and the reason he'd end up in Summer Creek.

There's mention of the Lepiane house all the way back to the first book, although it is something of a mystery, since no one knew who owned it. That played so well into this story where we get the first glimpse inside the beautiful old Victorian home.

As for the name of the house, CC thought it would be fun if everyone mispronounced it and any old-timer who would have remembered how to say the name properly would have either forgotten or been long gone. He actually came up with the name, which is Italian, from someone he knows through work. Everyone calls it “Lapine,” which is why it was fun to work Lepiane into the story!

When I started looking into the history of the song “You’re a Mean One, Mr. Grinch,” I was shocked to discover the voice behind the famous song is not Boris Karloff as so many think. The bass singer was actually [Thurl Ravenscroft](#).

The song was written by Dr. Seuss for a cartoon special in the 1960s. The music was composed by Albert Hague, who was born in Berlin and escaped Hitler’s army by fleeing to Rome and then America in 1939. Boris Karloff, who narrated the special, was falsely credited with performing the song, but the real singer, Thurl, was eventually given credit.

Thurl spent his life as an American actor. He was a longtime Disney employee who did cartoon and theme park voice work. For fifty years, he was the voice behind Frosted Flakes’ Tony the Tiger.

Speaking of songs, I had to work in The Chipmunks song “Christmas Don’t Be Late.” My mother-in-law is not a picky person. She’s pretty easygoing, as a matter of fact. But she detests listening to The Chipmunks singing. When CC was in high school, she sent him to the store to get some Christmas music and told him she didn’t care what he picked out, as long as it wasn’t The Chipmunks. Guess what he brought home? *The Chipmunks Christmas*. Way to go, CC!

While we are on the subject of mothers, I have to share a memory that makes me smile. CC and I were engaged, and he’d spent part of Thanksgiving with my family. We’d gathered in the family room that evening, full of pie and turkey, to watch *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*—the original cartoon. I should preface this and explain that CC loves the holidays, and this is one of his favorite Christmas programs. It, and *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street* with Maureen O’Hara, are the two must-watch shows on his list. Anyway, we’re all settled in to

watch and CC was laughing at the antics of The Grinch, and my mom was so busy laughing at him, she missed most of the program. It's such a sweet memory that I'm so grateful to have now that she's gone.

The window paintings Dani creates at the Broken Bucket were inspired by a Festival of Trees event from years ago. I was on the board of our local committee for a handful of years. Finding a location to hold a big gala with an auction was always a challenge. One year, it worked out perfectly to hold the event at the local shopping mall in an empty store that had huge display windows. The president of the board arranged to have Christmas scenes painted on the windows, and it was like walking into a Thomas Kinkade painting. I'll never forget how beautiful they looked, or how so many people came to support the charity that year because those windows drew them in.

The incident of the coffee/tea mix-up at the restaurant is inspired by something that happened to me. Confession time! I have never, ever liked the taste of coffee. I don't mind the smell of it, and it doesn't bother me if others drink it, just don't make me taste it. One day, when we were on vacation, I ordered a cup of hot tea. The server brought a steaming mug of dark brew. I was so cold, I didn't stop to smell it or even consider why there were no tea bag options. However, the moment I took a sip, I realized I'd just swallowed coffee. Ugh! The taste, no matter how many mints I ate or how much gum I chewed, stayed with me all day. Everything I ate or drank the entire day tasted like coffee. Weird, I know, but it is what it is! Anyway, I thought it would be fun for Dani, who works in the restaurant and is around coffee all the time, to not like it, especially if Gabe loved it.

If you're wondering why I chose Oklahoma for Gabe's family business, and placed Gabe's grandfather's ranch in the Oklahoma Panhandle, it's because my dad spent his early childhood years in the Panhandle, and he still speaks of it with great fondness.

When it comes to gratitude, I am a lot like Dani in that I sometimes need to focus on the abundance of things I have for which to be thankful. It's so easy in the hectic busyness of life

to forget how very blessed we are. Making a point of listing things I'm grateful for sure helps me focus on them. One of the things on my gratitude list is you. I'm so, so grateful to my readers and can't thank you enough for reading my books, for your encouraging messages and notes, and for your reviews. Thank you!

Also, thank you to Allysa, Alice, Linda, and all my Hopeless Romantics who help make my books the best they can be. You are so appreciated!

I hope you enjoyed another visit to Summer Creek. Who do you think caught Dani's bouquet and should be in the next Summer Creek romance?

May your holiday season be joyous and may all your days overflow with love.

Happy Holidays!

*Shanna*

# Reader's Guide

1. Both Gabe and Dani change during the story. How are they similar? How are they different?
2. If you were in Dani's position as a single mom trying to give her son stability, what would you do? How would it make you feel?
3. What's one thing you would have done differently if you were Gabe? One thing similar?
4. Were you surprised by any decisions Dani made?
5. How might Gabe's influence with Seth alter the teen's future?
6. If you were trying to help someone find the spirit of the season, what's one thing you would do?
7. Do you think there is hope for Gabe's relationship with his father and sister?
8. Were you surprised by Gabe's mother's involvement?
9. What do you think Summer Creek represents to Dani? To Gabe?
10. What's one way you hope to see Summer Creek grow or change in the future?

# Thank You

Thank you for reading Dani and Gabe's story. Now that you've finished [Guiding the Grouch](#), will you please consider writing a review? Your help would be so appreciated since reviews are the best way readers discover great new books.



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# The Christmas Cowboy Preview



“This seat taken?”

Startled by the deep voice speaking close to her ear, Kenzie Beckett glanced up into eyes the color of sapphires and lost the ability to speak.

Shaking her head, she moved her oversized shoulder bag from the chair in question to a space near her feet. The intent gaze of the man made her sit up straight in the chair and fight the urge to lick her suddenly dry lips. She'd noticed the handsome cowboy at the airport many times, but never had the opportunity to be this close to him.

He smelled every bit as good as he looked.

“Mind if I sit down?” he asked, pointing to the empty chair beside her.

Nervous, but with no reason to refuse, she again shook her head. Slowly inhaling a deep breath, she smiled and stuck out her hand as the cowboy folded himself into the seat. He filled the space next to her with an appealing scent that made her think of leather, spice, and rugged masculinity.

“I’m Kenzie.”

Pleased when he took her hand and gave it a firm, yet gentle shake, the contact created an unsettling storm of electrical currents to rush up her arm.

“Tate.” A white-toothed grin displayed two dimples through the scruffy stubble on his face. “Tate Morgan.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Morgan.” Tongue-tied and awestruck, Kenzie couldn’t believe she sat next to Tate Morgan, rodeo star.

Although ranching and rodeos were no longer part of her life, she kept up with some of the details. The good-looking cowboy sitting next to her was one of the top saddle bronc riders in the world. She knew he was from Washington State, but never connected him to the Tri-Cities area where she lived. She absently wondered if he was from Kennewick, Richland, or Pasco.

He must frequent the Pasco airport as often as she did with his rodeo travels. That was probably why she’d seen him there before and why he was waiting in the seat next to her to board the flight to Denver.

“Where are you traveling today?”

“Tennessee,” Tate replied, grateful he arrived late at the airport. The only seat left in the waiting area was the one next to the dark-haired beauty who caught his eye the last few times he’d flown out of town. “Call me Tate. All my friends do and I certainly hope we’ll be friends.”

Kenzie narrowed her gaze. She should have known he’d start flirting within seconds of sitting down. Apparently, a pair

of boots, a Stetson, and perfect-fitting Wranglers gave a man free license to flirt with any female crossing his path.

“I don’t make it a habit of becoming friends with people I randomly meet at the airport.” She tore her gaze away from Tate’s gorgeous blue eyes. Swiftly closing the fashion magazine she’d been mindlessly reading before he’d startled her, she stuffed it into her bag and checked her watch again.

“Really?” Tate pushed the brim of his Stetson up with an index finger and revealed a hint of light brown hair. “I figure once names are exchanged and handshakes are given, you’re a friend until proven otherwise.”

Heat filled her cheeks at his words. Despite his friendly tone and broad smile, she recognized a rebuke when she heard one.

What was it about this man that threw her off her game?

As a corporate trainer for one of the most successful direct sales companies in the country, she could get a room filled with consultants on their feet and enthusiastically following her direction with no problem. She could take on the corporate team, pitch ideas, and win them over to her way of thinking with hardly a blink.

But put her next to a cowboy, especially one as attractive as Tate, and she lost the ability to function with any degree of logic or wisdom.

A voice over the loudspeaker interrupted her thoughts, announcing another fifteen-minute delay for the Denver flight.

Kenzie released a pent-up sigh, opened a zippered pocket on her bag, and pulled out her phone. She sent a text message to the organizer of the regional meeting in Denver she planned to lead later that morning, informing the woman she would probably be late.

Normally, Kenzie liked to arrive the day before an event so she didn’t run the risk of being late. It also gave her time to prepare to give her best to the consultants.

The trainer originally lined up to lead the meeting had an emergency and asked Kenzie to cover for him, so she’d only

found out she needed to be in Denver the previous evening.

“Is everything okay?” Tate drummed his fingers on the arm of the seat. In spite of his calm facade, he had a tight connecting flight schedule and if they didn’t get moving, he was going to miss his plane.

“It will be if we can board and be on our way soon,” Kenzie said, tugging on the navy skirt of her business suit. The airport was warm and stuffy, crowded as it was with people waiting for flights, even though it was early May and the temperature outside was pleasant. “I’m leading a meeting in Denver and unless we make up some time in the air, a few hundred consultants will be left waiting for me to get there. I don’t like to keep people waiting.”

“That’s good to know.” He grinned again. “What is it you do?”

Kenzie glanced over to see if he was genuinely interested or just killing time. At the inquisitive look in his eyes, she relaxed a little.

“I’m a corporate trainer with Dew.” Kenzie took a business card from her bag and handed it to him. “We’re a skin care company that’s been around since the 1940s.”

Tate accepted the card from Kenzie and stared at the logo of a pale blue dewdrop with the word “Dew” embossed in gold across the center.

“Dew?” He thought it was an odd name for a company. “Where’s the name come from?”

Kenzie smiled and Tate felt drawn to the light shining in her beautiful brown eyes. They reminded him of the molasses his dad was so fond of eating - dark, rich, and sweet.

“All women want a soft, dewy complexion.” She bit her tongue to keep from launching into her usual spiel about the company and their superior products.

“If they hired you to be a walking billboard, you do a great job,” Tate said, causing Kenzie to blush again. “So, your company is all about stuff women use to preserve their youthful appearance?”

“Basically.”

Convinced the outrageously handsome cowboy next to her would not understand the importance of moisturizers, lotions, and exfoliators to the health of aging skin, she nodded her head.

Tate shot her a wicked grin. “Your people go door-to-door peddling goo?”

“No, they don’t go door-to-door or peddle goo.” Kenzie couldn’t stop the smile lifting the corners of her mouth as she removed a catalog from her bag and handed it to Tate.

He browsed through the glossy pages. The company offered more than just lotions and potions. Dew sold a collection for men, spa items, and gift options in what appeared to be a well-thought-out product line.

“How does it work? How do your... what did you call them? Consultants?” At her nod he continued. “How do they get catalogs into the hands of potential customers?” Unfamiliar with the concept of direct sales, if Tate found something he didn’t know, he quickly set out to learn all he could on the topic.

“Home parties. People invite friends into their homes and host parties. Consultants give a brief presentation and take orders. The party host receives freebies and discounted product for her trouble and people get together for a fun hour or two while shopping in the comfort of someone’s home,” Kenzie explained, warming to the subject.

She put herself through college doing direct sales. Her passion for the industry, Dew in particular, was why she was a well-respected corporate trainer at the age of twenty-seven.

“If I invite a bunch of buddies to my house, set out some snacks, and have one of your consultants come show us your stuff, you’d give me freebies?” Tate asked, only halfway joking. If he could somehow coerce Kenzie into being the consultant, he’d host a party every month just to be able to see her.

“In theory, that’s how it works.” She laughed as a visual popped into her head of Tate and his friends sitting around with facials dripping off their stubbly chins. “Of course, the freebies depend on your total orders for the party.”

Before Tate could ask more questions, the call to board rang through the airport. Under the assumption it would take a while, Kenzie began to gather up her belongings to make a final trip to the restroom.

Tate put a hand on her arm, drawing her attention. “You can leave your stuff here. I’ll keep an eye on it,” he said, nodding his head toward the restroom door.

“Well, I...” Kenzie said, surprised by his offer. She didn’t know the man and shouldn’t trust him, even if he did seem nice.

“I promise not to run off with your stuff or touch anything.” Tate held his hand up as if he made a pledge. “Scout’s honor. Besides, I’d look ridiculous toting that bright pink bag. It clashes with my shirt.”

She’d tried not to notice how well his burgundy shirt fit across his broad shoulders and chest.

“Thank you,” she said, getting to her feet. “I’ll be right back.”

“No need to hurry.” Tate glanced at the long line of people waiting to board.

When she returned a few minutes later, Tate stood at the back of the line, both his bag and hers over his shoulder, her suit jacket draped over his arm.

“I thought I better get in line since it’s finally starting to move.” He handed Kenzie her jacket.

“Thank you.” She took her bag from him and slid the strap over her shoulder. Hurriedly digging in a side pocket, she pulled out her boarding pass and checked to make sure everything was just as she left it. Tate seemed like a good guy, but trusting handsome cowboys had gotten her into trouble before.

“What have you got in that thing? Rocks?” Tate teased as they stepped closer to the door.

“No, bricks.” Kenzie grinned over her shoulder at him as she handed her pass to the ticket agent.

Tate felt an unfamiliar twinge in the region of his heart as Kenzie took her boarding pass and walked out the door.

Regardless of his extensive experience with the opposite sex, he'd never had anyone affect him like the beautiful brunette.

As he gave her a quick once-over, he admired the dark hair piled on her head, her long legs, and trim figure. Her stature intrigued him. He generally preferred smaller women, but in her heels, Kenzie nearly met his six-foot one-inch height.

A hint of something soft and floral tickled his nose while they walked onto the plane and waited to go down the aisle. He leaned closer and breathed in her scent, deciding he'd never smelled anything quite so inviting and feminine.

Out of habit, he tugged his hat more firmly on his head and studied the harried faces on the crowded plane. He hoped the flight would go quickly. It was vital he catch the connection to Nashville where he'd meet a friend to hitch a ride to his next rodeo.

He swallowed back a grin when he located his seat and Kenzie sat across the aisle from him. Suddenly, his day looked brighter. The connecting flight concerns shuffled to the back of his mind.

Instead of worrying, he had a few hours of uninterrupted time to get to know his lovely traveling companion.

After settling in to his assigned space, Tate noticed Kenzie leaning back in her seat, eyes closed, hands gripping the armrest with white knuckles.

He reached across the aisle and placed his hand on hers, watching her eyes pop open.

"We won't crash, you know." He attempted to coax her smile out of hiding.

"I know. I just hate takeoffs. I'm fine once we get in the air." Kenzie offered Tate a tense glance. "It's that awful feeling when your stomach is weightless that gets me every time."

"That's one of the best parts of flying." He waggled an eyebrow her direction.

"It's not surprising a daredevil like you would think so." She squeezed her eyes shut when the plane roared down the

runway and lifted into the air. As it gained altitude, she let out the breath she'd held and relaxed.

"How do you know what I do for a living?" Certain they hadn't gotten around to discussing why he was going to Tennessee or his career, his brow wrinkled in question as he looked at her.

"I assumed you're a daredevil by that gleam in your eye and the look on your face that says you love adventure." Kenzie wasn't willing to acknowledge she recognized Tate's name and knew exactly what he did for a living. She refused to admit to anyone, least of all the handsome cowboy beside her, she had even a passing interest in anything to do with the pro rodeo circuit. That was classified information she'd take to her grave. "You appear to be someone who lives life on the edge."

"I guess some people think I do. I ride saddle broncs as a profession. Well, at least I do when I'm not busy ranching." Tate chuckled and shook his head derisively. "What I really should say is when I'm not gone to a rodeo, I stay busy on our family ranch."

"Is that why you're traveling to Tennessee?" Kenzie asked, trying to think what rodeo he'd entered. It had been a long time since she'd kept close tabs on the rodeo circuit.

"Yep. I'm meeting a friend in Nashville, and then we're off to the rodeo. We're both competing tomorrow." He removed his hat and placed it on his lap.

Kenzie admired his strong hands as he ran tanned fingers through his thick hair to loosen the band pressed into it from his hat. She wouldn't allow herself to think of that head of light brown hair. Cut short, it was just long enough to have some finger-tempting waves, absolutely meant to torment women.

"Does your friend also ride saddle broncs?" Unsuccessfully, Kenzie tried to keep her gaze from entangling with his.

From experience gained in what seemed like a lifetime ago, she knew saddle bronc riders were artists, of a sort, as well as spectacular athletes. While bull riding and bareback riding were



wilder, saddle bronc riding demanded style, grace, and precision.

“Nah, he’s a steer wrestler,” Tate said, grateful Cort McGraw agreed to swing by the airport and pick him up on his way through Nashville.

Thoughtfully observing him, Kenzie pulled a water bottle from her bag and took a drink. Once she screwed the cap back on, she turned to Tate. “You said when you aren’t out on the rodeo circuit, you ranch. Where do you live?”

“South of Kennewick.” The ranch his grandfather had started back in the early 1900s and his father had made successful through unwavering dedication and plain old hard work had always been his home. “If you head toward Umatilla and take the last exit before you cross into Oregon, we’re about ten miles off the beaten path on the Washington side of the border.”

“I’ve never driven around much in that area.” In the time she’d been in the Tri-Cities, Kenzie hadn’t done any exploring. She was rarely home long enough to do more than catch up on laundry and visit her one close friend.

“Are you originally from the Tri-Cities?” Tate asked, wondering where Kenzie grew up. She seemed like the very persona of a fashionable city girl, opposite of the type of girl he thought would someday fit into his lifestyle.

“No, my family lives in Portland.” Kenzie brushed imaginary lint from her skirt. She knew the next question Tate would ask and beat him to it. “I moved to Kennewick three years ago because I needed to get out of Portland. My best friend lives near Pendleton and encouraged me to move closer. I chose the Tri-Cities area because it works well with my job. I spend a lot of time traveling and being close to an airport is essential.”

“What made you want to leave Portland?” Tate stretched his legs beneath the seat in front of him. He hated flying, not because he was afraid of the plane crashing, but mostly because he felt cramped and uncomfortable the entire time. Whoever designed the seats must not have taken long legs and broad shoulders into account.

“Let’s just say the city wasn’t quite big enough to keep from running into my former fiancé and his very pregnant girlfriend.” A flash of anger fired in her eyes.

At Tate’s raised eyebrow, she shook her head. “It really was for the best. We were at the bakery, doing a cake tasting for our wedding, when a woman ran in and started screaming at Sonny, slapping his face. Apparently, she’d just found out she was pregnant. She demanded he tell me the truth, and he confessed he’d been seeing her on the side.”

“More than seeing her, I’d say.” Indignant on behalf of the woman he’d just met, he thought her ex-fiancé had to be a certified idiot to mess up a future with Kenzie. However, if the man hadn’t been an idiot, Tate wouldn’t be sitting across from her, enjoying their conversation, and hoping he’d see her again.

“Anyway, I ran into them all the time. Since my job isn’t based in a specific area, it doesn’t really matter where I live. When Megan called and invited me to stay with her for a while, I decided to take her up on the offer. The drive from Helix to the airport in Pasco grew old in a hurry, so I rented an apartment in Kennewick.” Uneasy, she glanced at Tate. “Now you know more about me than you ever wanted to.”

“Hardly.” He wondered if her skin would feel as soft as it looked as he studied her strong cheekbones and creamy complexion. Popping his knuckles seemed the only way to keep from reaching across the aisle and indulging his curiosity by touching her cheek. When Kenzie cringed at the sound, he stopped and gripped the armrest. “Your friend Megan — is she, by any chance, Megan Montgomery?”

“Yes. Do you know her?” Kenzie’s voice carried a note of friendly interest.

“I know her husband, Owen. He purchases cattle from us and we’ve bought horses from them for years.” It was a wonder Tate and Kenzie hadn’t run into each other before, since the Montgomery clan liked to entertain and often hosted barbecues and dinners. “Megan’s fed us more than a time or two.”

“Wow. I’ll have to tell Megan I met you.” She made a mental note to call her friend later that evening. “When you say us and we, who else lives on the ranch with you?”

Tate laughed and the sound resonated somewhere deep and untouched inside Kenzie, drawing out her smile.

“It’s just me. Well, me and my foreman, Monte, and the ranch hands. My dad moved into an assisted living facility in Richland about a month ago, so I’m still getting used to rattling around the house by myself when I’m home.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Is your father unwell?” Kenzie asked, wondering what type of ailment required Tate’s father to move into a care home.

“Nothing is wrong with Pop except old age. He turned ninety on his last birthday and finally agreed it was time for him to retire,” Tate said, chuckling. He loved to see the reaction on people’s faces when he told them his father’s age.

Determined to be a bachelor his whole life, Tate’s father, Kent, didn’t know what hit him when he met a beautiful young woman who turned his world upside down.

“I can see by the look on your face, you’re trying to do the math and coming up shy a few years,” Tate teased with a knowing grin. “I’m twenty-nine. Pop was nearly sixty when he married my mama. She was in her late twenties. Most folks thought it was quite a scandal for them to get married, but they loved each other. I don’t think Pop ever recovered from losing Mama. I was eleven when she had kidney failure and died. We all thought she was in good health, but it seemed to hit her out of the blue. It’s been just me and Pop since. He’s done remarkably well for his age, but the winter was hard on him and he was ready to move off the ranch and into town once spring arrived. He’s in great shape, but I still worry about leaving him home alone. He agreed assisted living was a good option.”

“I’m sorry, Tate. I know how hard it is to lose a parent,” Kenzie said, not wanting to bare her soul to this stranger. “Do you have any siblings?”

“Nope, but I’ve got a bunch of friends who are as close as brothers and some cousins, however many times removed, who live a few hours away in Grass Valley.” He smiled as they made small talk the rest of the trip.

When the pilot announced the plane would soon land, they both glanced at their watches. They'd made up most of the lost time.

"I've enjoyed this flight more than any I have in a long time, Kenzie. Thank you for talking with me," Tate said as they landed and gathered their things in anticipation of leaving the plane.

"It was nice to visit with you, Tate. I hope you do well at the rodeo." She genuinely wanted him to win. It was hard to remain cool and aloof around such a warm, inviting personality.

Despite the alarms sounding in her head to stay far away from him, Kenzie was grateful she had the opportunity to meet the charming cowboy.

"I do, too. It's a long way to go to not at least place," Tate said with the grin Kenzie was starting to think of as his trademark.

Some irrational part of her wanted to kiss each dimple in his scruffy cheeks.

Together they hurried through the airport. When they arrived at the point where they would go their separate ways, Tate shifted his bag and placed his free hand on Kenzie's arm, pulling her to a stop. Gently taking her hand in his, he smiled, trying to ignore the powerful force surging from their joined fingers up his arm.

"I hope we run into each other again." He sincerely hoped he would see the beautiful girl another time. Although he'd just met her, he knew she would linger in his thoughts.

"That would be nice." Suddenly, she felt very shy. "You never know when we'll meet at the airport."

"Sure don't, since we both seem to travel frequently." Tate raised an eyebrow at Kenzie, giving her a beseeching look while shrugging his broad shoulders. "Wish me luck?"

"Of course." She smiled and squeezed the hand he continued to hold. Thoughts of how nice his palm fit against hers infiltrated her resolve to walk away and not give Tate another thought. "Good luck."

“I meant a good luck kiss.” The smile he bestowed on her had charmed many women into doing his will.

“Oh, I... um...” With a slim likelihood of seeing the handsome rodeo star again, Kenzie desperately wanted to kiss him. Before she could talk herself out of doing something crazy and completely out of character, she placed a warm, tender kiss to Tate’s enticing mouth, then stepped back. The brief contact left her lips sizzling.

“Ride ‘em, cowboy.” Flushed, her cheeks burned as she turned and started walking away from temptation dressed in a cowboy hat and snug-fitting jeans.

“Kenzie!” Tate called after her, stunned by the impact of the kiss.

When she stopped and looked over her shoulder, he shot her a teasing grin. “Make them all dewy-eyed, Miss Dewdrop.”

Kenzie laughed and waved before racing toward baggage claim. Nearly running through the airport, she caught a taxi and made it to her meeting with five minutes to spare.

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*USA Today* bestselling author Shanna Hatfield is a farm girl who loves to write. Her sweet historical and contemporary romances are filled with sarcasm, humor, hope, and hunky heroes.

When Shanna isn't dreaming up unforgettable characters, twisting plots, or covertly seeking dark, decadent chocolate, she hangs out with her beloved husband, Captain Cavedweller, at their home in the Pacific Northwest.

Shanna loves to hear from readers.

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