



Cowboy Angel in Disguise

for
Christmas

*A sweet hometown holiday
that rekindles
a childhood crush...*



JO GRAFFORD
BESTSELLING CHRISTIAN ROMANCE

COWBOY ANGEL IN DISGUISE
FOR CHRISTMAS

A Very Country Christmas Wish #1

JO GRAFFORD



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CHAPTER 1: AN UNEXPECTED GIFT

A knock on the front door of Willa Morgan's townhouse made her jolt in surprise. She wasn't expecting company. She'd spent the last hour curled up on the couch in a quilt, staring at the flames flickering in the fireplace and trying not to think.

Or cry.

Or feel anything at all.

It wasn't working.

Blinking through the tears that just kept coming, she set her mug of green tea on the coffee table in front of her. Though the swirl of steam and scent of elderberries was enticing, she hadn't taken more than a few sips. Her stomach was too knotted up. She'd mostly been holding the mug to warm her hands. So far, nothing had been able to chase away the cold ache in her heart.

She was starting to wonder if she was ever going to get back to normal...or some version of it. Losing her best friend so suddenly and so tragically had sapped all the joy and color from her life. Maybe it wasn't even possible to bounce back from something like that.

In the past four months, she'd tried everything she could think of to heal — praying, reading, counseling, taking long walks, and resting. Despite her efforts, she remained exhausted on the inside and out.

The knock on her door was repeated — a little harder this time.

Frowning, she debated whether to walk over there and see who it was or ignore it and hope they would go away.

It was past nine o'clock, so the nightlife in Phoenix was in full swing. Normally, she was right in the middle of it, electrifying her audience with her latest country western hit song.

But not tonight. She hadn't been able to sing a note since the tragedy. It was as if every last one of her musical abilities had died with her friend.

A third knock sounded on the door.

Okay. Fine. You win! Letting out a resigned breath, she smoothed her hands over the long skirt of her green corduroy dress and forced a smile as she made her way to the entry foyer. Her high-heeled cowgirl boots clacked against the marble tile, echoing down the dim hallway.

It was crazy to be so dressed up when she had no plans to leave the house, but her counselor had insisted that going through the motions was part of her journey back.

Back to where, though? After four months of grieving, Willa still wasn't ready to return to the stage. At this exact moment, she wasn't sure she was ever going to be ready.

Lightly cupping the doorknob, she leaned closer to squint through the peephole, but she couldn't see anybody on the other side. The only movement that caught her eye was from the naked limbs of the mountain laurels waving in the breeze. Three of them formed a soldierly straight line on her front lawn. Beyond them, the street flashed with the passing lights of cars, buses, and taxis.

Whoever her visitor had been, they were gone. A belated sliver of guilt worked its way through her. Knocking three times indicated persistence. They'd really hoped to catch her at home.

Curiosity finally got the better of her. Throwing back the deadbolt, she cracked open the front door. An icy wind whipped through the narrow opening, making her shiver. There was nobody around — not even the retreating shoulders of anyone walking away. She'd completely missed whoever it was. Frowning across the portico, she was about to close the door when she noticed a small package at her feet.

If it hadn't been for the glow of the streetlights, she might've missed it altogether. It was wrapped in plain brown paper with a bow of red and white twine securing it.

Relief flooded her at the realization that she probably hadn't missed an important visit, after all. It had probably only been a delivery person, knocking to notify her about the gift they were dropping off.

Pushing the door open wider, she threw another glance around the empty portico and front yard before bending down to pick up the package. She stepped inside with it clutched to her chest. Shutting and locking the door behind her, she leaned her shoulders back against it and closed her eyes.

It can't be from him. It just can't be!

Her heart raced dizzily at the possibilities, though.

Billy Rivers had always adored leaving her surprise gifts like this — all hours of the day and night, all year long. But logic told her that there was no way the gift was from him. He was never again going to send her a bouquet of wildflowers or a last-minute invitation to meet him on the rooftop for dinner. As badly as she wanted the gift to be from him, it simply wasn't possible.

Today marked the four-month anniversary of losing him in a head-on collision. The other driver had been stone-cold drunk, speeding down the wrong side of the highway. The fact that he'd survived when Billy hadn't was so unfair!

Willa had been on a hiatus from the singing circuit ever since. She simply didn't know how to continue on without the biggest inspiration behind her music. Billy had written every last one of her hit singles. He'd known her better than anyone else. He'd been her best friend, mentor, confidante, and occasionally her impromptu singing coach.

In short, they'd been inseparable. During their many jam fests, their voices had blended like magic. In the past year, the headlines had constantly linked their names together. TV show hosts had debated everything from when Billy would pop the big question to which exotic getaway would get to host their wedding ceremony.

The headlines had grown crushingly silent after his passing. It was like everybody was waiting for the other shoe

to drop. So was Willa. She couldn't see herself singing another note without Billy on the sidelines to cheer her on.

She was half-tempted to call her publicist in the morning to go ahead and pen the announcement about her retirement. After four months of being out of the public eye, it was probably what people were expecting, anyway.

"What am I going to do without you?" she whispered to the walls of the empty foyer. A fresh round of tears gushed down her cheeks. "Best friends don't leave best friends alone in the world like this. They just...don't."

In addition to all the other hats he'd worn, Billy had also owned and operated the recording company that had sent Willa to the top of the charts again and again and again. His younger brother, Mick, had stepped up to the plate to continue running Desert Productions. Unfortunately, his knowledge about the music industry wouldn't fill a teacup.

An overdressed playboy, he hadn't hesitated to schedule a long line of television interviews for himself. Willa had watched the first couple of them, but quickly lost interest. As far as she could tell, he had no real plans for taking Desert Productions to the next level. He mostly seemed to be enjoying his late brother's money and penthouse and all the female attention that came with it. To date, he'd shown precious little interest in scheduling new concert tours or pushing ticket sales. His only professional accomplishment had been installing his favorite sixteen-year-old niece as the next darling of Desert Productions.

Or so he hoped. The kid had yet to produce a single hit, and company profits were starting to dip.

Then again, maybe he was just trying to keep the company afloat. Willa's long hiatus from the stage certainly hadn't helped their profit margin. Maybe if she returned to work, he'd quit trying so hard to replace her.

Either that, or this was his way of getting even for her refusal to flirt back with him during their last appointment.

A feeling of revulsion washed over her at the memory. He'd tried to put the moves on her way too soon after Billy's passing. Maybe it hadn't been his intention, but he'd made it sound like a relationship between the two of them was inevitable. Like she was part of the package deal or something while he was busy taking over everything that had once belonged to his brother.

That so wasn't happening! He wasn't Billy, and he never would be. The sooner Mick got that through his thick skull, the better things would be for her and everyone else associated with Desert Productions.

If I go back there at all.

The longing in her to pen her resignation and announce her retirement grew legs and started running.

Stepping down at the pinnacle of her career would certainly allow her to leave on a high note. She'd already made her money and crossed the biggest items off her bucket list. Without the added pressure of any new recording contracts, she could take as long as she wanted to decide what came next. She still had no idea what that was. Her insides were swimming with uncertainty over the future.

Blowing a few loose strands of hair from her forehead, she returned her attention to the package she was holding. An elegant white card was tied down by the twine. She had to tug it loose from a pair of glue dots to open it. A short message was scrawled there.

I thought you might need this.

She didn't recognize the handwriting, and it wasn't signed. Thoroughly intrigued, Willa lifted the box closer to examine the return address label. Sadly, it was too smudged to make out more than the name of the town. It had been sent from Pinetop, Arizona, the small mountain community in east Arizona where she'd grown up. Her parents still lived there.

Hoping the contents of the package would shed more light on its anonymous sender, she hastily tore open the brown paper. A white cardboard box appeared. She stared at it for a

moment, admiring the elaborate snowflake design etched like eyelet lace into the sides of it. Whoever sent it possessed excellent taste in gift packaging.

She opened the lid. What lay beneath it made her gasp.

A gingerbread cookie ornament was nestled on a bed of snowy white fabric. It was cut in the shape of an angel and painted with intricate detail in white on white icing by a master decorator. She bent her head over the box to breathe in the delicious aroma of gingerbread dough and holiday spices. It made her think of family and home...of all the sled rides her dad had taken her on when she was a kid and all the snowmen they'd built afterward.

For a moment, the heaviness in her heart lifted.

You're right. I did need this.

She wished she knew who to thank for sending the much-needed dose of sugary comfort. Her mouth watered to sample a bite of it, but it was too beautiful to eat.

Walking back to the living room, she ever so gently hung the delicate, handmade gift on her Christmas tree. It swung back and forth a few times before coming to a standstill. It looked like it belonged there — a delicious morsel of holiday hope drizzled in white icing.

Backing away from it, she reached for her mug on the coffee table. The tea had long since grown cold, so she carried it to the kitchen and dumped it in the sink. She didn't need it anymore. Her fingers were no longer freezing.

She headed straight for her bathroom to fill the garden tub with warm water. Then she turned on the jets. Stepping into the bubbling waves, she scrubbed the tears from her face, wishing she could do the same with the sadness clinging to every part of her body and soul.

She'd said something along those lines to her counselor earlier, but he'd been quick to advise her that the grieving process didn't work that way. It took time, he'd said. There were no rules or deadlines. For some people, the process never

fully ended. Her biggest goal right now, according to him, was to find a path forward.

He was right. She grimaced as she stepped out of the tub and toweled off. Though she had no idea what was supposed to come next, four months was long enough to be stuck in limbo. She was simply going to have to knuckle down and try harder to find that path forward.

Pulling a fluffy terrycloth robe around her shoulders, she headed straight for bed. An hour later, she was still awake. Though the lilac pillows and comforter were soft and comfy, she was too restless to sleep. For one thing, she couldn't stop thinking about the angel cookie ornament hanging on her tree in the living room.

Though she had no idea who'd sent it, the fact that it had come from Pinetop was making her downright homesick! The more she thought about it, the more she missed the small mountain town nestled high in the White Mountains. She hadn't been able to visit there as often as she'd liked since her rise to stardom. For the last five or six years, her singing commitments had taken her to stadiums and theaters all over the world.

Sure, she'd squeezed in a quick visit home now and then. But for Christmas? Not a chance. Her agent usually had her booked solid for the holidays.

The last time she'd been home for Christmas was... *Wow! I literally have no idea.* She sat up in bed and rubbed her eyes. Had it been three years? Four? Not that the exact number truly mattered. What did matter was that it had been too long.

I should do it. Her hands fisted in the sheets as she imagined how overjoyed her mom and dad would be to spend the holidays with their only child.

Glancing at the clock on her nightstand, she couldn't think of one blessed reason why she couldn't drive home for the holidays. Right now, in fact. Though the beginning of December was usually one of the busiest times of year for her, she had absolutely nothing on her schedule at the moment. No

band practices. No meetings with her agent. No recording appointments at the studio.

An empty schedule didn't bode well for the future of her singing career, but it would certainly make an impromptu vacation possible. After resenting Mick's highhandedness in farming his niece out to every company who'd contacted Desert Productions for holiday entertainment this year, she was suddenly grateful that he'd done exactly that. They hadn't spoken in weeks, but she'd gotten his message loud and clear: Willa Morgan can be replaced.

Maybe he was right, though. Maybe it was time to let someone younger and more ambitious take her place in the spotlight. Someone who wasn't fading from grief and exhaustion. Someone with the kind of energy and enthusiasm their fans deserved.

Maybe a long overdue visit home was exactly what she needed to find that elusive path forward — not one of those quickie squeeze-it-in kind of visits between concert tours, but a real visit. The several-week kind.

Willa plopped back against her pile of pillows, scattering several across the bed. One dropped to the hardwood floor. She left it there.

I'm going home. I'm finally going home!

She'd start packing in the morning. Now that her decision was made, the knots between her shoulder blades unwound a little. Her eyelashes drifted to her cheeks.



EVEN THOUGH SHE HADN'T SET AN ALARM, SHE AWOKE THE next morning at the same time it would've normally gone off. She sat up and stretched, anxious to start packing. Funny how something as simple as throwing stuff into suitcases was giving her a sense of purpose again.

Maybe *simple* wasn't the right adjective to describe it. Packing for a month-long trip was kind of a big deal,

especially for a woman who'd never packed light.

She pulled the first suitcase out of her closet and got to work. Her mind was soon swimming with what-ifs.

What if I decide to go skiing?

*What if I attend one of the bazillions of holiday parties
Pinetop is so famous for?*

What if Mom tries to squeeze in a family portrait?

The more she played the what-if game, the more she packed. When she was finished, there were no less than six suitcases lined up against the wall. They contained outfits for every occasion. After being born and raised in Pinetop, she knew better than to return unprepared.

Her hometown looked like something you'd find on the cover of a Christmas card. They celebrated the holidays year-round — all of them. They did a big splash for Christmas in both July and December. Their lights and decorations were nearly as spectacular for Valentine's Day, Easter, Independence Day, and Thanksgiving. They seriously went all out for every season, too — spring, summer, autumn, and winter. There were flower growing contests, strawberry picking days, pumpkin patches, corn stalk mazes, hayrides, and sleigh rides.

This morning marked the first of December, which meant there would be ice sculpting, sledding and snowboarding races, cookie exchanges, and too many holiday gatherings to count at both Town Hall and church from now until Christmas. She wasn't sure she was in the mood to join in many of the festivities, but she'd packed for every possibility just in case — everything from formal wear to cowgirl boots.

She dragged her suitcases two at a time to the front foyer. Propping her hands on her hips, she stood back to assess the pile of luggage, knowing it was going to be a challenge to fit all of it inside her Porsche. Plus her two hat boxes. Plus the Christmas gifts for her parents that she would no longer need to drop off at the post office.

Oh, who am I trying to kid? They're not going to fit in my car.

Returning to her room, she unplugged her cell phone from the charger on her nightstand and dialed the one person in the world she kept on speed dial.

Her close friend, Tess Caldwell, picked up on the second ring. "So, you *do* remember my phone number?"

"Ha! Ha!" Willa's voice was dry.

"In case you haven't noticed, I'm not laughing. I've been crazy worried about you!" There was a catch in her friend's voice.

"Well, you can stop. I'm doing better."

"For reals?" Tess sounded hopeful.

"I've decided to go home for Christmas."

There was a gulping sound, followed by a cough. "Omigosh! Are you serious?"

"Totally! It hit me last night just how overdue I am for a visit, and now is the perfect time to make it happen. I mean... my schedule is completely empty." Some of her exuberance faded at the reminder that an empty schedule wasn't necessarily a good thing. Hopefully, it was only temporary.

Tess was silent for a moment. Then she started speaking again in a rush. "I bet your parents are ecstatic, huh?"

Willa bit her lower lip. "Um, about that..."

"You mean you haven't told them yet?" Her friend's voice rose to an incredulous squeak.

"I seriously only made the decision to do this a few hours ago. It might've been close to midnight. I can't remember." Like every other night had been for the past four months, last night was sort of a tearful blur. "It's not like I had the chance to tell anyone yet."

"Why did you call me first instead of them?" Tess's voice was mildly accusing.

“Two reasons. Because I’d like to make my trip home a surprise. And because I just now realized I can’t possibly fit all of my suitcases into my car.”

“So you called me to complain? Gee, I’m honored!” Tess sounded genuinely happy about the prospect.

“I’m not sure that complaining will do much good. A teensy favor from you might go a lot farther.”

“Sure. Anything. Whatcha need?”

“To trade cars with you for the holidays.”

A breathy expulsion sounded in her ear. “Are you for real?” Tess demanded, chuckling.

“Like I said, there’s no way I can fit six suitcases, two hat boxes, and a whole pile of Christmas gifts—”

“You do realize I don’t drive a car?”

“I know. That’s why we’re having this conversation.”

“In case you’ve forgotten, I drive a juiced up pickup truck that my mechanic friend has been having an absolute heyday with. Extra wide tires. Jacked a foot off the ground. Sound packs. You name it. Something an elegant, refined Porsche owner wouldn’t be caught dead in.”

Whatever. “Isn’t it a dual cab?” Willa pressed.

“Yes, but—”

“And those extra wide tires are new ones, right?” Having a mechanic friend came with some clear perks. Tess’s truck was all but guaranteed to be road-ready.

“It runs great, Willa. It’s just not the kind of vehicle I can picture you driving.”

“Like I care what other people think! You should know that by now.” Willa couldn’t believe she was making such a big deal out of it.

“I do,” Tess sighed. “It’s probably the only reason you and I are such good friends.”

“Not true.” Willa had always hated the way Tess acted like she wasn’t worthy of being friends with a celebrity singer. “We’re friends because you’re the kindest, sweetest, most amazing waitress in Arizona. Oh, and you bake the *best* pies and cobblers.” Willa had waited on tables herself back in high school and college. She’d made a lot of great memories in the process. *Shoot!* Waiting tables was technically how she’d met Billy Rivers. Feeling the familiar sting of tears, she forced her thoughts back to the conversation at hand.

Tess had grown strangely silent. She finally giggled. “Really? That’s it? I was getting ready to pour a cup of coffee, prop up my feet, and just soak in the compliments.”

Willa snorted. “Translated that means Tess Cardwell was trying to find the record button on her phone and didn’t get there in time.”

“You know me too well.” Tess giggled again. “You were really on a roll there. You sure that’s all the nice stuff you have to say about me?”

“Not even. You’re an easy person to love.”

“Fine. You win. Yes, you can borrow my truck.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!” Willa drew a deep breath of relief. *Problem solved.* “When can we make the trade? Sorry about the rush, but I was hoping to get on the road as soon as possible. Like today.” Now that December had rolled around, the weather back home would soon range between bad and worse. Once the snowstorms began, they wouldn’t let up until February, maybe March. The roads leading up the mountain would become impassable for hours on end, sometimes for days.

“Just take my truck,” Tess said hastily. “We don’t have to swap. My mechanic friend can lend me one of his beaters.”

“No way! I’m not leaving you without your own set of wheels.”

“Yeah, you are, because I’m not running the risk of messing up your Porsche. Pretty sure it costs more than I’m worth.”

“I can’t believe you said that!” Willa was aghast. “It’s fully insured. If something happens to it while I’m gone, I’ll fix it. Driving a Porsche is a lot of fun. You might actually enjoy it, truck girl,” she wheedled.

“That’s exactly what I’m afraid of! What if I’m tempted to take up drag racing or something?”

Willa snickered. “You won’t.” Tess was too much of a play-it-safe kind of gal. She was seriously allergic to taking risks.

“You’re right, but I took on that weekend nanny gig, remember? They’re the snobbiest people on the planet. Not sure I want them asking a bunch of questions about why I’m suddenly driving a luxury sports car. With my luck, they’ll report me to the police for carjacking!”

Willa could tell by the change in Tess’s voice that she wasn’t looking forward to her weekend grind at the Riley mansion, and she didn’t blame her one bit. The Riley’s four stair-step daughters — fourth grade through eighth grade — were pure evil. Their biggest mission in life was to scare off their latest nanny. They bragged about it all over social media.

Willa tried on a new Stetson in front of her tall dressing mirror, wishing there was something she could do to make Tess’s life easier. “Fine. New idea. You should come with me to Pinetop.”

“Don’t I wish,” Tess sighed, “but the tips are just too good this time of year. Sorry!”

Right. It was a tactful reminder that her friend needed the income. Willa suddenly felt foolish for extending such a flippant invitation. Most people weren’t in the position to take off from work out of the blue for an entire month. She hoped she hadn’t inadvertently hurt Tess’s feelings.

“So, um. Tell me where you are, and I’ll come make the trade.” Willa glanced at her watch, truly anxious to start her road trip. “Maybe we can meet for coffee somewhere.”

“Just hang tight a few more minutes, chickadee. I’m already on my way to your place.”

“Then why’d you put up such a fuss about lending me your truck?” Willa chuckled as she switched to a different hat, exchanging her beige felt Stetson for a black felt one. She set it at a sassy angle over her long, dark hair. It was extra wavy this morning, since she hadn’t taken the time to straighten it.

“Because I haven’t seen you in forever,” Tess exploded. “Which means I haven’t had the chance to vent to you about anything in forever, so I kinda figured you owed me.”

“I’m so sorry.” Willa adjusted the hat to a different angle. “I know I haven’t been in the best head space lately.”

“For all the right reasons,” Tess reminded hastily. “You don’t owe me any apologies.” Her voice dwindled for a second. “Hey! Look out your window.”

With a squeal of excitement, Willa threw her hat on the bed and jogged down the hallway to open her front door.

Tess was standing on the doormat.

Willa wordlessly held out her arms.

Tossing her auburn ponytail over her shoulder, Tess leaned in to deliver a squeeze hug. “Gosh, but I’ve missed you!” Her chuckle was damp.

“Right back atcha!” Willa returned the hug

Then Tess took a step back and dangled a set of keys in the air. “If you’re sure you’re sure about doing this...” She looked as cute as a bug in her faded jeans and jean jacket. Her short black apron was showing beneath the jacket, which meant she’d either just gotten off shift at the diner or was about to go on.

“I’m sure.” Willa accepted the keys, glancing past her friend’s freckled face to the 1977 Ford F-150 parked against the curb. Her mechanic friend had restored the paint job to its original black and red two-tone finish. In addition to jacking it up a few inches higher than factory settings and putting on extra wide tires, he’d installed shiny silver rims and some super sporty spotlights.

“Wow!” They didn’t look like cheap upgrades. “Do you have something to tell me about this mechanic friend of yours?”

“Like what?” Tess looked surprised.

“Are y’all dating?”

“Nah, it’s nothing like that. He just gave me a really good deal on the tires.” Tess waved vaguely at the truck, looking a little uncomfortable.

“Uh-huh.” Willa wasn’t at all convinced.

“He’s just a friend. Really!” Tess made a face at her. “I’ve sort of become his guinea pig lately. He’s been practicing detailing and a bunch of other services he’s been wanting to offer at his shop.”

Still not convinced there wasn’t more to it than that, Willa arched her eyebrows at her friend. “Well, it looks amazing.” She hardly recognized the truck as the same one Tess used to drive. The rusted bumpers had been replaced with shiny new chrome. “I’m starting to understand why you weren’t in such a big stinking hurry to trade vehicles.”

Tess shrugged. “Just hand over your Porsche keys, woman, and we’ll call it even.”

“Want to come inside and do it over coffee?” Willa waved at the open door. Since she’d stepped outside without her coat on, she was starting to turn into an icicle.

“I always have time for coffee.” Tess danced through the doorway and unzipped her coat.

They were soon chatting up a storm at the bar in the kitchen, sipping on hazelnut caramel lattes drenched in their favorite chocolate creamer.

“I needed this,” Tess sighed, glancing around the room. It was a gorgeous kitchen with black and white granite countertops, stainless steel appliances, and small pops of Christmas red — berry colored dish towels hanging from the oven handle and a poinsettia plant in the windowsill.

“Me, too.”

“I wasn’t kidding when I said I’ve missed you.” Tess gave a suspicious sounding sniff.

“Right back atcha. Sorry it took me so long to come up for air.”

“I’m just glad you’re okay.” Tess sniffled again.

Willa nodded her thanks, knowing now was probably the best time to introduce the new idea forming in her head. “Any chance I can beg another favor from you?”

“Of course!” Tess’s eyes grew a little glassy, as if she wasn’t quite ready to say goodbye.

“I haven’t made any other arrangements for this trip,” Willa confessed, staring ruefully down into her coffee cup. “I haven’t had time to talk to the post office about holding my mail, there’s no one to water my poinsettias, and houses don’t do too well when they’re vacant. I mean...anything could go wrong while I’m away.”

Tess didn’t so much as hesitate. “If you need someone to keep an eye on the place, I’m your gal.”

“I was thinking more along the lines of you staying here.”

Tess blinked. “Why?” Concern infused her eyes. “Are you having security issues or something?”

“No! Nothing like that.” Willa swirled her coffee mug to remix the chocolate creamer that had settled to the bottom. “It’s just that last night I had a special delivery to my front door. I don’t know who sent it, but...” It wasn’t from Billy. That she did know. Her face crumpled at the memory of all the fun gifts he’d sent her over the years.

“Oh, hon!” Tess shoved her coffee cup aside and reached for Willa’s hands. She gave them a comforting squeeze. “Talk to me,” she commanded softly.

Willa nodded, no longer trying to hold her tears back. “I know it’s not from him,” she choked, “but it was so like something he would’ve sent if he were still here. I...maybe I should just show it to you.” She abruptly slid off her stool and beckoned for Tess to follow her to the Christmas tree.

Stopping in front of the lovely angel cookie ornament, she wordlessly pointed at it.

“It’s beautiful,” Tess said softly. “What did you mean you don’t know who sent it?”

Willa spread her hands. “Whoever it was didn’t sign the card, and the return address label was too smudged to read anything other than the town.”

“Really? What town?”

For an answer, Willa retrieved the card and discarded wrapping paper from the coffee table and handed them to her friend.

Tess opened the card first, swiftly scanning the one-sentence message. “Oh, wow! A mystery guy. Maybe he’s a secret admirer.”

Willa replayed the short message in her mind before answering. *I thought you might need this.* “The thought did cross my mind, but I don’t know. The message isn’t the least bit flirty. It’s more...comforting, if you know what I mean. Like someone wanting to assure me I’m not alone.” It was sweet and special. And since it had come from her hometown, it was probably from someone who knew her and cared about her.

“Yeah.” Tess nodded. “Kind of like a verbal hug or something.”

“I know, right?” Just looking at the beautiful ornament again this morning was lifting Willa’s spirits all over again. The fact that someone had taken the time to bake and decorate it for her made it even more special. It felt...personal.

“I’m still not ready to cancel my secret admirer theory.” Tess leaned closer to bump shoulders.

Willa shrugged. “I’ve had a lot of secret admirers over the years, plus my fair share of stalkers.” She wrinkled her nose. “It sort of comes with the territory.”

“Aw! You lead such a rough life,” Tess mocked.

“Just be glad you’re not me.” Willa’s voice came out more bitter than she intended. “The loss of privacy alone would do you in.”

Tess slung an arm around her shoulders and gave her a gentle hug. “I’m just glad we’re friends,” she said quietly. “Sorry I haven’t been a better one lately. I know the past few months haven’t been easy, and my two jobs have made it hard to be here for you the way you deserve.”

“You’re here now.” Willa hugged her back. “So, is that a yes about staying here while I’m gone?”

Giving her a sideways look, Tess gave a snort of laughter. “Oh! You were serious about that?”

Willa gave her a mock glare. “Do I look like I’m joking?” She moved across the room to her antique Chippendale desk to pick up the long white envelope lying there. She returned to Tess, holding it out.

Tess’s eyes grew wide. “What’s this?” At Willa’s silence, she tore open the envelope and simply stared. “I don’t understand,” she bleated, waving the check at her.

“It’s six weeks worth of house sitting pay, since I probably won’t make it back until sometime in January. Enough, I hope, for you to give the Rileys the boot while I’m gone.” She was only half-joking about that last part.

“You know I can’t accept this.” Tess’s lips tightened. “It wouldn’t be right to take money from a friend.” She tried to hand the envelope back, but Willa could see what it cost her.

Not for the first time, Willa burned with curiosity about Tess’s past — where she was from and how she’d ended up in Phoenix. Not to mention why she’d become a waitress and stayed a waitress for so long. Though it was an honest living, most folks used jobs like that as a stepping stone for something else. Willa had only waited tables until she’d landed her first recording contract.

Willa gently waved away the check. “If you don’t want to accept any money for house sitting, then consider it an early

Christmas gift. Feel free to feed the homeless with it or send gifts to an orphanage. Just take it. Please.”

With a moan of surrender, Tess launched herself into Willa’s arms. “How can I say no to that? Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

The alarm on her phone suddenly jangled. She drew back, grimacing as she reached inside the pocket of her jacket to turn it off. “I’ve gotta head to my shift at the diner.” She faced Willa, looking so forlorn in her faded jeans and teary eyes that Willa’s heart went out to her.

“You’re going to be gone before I get back, aren’t you?”

As Willa nodded, her own eyes grew damp again. “Hitting the road today is my best chance of beating the snow.” According to her weather app, Pinetop had already experienced some flurries. Their first real accumulation of the season would hit any day now.

“I guess I’d better say Merry Christmas then.” Tess gave her another hug and muttered, “Because I’m sure as heck no good at goodbyes.”

Willa studied her wistfully when she stepped back. “I really hope it works out for you to visit Pinetop with me some day. You would love it there.”

Her friend’s sad smile told her that she didn’t think it was likely. “Maybe someday.”

“This way.” Willa walked her to her attached one-car garage. Before she opened the door, she gave Tess a quick tutorial on how to run the security panel against the wall.

“Fancy shmancy! Can’t believe I’m actually going to be living on the pinkies-up side of town for the next few weeks. How will I ever survive?”

“You’ll manage.” Willa grinned. “I have faith in you.”

Tess’s tears were dried by the time she drove away in Willa’s silver Porsche. The gratitude glowing in her smile made it feel like Christmas had come early this year.



CHAPTER 2: IMPROMPTU PARADE

One hour later

Willa watched the overcrowded streets of Phoenix disappear through the rear-view mirror of Tess's truck. It was a bittersweet feeling to leave the city for the first time since Billy's tragic passing. The truth was, she'd been reluctant to leave him — her memories of him, his songs that were still being played on the radio, even the cemetery where he'd been laid to rest.

But it was time for her to go home. Instead of turning on the radio, she'd connected her cell phone to a small portable speaker she'd brought with her. It was resting on the seat beside her, filling the cab with muted country classics like "Tennessee Christmas".

The lovely lyrics surrounded her like a warm glove while the arid Arizona scapes flew past the windows — miles of sand dunes tinged pink by the morning sun, clusters of palo verde trees stripped naked by the cooler temperatures, towering rosy ridges, and flat-as-board mesas.

It took just shy of four hours for the desert terrain to transition to the highlands. The long stretches of sand were abruptly replaced by foothills and scattered evergreen forests. The craggy ranges of the White Mountains rose in the distance.

Pinetop was nestled on the side of one of those mountains, hidden from view by a wall of junipers, firs, and pines. Willa's excitement notched higher as she turned Tess's Ford pickup onto Highway 273 and began her final ascent toward home. Though tucked more miles than she would've preferred from the next nearest town, there was no place in the world quite like it.

She smiled as she approached the intersection leading into the heart of downtown. Growing up there had felt a little like growing up at the North Pole. It was chilly year-round, even in the summer. This time of year, everything in town was

dripping with icicles and covered in frost. It was like driving through a postcard.

As she turned onto Main Street, she was relieved to see it was mostly the way she remembered it — dotted with one festive storefront after another. Wide picture windows boasted fresh baked goods, handmade candies, holiday crafts, antiques, books, candles, clothing, and linens. In one window, there were grandfather clocks on display, made by a man as ancient as St. Nicholas himself. In another window, a semi-famous dog breeder advertised cuddly adoptions. Only a few of the businesses were ones she didn't recognize, but she'd expected a few changes after being gone so long. People traveled to Pinetop from all over the state to shop and vacation, so new companies were forever trying to elbow their way into town.

Nostalgia clogged Willa's throat as she neared the end of the business district. She was less than a mile away from the residential part of town. Her heartbeat sped in anticipation of seeing her parents for the first time in over six months. She could hardly believe it had been that long.

While growing up in Pinetop, she'd had everything a child could dream of — two adoring parents, her own bedroom on the second story of a fairy-tale-like chalet, mountains of toys, private singing lessons, and a circle of friends that she once assumed she'd be friends with for life. After leaving for college and staying gone to pursue a singing career, however, she'd eventually lost touch with every single one of them. The last she'd heard, most of them were now married with children of their own.

Willa bit her lower lip at the reminder she was both single and childless. She got to lay her head on the pillow of professional success every night, something that had proven to be a lonely bedmate.

Guess that's one reason I haven't been in such a hurry to visit home lately.

During the first year of her singing career, visiting home had been super fun. There'd been special dinners in her honor, album signings at the local library, and a long autograph line

afterward. Several of the festive little shops on Main Street had even started selling authentic Willa Morgan merchandise — everything from posters to t-shirts.

Paying a visit home with her twenty-eighth birthday looming was a different story entirely. She hadn't produced a new hit single in months for the locals to celebrate. None of them were even aware she was visiting. That meant no album signings this time and no autograph lines.

She kind of wished she could just slink up the back road to her parents' home, safe from any inquisitive townspeople who might catch sight of her and try to flag her down. Unfortunately, the back road was barricaded shut when she reached it. There was a sign swinging between a pair of sawhorses that indicated it had been covered by an avalanche of snow, waiting to be blown clear again.

Clearly, I missed the fact that Pinetop already had its first snowstorm.

Unfortunately, it left her with only one route home, down the heavily populated Pinewood Avenue. Businesses were literally crammed on both sides of the street. The other problem was that it was located right smack at the beginning of the town's favorite parade route. And unless her memory was slipping, the first day of December had been enough reason in past years to throw a winter parade. The locals considered it to be the first day of the official Christmas season.

Willa drove around the next curve, and her heart sank at the number of people gathered on the sidewalks. It could only mean one thing; her memory wasn't slipping. There was most definitely a parade on the way. People were already shading their eyes against the sun, craning to catch their first glimpse of the coming floats.

It was pointless to keep driving. Her best option was finding a place to park and waiting out the parade. With a sigh, she feathered her brakes, eyeing the parking spaces in front of the next several businesses to her right. They were full. However, a pair of red taillights flashed a few car lengths

ahead of her. She turned on her blinker, sped up a little, and swooped in behind it. She narrowly beat out another vehicle. The driver threw her hands into the air and drove on. Willa chuckled dryly and avoided making direct eye contact with her.

Sorry. Not sorry, lady. Anybody wanting a parking spot in this town had to be assertive. Everyone knew that. She edged forward while the other car was still pulling out of its spot. Unaccustomed to driving such a large vehicle, she had to back up and straighten Tess's truck several times to get it in the center of the parking spot.

At least a half dozen other cars paused in the hopes that she was leaving instead of staying, but they gave up the moment she turned off the motor. She hunkered behind the steering wheel, nudging her oversized sunglasses higher up her nose. Between driving a truck no one was familiar with and having her face half-hidden, she was confident no one would recognize her.

The moment the first float appeared, Willa couldn't resist leaning forward and waving back to the cheery Mr. and Mrs. Santa.

"Oh, my goodness," she sighed, pleased to see that Flash Billings, the town's ancient postmaster, was still playing Santa after all this time. The coolest thing about his long, white beard was that it was real. She could personally attest to it after tugging playfully on it a few times back when she was a kid.

He leaped down from the float with an agility that belied his age and started throwing candy to the spectators. He dug handful after handful from the lumpy red sack tossed over his shoulder. When he passed by Willa, he pointed a finger straight at her windshield and shook his head, as if he couldn't believe she was too chicken to come outside and brave the cold.

"There's no way you recognized me," she muttered. "There's just no way!" However, the cheering crowd and tug of holiday spirit continued to chip away at her resistance.

Unable to hold out for long, she pushed open the door and shimmied into the narrow opening between Tess's truck and the vehicle to her left.

Because she was and always would be a country gal at heart, she hopped up on the tailgate and climbed inside the truck bed. Moving forward to the cab, she leaned her arms on the roof and continued watching the parade from there. It was a much better view. She gave herself a mental high five for thinking of it.

What she hadn't given much consideration to was the fact that she was wearing one of her favorite long suede skirts — dyed a bright shade of Christmas red with plenty of fringe waving in the breeze. Her swing coat was a deliciously chic statement in faux white fur. She'd cinched in the waist with a silver Concho belt and perched a white felt Stetson on her head. No proper western outfit would've been complete without a hat.

She dimly became aware of heads turning in her direction. What started off as a few whispers behind hands soon turned into a low murmur of awe.

“Aren't you a sight for sore eyes, kid? Looking just like Christmas up there.” Flash Billings appeared out of nowhere, weaving his way through the crowd in her direction. His face was lined like old leather. Like the last time she'd seen him, he still didn't look a day older than a hundred and two with his Rumpelstiltskin beard.

Guess I was wrong about him recognizing me. She shot him a sheepish smile. “Aren't you supposed to be on your float?”

“Yep, but I got a double filling in for me. No way was I gonna pass up the chance to come give my favorite country singer a proper hug!” He pushed back his hat to get a better look at her as he neared the truck. Then, in a move that belied his age, he hopped onto the tailgate and held out his arms to her. “I delivered a whole pile of Christmas cards to your mother earlier. She didn't say a single word about you coming home for the holidays.”

“It’s because she doesn’t know.” Willa moved across the truck bed to hug him. “It was supposed to be a surprise,” she finished, feeling a little guilty about the fact that her presence had been discovered before then. *I really should’ve stayed inside the truck.*

It sure was good to see Flash, though. She hugged him tighter, adoring how the grain of his fleece-lined denim coat felt against her cheek. It smelled like hickory smoke from the wood stove he’d always used to heat his cabin.

“Looks like your secret is out of the bag, kid.” Flash’s voice didn’t sound nearly as old as he looked, probably because he was closer to seventy-two than a hundred and two. She was one of the few people in Pinetop who knew the truth about his age. He preferred to keep everyone else guessing, especially the children who hopped in line to sit on his lap and tell him what they wanted for Christmas.

“Willa Morgan!” The squeal of another familiar voice made her tense. It belonged to Bea Ashburn, someone Willa wasn’t nearly as excited about running into as Flash. She watched Bea elbow her way in front of a pair of shop owners who were standing beside the doors of their boutiques. “How dare you show up looking like a country music queen and catch me in my old workout clothes like this!” She reached the truck and hopped nimbly onto the tailgate beside Flash. Leaning closer, she pressed a chilly kiss to Willa’s cheek. Her hands were too full of shopping bags for a proper hug.

“You look amazing and you know it.” Willa eyed Bea’s red and white candy cane striped running suit, resisting the urge to roll her eyes. After growing up on the same street and attending all the same schools, Willa was well aware that her childhood playmate didn’t own anything old. Bea’s makeup was always painted on, and every hair was always in place. Even in the light breeze, her glossy blonde ringlets bounced against her high cheekbones in perfect unison, as if they didn’t dare do otherwise.

Distance had sprung between them the moment Willa decided to leave town for college, and their lives had been traveling in opposite directions ever since. While Willa had

chosen a career over having a family, Bea had chosen her family over her career. In a manner of speaking. According to Willa's mother, Bea kept a small army of household employees on her payroll, to include a live-in nanny for her twin daughters.

So you can reign as queen over all the holiday parties in town. Willa hadn't meant for her mind to go there, but it was hard not to. It was a position she'd once held herself.

The excited babble of her impromptu welcoming party escalated as the last few parade floats rolled past the truck. Willa gazed helplessly around her, trying to gauge how many more people she would have to hug and greet before she could hop back inside Tess's truck and finish the drive home to her parents.

Her gaze fell on a tall, broad-shouldered man standing directly across the street from where she was parked. She didn't recognize the squared-off lines of his bronze features, which was odd since she knew almost everyone in town. Nearly everyone around him was dressed in plaid, but not him. He was wearing a black suit jacket over his jeans. Surprisingly, no one was rubber-necking him because of it. He was lounged against one of the light poles with his black boots crossed, tipping his Stetson every so often at a passerby. They waved and greeted him in return before hurrying on down the sidewalk.

Like the growing cluster of people around her, it appeared that he'd paused to gawk at her, though he was choosing to do it from a greater distance.

She didn't realize she was staring back until he pushed his Stetson an inch or two higher to ensnare her gaze. It was a slow, carefully calculated move. Not a big surprise. She was accustomed to being flirted with by handsome, mysterious men. However, she wasn't prepared for the glint of humor in his dark gaze when it clashed with hers. It reminded her way too much of a certain cocky, eight-year-old from elementary school who'd been the bane of her existence once upon a time.

Angel Castellano.

He'd sworn to her entire circle of uptown friends — bankers' kids, attorneys' kids, even the mayor's kids — that he was going to marry Willa Morgan someday. Though they'd laughed the proud little third-grader to scorn, he hadn't changed his tune.

There's no way you're him. She squinted through the sunlight at him. He was way too tall, and his shoulders were way too broad.

A delicious shiver that had nothing whatsoever to do with the December breeze worked its way down her spine as they continued their staring match. No matter how hard she tried, her brain was unable to connect her memories of the undernourished, poorly dressed son of a migrant worker with the older, much cockier cowboy who was currently smirking at her.

No, it simply wasn't possible.

It can't be him. It just can't be!



CHAPTER 3: DINNER WITH A SIDE OF CROW

In the typical your-business-is-my-business attitude held by most of the citizens in Pinetop, a small entourage of well-meaning citizens noisily revved their trucks and Jeeps and pulled into the street in front of Willa. It was as if a whole new parade had been formed. People were honking their horns and hanging out of their windows to encourage others to join them.

“It’s Willa Morgan,” one woman screamed.

“Holy smokes! She’s actually back?” a man hollered in response.

Flash Billings was leading the group at the front of the line in his red, white, and blue mail delivery truck. The small caravan of vehicles quickly grew to ten, then fifteen. Afterward, Willa lost track of the number of cars and trucks snaking their way down the street.

Flash pulled abreast of Tess’s truck and hopped out to jog over to her again. “So much for your surprise visit, kid. Looks like you’ve drummed up a welcoming party.”

Smiling, she shook her head at him. “I don’t know what to say.” This was a far cry from the quiet homecoming she’d pictured. However, he was so kind that she didn’t have the heart to beg him to send everyone home and leave her in peace.

“My only fear is that poor Ella is gonna faint dead away at the sight of all this, considering she’s not even expecting you.” His wizened, silvery gaze pierced her with a knowing look. Then he winked. “But I was,” he chortled.

“You were?” Willa blinked in surprise.

“Yep. Everyone else said it would take nothing short of a Christmas miracle to bring you home this year, but here you are.” He sobered. “I’ve been around long enough to know that the best miracles show up when you need them the most.”

“Who needs a miracle?” Willa frowned at his words, wondering if she should send a quick text to her mother, after

all, to give her a heads up about her visit. “Is everything okay?” She was ashamed that she had to ask, but it had honestly been that long since she’d last called home. Had it been one week? Two weeks? She’d been so buried in grief over Billy that she hadn’t been the best daughter in a while.

Flash bestowed one of his enigmatic looks on her that neither heightened nor reduced her anxiety. “All I meant was that your mom could use a little extra company right now.” He clamped his lips together, signifying that he’d said all he intended to say. Then he assisted her down from the truck bed and escorted her to the driver’s side of the truck.

As she climbed behind the wheel, someone started a lively countdown that grew louder with each number.

“Ten! Nine! Eight!” A few vehicles honked their horns as they counted.

Jogging back to his mail truck, Flash motioned for Willa to pull out and take her place behind him. More townspeople waved and shouted greetings to her from the sidewalk as the ever-growing caravan slow-trotted its way down their beloved parade route. She pasted on her most winning smile and mechanically waved back.

Please let Mom be okay, God. She couldn’t bear the thought of receiving bad news when she arrived home. Her forty-seven-year-old mother had already experienced a few scares during her last two mammogram appointments. The radiologist had located a few “spots” that he claimed were “worth watching.” Unfortunately, that was all her mother had been willing to share about it.

Willa’s throat tightened with emotion as her parents’ two-story chalet came into view on the corner of Pinewood Avenue and Pine Circle. It was the first home in a semi-circle of cedar chalets that curled away from the downtown area. The most prominent citizens in Pinetop lived there — two attorneys, a husband and wife team of Family Medicine doctors, the mayor, and a handful of shop owners. At least, that’s who used to live there. It was possible a few homes had changed ownership in the time that Willa had been away.

She glanced down the curved street of houses, looking for any details she didn't remember. Other than the new metal roof on the Ashburn's chalet, nothing jumped out at her.

Oh, wait. Whoa! There was actually one very significant change to the street she'd grown up on — an additional home at the end, bringing the most upscale residential street in town to an uneven thirteen houses. It was nearly twice the size of the others, boasting two upper story balconies, plus a few other smaller outsets that might've been lookout points for single bedrooms. It was hard to tell from this far away. The two main balconies were held up by craftsman-style, stacked stone columns.

She blinked. Who in town would build such an ostentatious structure? It was beautiful, yes, but way over the top — more like a resort than a single-family dwelling. She was a little shocked that the other inhabitants on the street, who were forever trying to one-up each other, hadn't managed to block its construction on some building permit technicality or another.

The front door to her parents' home flew open, reclaiming her attention. Ella Morgan appeared in the doorway, clutching a crocheted red shrug around her slender shoulders.

“Willa!” She stood there, gazing at her daughter in astonishment.

Though Flash was still rolling on down the street, probably preparing to circle back with the whole entourage, Willa broke ranks. She whipped Tess's truck from the line of vehicles and careened a little faster than she probably should have into her parents' driveway.

“Thank you, everyone!” Waving a hand frenziedly over her head, she jogged toward the front porch without looking back at the street. “Mom!” She anxiously scanned her mother's features for any sign of illness.

Her words were lost in her oomph of surprise as a strong, familiar set of arms swept her off her feet from behind, twirling her around and around. Her Stetson tumbled to the ground.

“Dad!” She settled her arms over his, engulfed in the wondrous scent of his woody aftershave.

“Hey, baby girl!” He kissed her cheek before setting her back on her feet.

Though he was only an inch or two taller than her five feet five inches, he had no trouble retrieving her hat while hoisting her into his arms in a single swooping motion. This time, he carried her up the porch steps and deposited her in front of her mother.

They reached for each other at the same time.

“Sweetheart!” Ella Morgan’s musical alto trembled with excitement. “My sweet, sweet Willa!” The lake-blue eyes that matched her daughter’s turned glossy with unshed tears.

Willa had never cared much for her first name. She’d always thought it sounded too countrified. Not once in her twenty-seven years, however, had she breathed a word of her dislike about it to her parents. She was the miracle child they weren’t supposed to be able to have, so they’d named her after both of them — Will and Ella.

Her father’s arms crept around his two favorite ladies, and the three of them stood there on the porch, soaking in the poignancy of their long-awaited family reunion.

“This calls for a celebration,” a man shouted from the caravan in the street.

“Yup,” someone else hollered back. “I say we all head over to Castellano’s for dinner!”

“Castellano’s?” Willa stiffened in surprise, pulling back a few inches to pin her mother with a questioning look. She recognized that name all too well.

“A lot has happened since your last visit, sweetie.” Her mother’s expression held no censure. She’d never been anything less than proud of her only daughter’s accomplishments. As far as she was concerned, the long months separating Willa’s visits home were simply the cost of success.

As she held her at arm's length to get a better look at her, a gust of icy wind whipped at her rich dark hair that was twisted into a loose up-do. Like her daughter's hair, several stray wisps brushed against her temples. Unlike her daughter's hair, her wisps were intertwined with a few strands of gray.

Ella Morgan's words infused Willa with guilt. "I'm sorry it's been so long since my last visit. I—"

Her mother stopped her with a light tap of a finger against her lips. "You're home now, an answer to a mother's prayers. That's all that matters."

"But—"

Ella Morgan tapped her finger to Willa's lips to shush her again.

"Listen to your mom." Her father leaned in for another quick hug before heading inside.

"Your dad and I don't need or want any apologies," Ella Morgan insisted with alacrity. "We understand how busy your career keeps you, and we're so stinking proud of you we can hardly stand it! Now come inside and tell us all your latest news." She curled an arm around Willa's slender waist and steered her towards the door her husband was holding open for them.

Though Willa couldn't think of anything newsworthy to share, she allowed her mother to tug her across the threshold.

Will Morgan leaned out to the porch to shout, "Let's meet up at Castellano's at six!"

There was a flurry of hoots, claps, whistles, and honks. They were followed by the drone of truck and Jeep motors as her welcoming party finally dispersed.

"In case you had any doubts, your popularity remains at an all-time high here in Pinetop." Her mother gave a girlish laugh as she led her family into the great room.

Willa paused in the doorway to absorb the wonder of being home. The room was a delightful mix of old and new furnishings, to include a brown leather sectional where a plaid

sofa had once rested. The two-story walls were still lined with cedar logs, and a cherry wood concert grand piano still jutted from the east corner. Built-in bookcases on either side of the stone fireplace overflowed with classics, biographies, and atlases of the world.

Their family Christmas tree, cut down every year from the mountain forests, rested in front of the bookcase to the right. It was decked out with a lifetime collection of souvenirs from every city they'd ever visited. It also included every ornament Willa had made in school.

A large family portrait in an antique gold frame graced the wall above the mantle. She'd been sixteen when it was painted. In the portrait, she was wearing a Christmas red dress with a red lacy overlay. It struck her how much sparkle and energy emanated from the younger version of herself on the canvas. At the time, there was nothing she'd dreamed of doing that she didn't believe she could go out in the big wide world and do.

And she'd been right.

To a point.

She certainly hadn't pictured herself being this close to her twenty-eighth birthday without having so much as a serious boyfriend. Even though she and Billy Rivers had never officially dated, he was as close as she'd come to that.

Her shuddery sigh made her mother give her a gentle nudge towards the sectional. "Sit with me, sweetie. Your dad has gone to brew us some of my famous mint green tea."

Though Willa obediently took a seat, her mother's announcement renewed her worries from earlier. Why was her father waiting hand and foot on them all of a sudden? In the past, her mother had always done the honors.

Frowning toward the kitchen, she demanded, "When did Dad learn how to make tea?"

Her mother's shrug was nonchalant. "It's never too late to teach an old dog new tricks." A teasing smile tugged at her lips.

“But it’s Dad we’re talking about,” Willa reminded with a quirk of her eyebrows. “The guy can burn water.” She had no doubt he’d find a way to destroy the tea.

“Then I’ll brew you another cup. Quit trying to change the subject. I asked you a question first.” Her mother’s lips tightened in determination. “Work! News! I’m dying for an update.” She made a pinching motion with her thumb and forefinger. “I know you’re all grown up and don’t need our interference in your life, but your father and I were this close to purchasing a pair of plane tickets to come check on you, anyway.”

“Oh, Mom!” Tears welled in Willa’s eyes — the burning, painful kind.

“Talk to me, sweetie.” Her mother scooted closer on the sofa, drawing Willa’s head to her shoulder like she used to do when she was much younger.

“What can I say? It’s been a long four months.” As badly as Willa wanted to have the weeping part of the grieving process behind her, her tears started to flow again.

Her father stepped inside the room and abruptly set down his tray of tea. Hurrying forward, he knelt in front of them.

“Is she—?” He stopped when his wife shook her head in warning.

“I’m s-sorry.” It took a few minutes for Willa to find her voice again. “Just when I think I’m ready to be okay again, I’m not.” Maybe coming home had been a mistake. Maybe she wasn’t ready for this.

“We’re so sorry for your loss!” Her mom exchanged an agonized look with her dad. “Our hearts are broken for you. We’ve been praying non-stop for your comfort and strength.”

“Thank you.” Realizing her parents didn’t quite know all the details, she spilled the rest of the story to them like a bottled up storm — from Billy’s graveside memorial service to his younger brother’s subsequent rise to power at Desert Productions.

“I don’t know what’s supposed to come next after he gives me the boot,” she finished brokenly, dabbing at her soaked cheeks. “I’ve considered beating him to the punch by turning in my resignation, but singing is all I know. It’s all I’ve ever known. It’s my whole life.”

Her dad reached for the box of tissues on the coffee table and held them out.

Her mom intercepted the box, pulled out a whole wad of tissues, and pressed them into Willa’s hands. “Singing, by far, isn’t all that you know, sweetie.”

Willa gaped at her while pressing two of the tissues to her cheeks. She’d been expecting sympathy, not something that bordered on a reprimand.

“It’s been a big and beautiful part of your life,” Ella Morgan hastened to add. “But no matter how good things have been in the past, there’s always more to be had. God’s plan for your life is far from over. You’re so young, Willa. You still have so much living to do.”

That was definitely more along the lines of what she’d been expecting to hear from her mother, minus the comment about how young she was. “I’m almost twenty-eight,” she reminded dryly.

“I’m not likely to forget the age of my only daughter.” Her mother’s voice was tart. “What I said still stands.”

“If I could jump in with my two cents worth...” Her dad reached for her hand. “Once in a great while, life has a way of stripping you down to nothing more than your faith, but it’s enough. Just trust the Lord to see you through. Even this.”

“I haven’t prayed much lately,” she admitted in a low voice. “Every time I try, I just end up boohooing.”

Her mother nodded in sympathy. “He gave us tear ducts for a reason, sweetie.”

“Then why do I feel so weak? Like such a helpless crybaby?” Willa shook her head, feeling emotionally wiped out after her latest bout of weeping.

“Crying doesn’t mean you’re weak,” her mother protested, looking aghast. “Though I never had the pleasure of meeting him in person, Billy Rivers impressed me as someone worth crying for.”

Willa squeezed her eyelids shut, appreciating the sentiment behind her mother’s words. “Thank you for saying that. It means a lot.”

“You’re welcome.” Her mother was silent for a moment. “I know you’d probably prefer to head to bed early after such a long drive, but your biggest fans in town might stage a revolt if you did.”

A chuckle bubbled from Willa as she opened her eyes to meet her mother’s worried look and her father’s fiercely protective scowl. “After everything I’ve told you about my teetering career, do you truly believe that the Lord still has a plan for my life?”

“Yes,” her parents declared in unison.

“Okay.” She grimaced at them. “Okay.” They’d never once lied to her. If they believed it, then she was going to find a way to believe it.

“So, you’ll be joining us for dinner at Castellano’s to avoid a revolt?” her mother inquired softly.

“I certainly didn’t come home to start a war.” Willa’s heart raced at the thought of seeing Angel again after all this time. She had no idea how her cocky former classmate had managed to get a whole stinking restaurant named after himself, but he’d always been persistent. She’d give him that.



CASTELLANO’S, AS IT TURNED OUT, WASN’T SIMPLY A restaurant. It was a full-blown amphitheater with a central stage and tiered table seating. Because it was located in the mountains, it also had a roll-back roof that she imagined remained closed most of the year — complete with state-of-the-art lighting and surround sound.

How? Willa felt like her head was spinning off her shoulders as she tried to take it all in at once. How had anyone managed to get the specialized work crews to come to such a remote town to even build such a space? The logistics blew her mind.

She'd performed in places like this all over the world, but she'd never — not in her wildest dreams — expected to find such a facility in Pinetop, Arizona. It was every shade of amazing!

“Pretty wow, huh?” Her mother had changed into a semi-formal gown of red tulle that hung in frothy folds all the way to the floor. She'd replaced her shrug from earlier with a red sequined jacket.

“Very wow,” Willa agreed, feeling a tad lightheaded. She was tired from her drive and emotionally wiped out from her earlier weep fest, but she was doing her best to hide both of those things from her family and friends this evening.

While her mother's red dress had nailed the holiday festive look, Willa had gone for a more dramatic look. It's what the townsfolk were expecting, and she didn't want to disappoint them. Instead of wearing Christmas colors, she'd selected an off-the-shoulder black gown. The soft, filmy fabric emphasized the slender curves she worked so hard to maintain with a strict diet and an even stricter gym routine. A person's image could make or break their success in show business, so she didn't leave important stuff like health and fitness up to chance.

Desert roses were embroidered across the bodice of her gown and the lower twelve inches of the skirt. It boasted an asymmetrical hem that showed off her high-heeled black cowgirl boots. Since it was so windy in her hometown, she'd left her dark waves down, allowing the outside elements to toss it into a natural wind-blown look. Her necklace was made up of round silver beads that matched her low-slung Concho belt, and her manicure was solid white. She'd added nothing more than a dusting of powder to her face to eliminate the shine, plus a swipe of rosy lip gloss. As long as no one got

close enough to see how red-rimmed her eyes were, she looked her best.

Her father proudly escorted her and her mom to a table resting on a special outset close to the stage. The chairs clustered around it were some of the best seats in the house.

He hurried ahead to hold out chairs for both of them, looking close to bursting from pride in his charcoal suit and white button-up shirt. He was wearing a red tie that matched her mom's dress — one that Willa had no doubt her mother had picked out for him.

“So this is Castellano's.” She gazed around them again as she took her seat. It was truly a magnificent facility! The base of the stage was surrounded by a forest of tiny pines lit with bazillions of tiny white lights. She wondered if they were real.

Castellano's, she decided, was every bit as elegant as the Desert Dreams Theater back in Phoenix, but newer with more upgrades. Butterflies danced in her stomach at the prospect of coming face-to-face with its owner after all these years.

Not that she had any reason to believe he'd pay a personal visit to their table this evening.

“Yes. This is Castellano's,” her mother murmured with a shade of awe tinging her voice. A pine wreath centerpiece was aglow with yet more tiny white lights. Sprigs of winter berries popped artistically here and there from its bows.

Breathing in the scent of pine, Willa reached out to brush a fingertip over the long, narrow needles circling the wreath. *It's real.* She drew back her hand in awe. Everything around them was real. Angel Castellano was real. Real and all grown up now.

And he'd built...*this.*

Waiters and waitresses in black-and-white uniforms glided across the room, escorting the never-ending line of guests to their seats. It was as if the entire town had shown up for dinner this evening.

Her mother followed her gaze. “It's hard to believe that skinny little boy grew up to be such an amazing chef.”

A chef? Willa's face grew warm at the memory of all the teasing Angel Castellano had endured from their classmates during middle school and high school over his love for cooking. They'd mercilessly criticized him for choosing to take electives like home economics instead of extra gym classes like most of the other guys had done.

"It's even harder to believe he returned to Pinetop after college to set up shop here," her father added. "Castellano's is a major draw for tourists. Everyone in town is grateful for what he's done."

"He's given this town a new life." Willa's mother reached over to pat her hand. "With so many college-age kids hightailing it to bigger cities and never coming back..." She shook her head sadly.

Willa bit her lower lip, knowing she'd been in that club.

"Long story short, our population was dwindling until Angel Castellano showed up. He brought a whole army of sous chefs, wait staff, actors, dancers, and singers with him." She shot a sly look at her daughter. "I've heard he's still hiring."

"Yes, I am." Angel's baritone drawl made Willa freeze. Gone was the youthful, gravelly tenor of her former classmate. He had the voice of a man now.

Her heartbeat escalated to a more rapid tempo as her dad stood and thrust out a hand to the owner of Castellano's. Not wanting to appear too curious or too eager, she slowly turned her face in his direction and received her next shock of the evening. It was the same man who'd grinned at her from across the street earlier.

Oh, my lands!

She should have known it was him. Her heart did a crazy little backflip for no particular reason as she met his dark, knowing gaze for the second time that day.

He'd changed so much. No child as scraggly and annoying as he'd been during their elementary school days had the right

to grow into such a gorgeous man. It defied all logic, something he'd always enjoyed doing.

Despite his parents' broken English and lack of education, he'd competed against her in everything — going toe to toe in spelling bees, math contests, and impromptu races on the playground. He was the only student who'd ever been able to beat her in her academics, not once, but again and again and again. Her friends had always cheered against him, while continuing to root for their beloved princess.

To her eternal shame, she'd let them, not once asking them to tone down their mocking commentary. Word had filtered back to her more than once about the scuffles Angel had endured afterward with some of the guys on his walks home from school. And she'd still kept her silence, craving the approval of her friends too much to give a single drop of it up for her arch nemesis.

If she harbored one regret from her childhood, it was Angel Castellano.

He stood in front of her now, no longer the poorly dressed son of a pair of migrant workers, but the proud owner of the poshest business in Pinetop. *Shoot!* It was probably the poshest eating and entertainment establishment in all of Arizona. Though she was secretly happy for him, she doubted he was still seeking her approval the way he'd tried so hard to do when they were kids.

The designer black suit and mocking smile he wore this evening was the perfect comeback to everything he'd endured at the hands of her snooty comrades. He no longer needed the approval or acceptance she'd failed to extend him when she had the chance.

His coffee-brew eyes locked on hers, boldly drinking her in with the same hint of humor she'd glimpsed at the parade. It irritated her as much now as it had then. She suspected he was laughing at her inside his head.

She lifted her chin. "It's good to see you again, Mr. Castellano." She held a hand out to him.

To her surprise, he raised it to his lips instead of shaking it, brushing his very warm mouth over her very chilly fingers. She tried to suppress a shiver, but wasn't sure if she succeeded.

He winked at her as he lowered her hand, but didn't immediately let it go. "You can drop the mister, Willa. I'm the same guy who beat you in our fifth-grade spelling bee. And the sixth grade. And the seventh."

She remembered those defeats all too well. There was no reason to come rub her nose in them again after all these years. She drew her hand back, pretty sure he was wrong about one thing. No, he wasn't the same guy. He was the grown-up version, with a man-sized ego and a man-sized supply of arrogance. From where she was sitting, he was worse than ever.

"Thanks for coming to say hi, Angel." She forced more sweetness into her tone than she felt. "But it's a full house, so I bet you're anxious to get back to your other guests." It was a not-so-subtle reminder that only one of them was on the clock. He might own the place, but he and his staff would still be serving her and her family this evening, not the other way around.

His smile widened as if he wasn't aware he'd just been put back in his place. He shook his head in mock disapproval at her. "My staff can handle our other guests. It's not every day we get a celebrity of your caliber in here. That means you're my top priority this evening."

Her lips parted in surprise. "That's, um, very kind of you." She doubted kindness had anything to do with it, though. She wished she knew what game he was playing this time around.

Willa's mother leaned closer to murmur in her ear. "Isn't he wonderful?"

Willa clenched her teeth, keeping her smile pasted on. She could only hope that Angel's overly perceptive ears hadn't caught the terribly naïve comment. What Ella Morgan didn't know about the pesky owner of Castellano's would fill the entire state of Arizona.

Every instinct in her screamed that he wasn't giving her family the VIP treatment this evening because of her platinum albums or the fact that the Morgan name went all the way back to the founding families of Pinetop. Nope. This was payback time for him. He'd waited many, many, many years for this opportunity.

And if he was anything like the shameless little rascal he'd been in the old days, he was just getting started. She had no doubt he was telling the truth about personally overseeing their dining experience. She was equally certain that the main entrée he'd be serving her was slow-roasted crow.



CHAPTER 4: A SLICE OF OPPORTUNITY

By the time Angel returned to the kitchen, his brain was exploding with too many old memories to count — both wonderful and miserable ones. For years, he'd built up this moment in his head. He'd imagined what it would look like, feel like, and taste like on the menu the night he and Willa were finally reunited.

In person.

Face to face.

As equals at long last.

He'd hoped to shock her with his unmitigated success as a businessman and was pretty sure he'd succeeded in that area. He was now the wealthiest person in Pinetop, or at least he had been before she'd driven up in her classic Ford F-150. He truly had no idea what her net worth was — only that she, too, had found exorbitant success in her choice of careers. Though she would probably laugh him under the table if she ever found out, he was one of her biggest fans.

Before tonight, he'd also longed for the day when he could rub her snobby nose in the fact that he was no longer an outsider. Whether she liked it or not, he was now her equal on every level — from the number of college degrees hanging on the walls of his office to the level of respect he commanded in their community.

In the end, though, no nose rubbing had been necessary. She'd treated him with the utmost kindness and class, not hesitating to offer him her hand. Allowing him to kiss her fingers had been the icing on his proverbial cake. Every inch of him was still vibrating with exultation over the way her hand had felt resting in his. She hadn't pulled it away until he'd started giving her a hard time. Even then, she'd been subtle, not making a big deal about it or anything.

She was like a desert rose in the middle of a field of daisies. From the moment she'd stepped into the room this

evening, her beauty had taken his breath away. But that wasn't all she'd done.

When he'd gotten an up-close-and-personal look at the woman of his dreams, he'd received one of the biggest shocks of his life. Her expressive blue eyes were red-rimmed with misery. Just before stepping into his dinner theater — the one he'd scrimped and saved for the better part of a decade to build so he could impress her — she'd been weeping.

His heart had frozen at the realization that her tears had nothing to do with her long-awaited visit to Castellano's. The only logical explanation for them was the tragic passing of her award-winning producer and songwriter. Since Angel followed every blasted one of her social media accounts, he hadn't missed the rumors floating around about her and the owner of Desert Productions. As badly as he didn't want to believe those rumors, her grief-stricken features this evening said there'd been something to them.

It didn't change the way he felt about her, but it underscored the fact that he had his work cut out for him. Big-time.

He shoved open the door to the kitchen harder than he intended. It gave a satisfying slam against the wall, making the nearest sous chef jolt in surprise. It also served to get everyone's attention, which saved him a little time. The eyes of his entire staff were on him.

"Willa Morgan and her parents are our guests this evening." He was pretty sure he wasn't announcing something they didn't already know. Their excited nods and smiles verified that theory. So did the quick elbow nudges a few employees gave each other. A handful of them must have caught wind of the history between him and Willa.

Good. This is good.

Any knowing glances she intercepted between his employees would only enhance what he had planned for her this evening. The award-winning theater performances. The scattering of pranks across the room that his wait staff was

renowned for. By the end of the night, her thoughts would be about no man but him.

“Serve live lobsters to the three men in tuxedos at the table next to hers,” he ordered. “Bind the claws so no one gets hurt, and stand by to replace them with the roasted ones as soon as people quit laughing.”

With a snicker, two waiters dove to the lobster tank to get started on his first directive.

“Deliver a pair of butterflies in a glass dome with air holes to her table as the centerpiece,” he continued. He’d had a few specially shipped in for that purpose. “Prepare a seventy-two ounce steak for her father.” Though his list of demands was lengthy and precise, his staff members didn’t bat any eyelashes. They simply got busy. He was careful to keep the job satisfaction rate at Castellano’s high and the turnover miniscule. He’d learned when you treated folks right, they worked all the harder for you.

He retired to his office and discreetly watched their progress from his tinted window that overlooked the theater. He mentally checked off each course as it was served and each carefully choreographed prank as it was played out. He’d built his reputation on the impromptu fun and frivolity he provided his guests, saving the best pranks for the best attended evenings on Friday and Saturday. It was a signature part of the show that the audience loved and couldn’t get enough of.

He smirked when the three men in tuxedos first noticed the live lobsters crawling off the platters his wait staff set in front of them. They leaped up from their seats. One even managed to knock over his chair in the process. Willa’s mother jolted violently and clung to her daughter for a few moments. Like the other patrons sitting nearby, however, they soon dissolved into laughter.

A minute or two later, the audience stopped laughing and starting ooh-ing and ah-ing over the lavish butterfly centerpiece delivered to Willa’s table.

The only thing he was missing from this evening’s lineup of entertainment was an actual entertainment director. The last

one had resigned a month ago to accept a position in New York. As nice of a reputation as Castellano's had, it was still difficult for his company to compete with the opportunities found in bigger cities. It wasn't just the pay scales he was up against, either. His salaries were competitive. It was the fact that places like Dallas, New Orleans, and Miami could draw bigger crowds. Much bigger crowds.

Unfortunately, being down an entertainment director meant his crew's singing and dancing routines were growing a little stale. They needed a fresh dose of inspiration and the right kind of coaching. They also desperately needed to begin rehearsing for the annual Christmas pageant. Though he'd sent job advertisements across the country, he'd yet to find someone with the qualifications he was seeking who was willing to relocate to Pinetop.

Watching the closing act of tonight's show from the solidarity of his office, he winced when one of the dancers stumbled. She smoothly covered the bobble with a tumble into the nearest male dancer's arms. He caught her, spun her around, and lightly shoved her into the next male dancer. Their antics brought a fresh round of chuckles and clapping from the audience, but a professional observer would've still recognized the bobble for what it was.

And Willa was a professional. She was probably eye-rolling the rag-tag finish to their performance.

Swallowing his frustration, he returned to the kitchen and signaled for the final *piece de resistance* to be delivered to their guests. It was a recipe he'd authored for a dessert that was a cross between vanilla custard and bread pudding. To date, the recipe had won no less than five distinguished culinary awards. However, he'd not yet served it in Pinetop. He'd been waiting for the lady it had been named after to return to town first.

He left his office and jogged up the stairs of the stage to personally deliver the all-important announcement. Conversations hushed as he strode to center stage and turned on his wireless microphone. "This is the part of the evening you've all been waiting for. Dessert!"

He waited until the cheers and clapping died down before continuing. “My staff prepared it in honor of a very special guest this evening. Please help me welcome home our very own Willa Morgan!” As he spoke her name, he pivoted to look directly at her. At the same moment, a bright white spotlight flashed on to illuminate the chair where she was sitting.

As the room erupted into applause, he was pleased to note the flush of appreciation spreading across her face and the sparkle lighting her eyes. She didn’t look even remotely close to weeping.

It felt like the biggest accomplishment of Angel’s career.

When the crowd started to chant her name, her blush deepened.

He plunged onward with his carefully prepared little speech. “We thought an extra special dessert for an extra special guest called for an extra special name.” He waited until all eyes were back on him before giving the signal to his wait staff. They poured through the silver kitchen doors, bearing his prized dessert in white porcelain bowls on silver trays. As they approached the tables, they lit the bowls of pudding with tiny torches, melting the top layer of cream to an exotic drizzle. The flames only lasted a few seconds — just long enough to create a sizzle of light across the room and the delightful scent of toasted whipped cream.

Angel gave a grand flourish. “We hope you enjoy Castellano’s award-winning Willa Vanilla Pudding, folks!”

The roll of laughter across the room soon faded to gasps of delight as their guests spooned the first bites of dessert into their mouths.

He barely heard them. He was too busy watching Willa Morgan’s flush of appreciation fade to the dull red of anger.

“Gotcha,” he muttered beneath his breath as he exited the stage and strode in her direction.



WILLA HAD DIFFICULTY CHOKING DOWN HER FIRST BITE OF pudding. It wasn't because she could find any fault with the recipe, because it was seriously the most amazing burst of flavors that had ever been inside her mouth. She was simply too overcome with mortification to enjoy it.

Willa Vanilla. Angel Castellano's dreaded nickname for her from their playground days had come crashing around her ears like a mud slide. She'd never cared much for her real name, so turning it into a silly rhyme about food made it that much worse to bear.

Willa Vanilla! Willa Vanilla! Willa Vanilla! She would never forget the teasing way Angel and his small collection of migrant worker friends had chanted the nickname while chasing her and her friends home from school one afternoon. Bea had teased her mercilessly about it afterward, claiming she'd finally landed her first boyfriend.

A scrawny eight-year-old classmate who'd had the audacity to claim to the entire playground that he was going to marry her someday.

Unfortunately, the older, even more irritating version of him was marching in the direction of her table right now.

"Oh, Willa!" her mother sighed. "After all these years, that sweet boy must still care for you."

Sweet boy, my hide! The man was every bit the bane of Willa's existence as he'd been nearly twenty years ago. She was tempted to empty the remaining contents in her glass of sparkling lemonade on him. However, she didn't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing just how badly he'd gotten under her skin.

Choking down a second bite of pudding, she inwardly pleaded with the capillaries in her cheeks to quit putting out so much heat as he reached her table.

To the amusement of their onlookers, he paused in front of her to bow. A smattering of applause broke out as if he'd just completed a Broadway-worthy performance.

Willa gritted her teeth, hoping he'd trip over his expensive leather wingtips and do a face-plant. However, he straightened with the grace of Prince Charming. Without asking for permission, he pulled out the chair across from her and took a seat. He lounged back and crossed his legs with the lazy, unhurried movements of a man who owned the world.

Or half the town, in his case.

"Did you enjoy your dinner?" Though his tone was impeccably polite, the devilish glint in his eyes was anything but. He'd goaded her throughout the entire evening. It was unlikely anyone else knew it, but she did.

"The lobster prank was fantastic!" Will Morgan grinned at the memory. "And don't even get me started on my steak." Over fifty ounces of it was sitting in a to-go box for him to take home. He made a sound of pure male contentment. "I'm not sure what your folks in the back put in the steak sauce, but it's the best I've ever had." He paused before adding. "Anywhere. Ever."

"Our pleasure. I'll be sure to pass on your kind words to my staff." Angel inclined his head respectfully at Willa's father. Then he caught her gaze. "How was your dessert?"

Laced with crow like you intended. She managed to smile despite her gritted teeth. "It was everything you hoped it would be and more," she replied sweetly, hoping he'd catch the double meaning behind her words. *You're a bigger brat than ever!*

She was rewarded with the slight raise of his eyebrows. "Not even close," he informed her with another wicked look. "I'm just getting warmed up."

Her parents exchanged a puzzled look, unable to follow their cryptic conversation.

"It's a private joke," Angel assured them with another wink at her that made her want to slap him.

Ella Morgan leaned her elbows on the table and clasped her hands in supplication. "I hope you don't mind me asking, but my friends and I are dying for any news you can give us

about the annual Christmas pageant. Please, please, please assure us that you're still going to do it!"

For the first time that evening, Angel's perfect aplomb slipped. He straightened uncomfortably in his chair. "Maybe you haven't heard." He leaned closer and lowered his voice to confide, "My last entertainment director accepted a position in New York. I've been scouting for a new one but haven't found the right person yet." His gaze flickered to Willa, one eyebrow raised in question.

She was utterly dumbfounded. Was the insufferably cocky theater owner actually trying to gauge her interest in coming to work for him? *As if!*

When she didn't answer, he turned his questioning gaze on her mother.

Willa's heart sank at the realization that he'd been playing an angle all evening. He hadn't simply been slathering her family with VIP treatment due to her celebrity status. He'd been angling for a new entertainment director all along, and apparently he had his eye on her for the job.

If looks could kill, hers would have fried him to a crisp like a slab of bacon in an iron skillet.

"Oh, sweetie! Did you hear that?" Ella Morgan reached over to squeeze Willa's hand in mid-air as she was about to lift her glass of sparkling lemonade. It was probably the only reason the contents of the glass didn't come flying across the table at their host.

"I heard." She kept her voice falsely sweet and falsely smooth. "I wish you the best in finding the right person for this...fine establishment." She deliberately paused in the middle of her compliment, just enough to make him wonder if she was being sincere. Which she most certainly wasn't! She was inwardly seething from his audacity. Her only reason for driving into town was to celebrate the holidays with her family, for crying out loud! Not to cover down for his latest staff shortage.

“Thank you.” His tone was bland as he posed his next question. “How long do you plan on staying in town?”

“I haven’t decided yet,” she gritted out, no longer able to hide her irritation. *Back off, mister!* Her personal schedule was absolutely none of his business. “You know how it is with performing arts,” she added vaguely. The only reason she was keeping up any pretense at civility at this point was for the sake of her parents. No way was she allowing Angel Castellano, of all people, to ruin her first evening home with them.

“You’re at least staying until Christmas, right?” Her mother looked alarmed.

Willa bit her lower lip, nodding. Her mother’s words were a painful reminder that the only reason she had that kind of time was because Desert Productions was in the process of dropping her from their label. If she’d bothered returning any of Mick Rivers’ calls lately, she might’ve already been booted.

The worry lines disappeared from the edges of her mother’s eyes. It was replaced by a speculative look that made Willa inwardly groan. Ella Morgan was undoubtedly connecting all the wrong dots between Angel’s hunt for a new entertainment director and her daughter’s temporarily empty schedule.

She shot a pleading look at her mother, giving her a slight head shake when Angel wasn’t looking, but her mother didn’t seem to notice.

A flush of happiness rose to her cheeks as she reached over to pat Willa’s hand. “You should apply for the job, sweetie. It would be so perfect for you. I mean, the two of you already know each other.” She gestured hopefully between them.

“I can’t.” The answer mechanically flew from her lips. On principle, she refused to buckle beneath Angel’s shameless manipulation. “My agent is working on lining up some things for me in January,” she lied, hoping it would lay the matter to rest. “No rest for the weary.”

“Oh, sweetie, you’re so talented that I’m sure you can juggle whatever your agent has in mind and still help out with the Christmas pageant.” Her mother impulsively twisted in her chair to give Willa the full blast of her pleading expression. “The only thing that could possibly top your visit home would be seeing you in action again.”

Willa’s lips opened and closed, but no words came out. Her life was an open book. Everybody who was anybody knew her reasons for being absent from the stage for so long.

Her mother gasped as she watched the play of expressions on her daughter’s face. “Oh, my goodness, sweetie! I didn’t mean that the way it sounded. If you’re not ready to jump back into show business, then don’t. I was only speaking from the standpoint of a proud mother. ”

But her expression had grown so sad that Willa wasn’t convinced. Her father’s wrinkled forehead did nothing to allay her suspicions. Something was wrong. Something that the two of them weren’t telling her.

She shot a quick glance at Angel, but he looked as puzzled as she felt. He wasn’t playing a part this time.

During the momentary lull in their conversation, Ella Morgan swayed a little in her seat.

Willa felt the color leave her face. Something was definitely wrong with her mother. And whatever it was, it was making her anxious to see her daughter in action again.

Possibly for the last time.

“I’d like to apply for the job.” The words burst raggedly from Willa. Her gaze never left her mother’s face. “You’re right, Mom. I’m on vacation. My schedule is wide open for an interview.” The look she sent Angel Castellano bordered on pleading. It sort of killed her how quickly she’d been forced to reconsider his mocking offer.

He studied her for a moment with an expression she couldn’t read. “I can meet with you tomorrow morning after church. My office is in the back.” He nodded at the wide tinted window overlooking the theater.

She followed his gaze and bit her lip at the realization he'd probably watched her the entire evening from his throne.

"If our meeting runs long, you're welcome to join me for lunch afterward." His teasing smile was back in full force.

She wanted to crawl under the table. To be reduced to begging for a job from Angel Castellano was bad enough. The idea of joining him for lunch afterward was like rubbing salt in the wound.

It was like the fifth-grade spelling bee all over again. He'd bested her yet again, and now he was gloating. Her only consolation was that they both knew she was only attending the interview for her mother's sake. That reduced it to a half win, right?

And if he really thought she was sticking around for lunch afterward, he was in for a rude awakening. It didn't take much to get rumors started in their small town. She had zero interest in feeding that beast by being seen at a table for two with him.

Her father stood and said something about calling it a night as he assisted her mother to her feet. Angel stood as well and signaled to the nearest waiter. The man nodded and took off in a hurry. He returned only seconds later with a small white cardboard box.

"Dessert to go," Angel supplied offhandedly, holding it out to her.

"Thanks." The word clogged in her throat, nearly choking her. If the box contained more of his Willa Vanilla Pudding, she was throwing it away as soon as she got home.

Willa was so distracted by her mother's pale, drawn appearance that she ended up not opening Angel's to-go box that evening, after all.

The next morning, however, she wondered if she'd imagined how poor her mother had looked the evening before.

Ella Morgan beat her to the kitchen and already had their first round of tea brewing by the time Willa joined her. "What's in the box?" She pointed at the white cardboard box resting on the counter beside the kitchen sink.

Willa grimaced, knowing it was probably more of the Willa Vanilla Pudding. At least, she had a good excuse for throwing it out now that it had sat out all night.

Reaching for the box, she frowned thoughtfully at the snowflakes etched into the sides of it. *That's interesting.* She'd seen a box like this before.

Exactly like this one.

In Phoenix.

On my doorstep.

It was suddenly harder to breathe as she held the box up to examine it more closely. It was a perfect match to the one she'd received the night before driving to Pinetop. Her heart skipped a beat.

What game are you playing this time, Angel Castellano?

She wordlessly opened the lid and stopped breathing altogether. For the space of a few frantic heartbeats, all she could do was stare at the three gingerbread cookies nestled there.

No! I'm either dreaming. Or hallucinating. Or...

She dragged in an incredulous breath, unable to believe what she was seeing. To be more accurate, she didn't *want* to believe it.

The cookies were cut in the shape of angels, trimmed in delicate swirls of white icing. All three were identical to the angel cookie ornament she'd left hanging on her Christmas tree in Phoenix.

Why? She caught her trembling lower lip between her teeth. How could Angel Castellano, of all people in the world, have known what he'd scrawled on his card was exactly what she'd needed to hear at that exact time on that exact evening? She replayed the message in her head.

I thought you might need this.

She'd known the man for nearly twenty years, long enough to know he wasn't that sensitive, kind, or thoughtful.

Or was he?

She bit down harder on her lower lip, trying to make sense of the frenzied tangle of emotions his latest gift had stirred. Had she misjudged his intentions last night? She squeezed her eyelids shut, wondering if she'd done far worse than misjudge him for a single evening. What if she'd been misjudging him for years?

Her mom had always claimed that boys only teased the girls they liked. Was it possible that Angel's incessant taunting as a child had simply been a boyish attempt to get her attention? If so, it had worked. Not the way he'd intended, of course, since she'd ultimately left town and all but forgotten his existence.

Until the night his angel cookie ornament had arrived at her door.

She opened her eyes to gaze in stunned fascination again at the three matching cookies in the box. Was this his way of drawing her attention back to him yet again?

"Oh, wow!" Her mother reached for one of the cookies and took a tiny nibble from its foot. She made a soft humming sound in the back of her throat. "I don't know how that man does it, but he makes the most incredible gingerbread cookies in the world. My friends are convinced he adds a pinch of holiday magic to each and every one of them."

Magic? Willa blinked at her. More like mayhem! Since he was a scrawny kid of eight, Angel had been leaving a mile-wide trail of it everywhere he went.

Funny how his trail of mayhem had managed to stretch all the way to her heart this time. In the past, he'd provoked and challenged her. Last night, however, he'd stirred a whole new set of trouble by kissing her hand and making her feel things she didn't want to feel.

Not from him, at any rate.

Then he'd taken it a step further by revealing himself as the sender of the gift that had brought her into town. The baker

of the magical cookies. The author of the most heartfelt note anyone had ever written her.

What do you want from me, Angel Castellano?

Though Willa wasn't sure she wanted to know the answer to that question, something told her she was about to find out.



CHAPTER 5: INTERVIEW WITH AN ANGEL

Willa pulled outfit after outfit from her suitcases, unable to decide what to wear to church. It wasn't the church service that had her insides in knots. It was the interview that would follow it.

She didn't want to show up overdressed or underdressed, nor did she want to wear anything that Angel might consider flirty.

This is not a date!

She wasn't sure why she felt the need to keep telling herself that. It was an interview — nothing more and nothing less — one that she fully intended to nail for her mother's sake. Though Ella Morgan had insisted her dizzy spell last night was simply due to tiredness, Willa still couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to it. Maybe after she'd been home for a few weeks, her mom would be willing to open up a little more about what was going on with her.

I hope.

She yanked three formal gowns from one of her suitcases and flung them on the bed. Six other winter dresses followed. She unzipped the next three suitcases and unearthed a few business suits, along with a pile of jeans, a few pairs of velvet pants she'd worn during concerts, fringed jackets, sequined vests, and a collection of winter scarves in a full rainbow of colors. What she'd packed was a direct reflection of the chaotic emotions churning inside her. All the fear and uncertainty.

But that was about to change!

Ever since she'd agreed to the interview last night, she'd been experiencing a driving need to convince the cocky Angel Castellano that she wasn't merely another washed up singer. A has-been.

She still had something to offer, and she was going to prove it. Not just to the guy she'd competed against as a kid, but to the rest of the world. To petty small-minded people like

Mick Rivers and his grasping wannabe of a niece. To everyone who'd kicked her while she was down.

Selecting a navy pantsuit, she held it up in front of the dressing mirror.

Perfect!

It was both professional and decisive looking. It practically shouted *management material*.

She paired the suit with a blue and white striped blouse, then debated whether she should switch out the color of her manicure. After a moment of deliberation, she decided to leave her nails white. Understated was the look she was going for today. During her interview, she wanted Angel to spend less time looking at her and more time listening to her.

She twisted her hair into a loose updo, not fighting the strands that immediately slid back down around her temples and cheeks. Like last night, she applied minimal makeup, enough to enhance but not overpower. Her vision for the pageant, not her personal appearance, would take front and center.

The final touch to her outfit was a silver necklace with a delicate angel wing pendant. Desert Productions had gifted them to all their employees at the time of Billy's passing. She'd worn it every day since.

She'd considered leaving it off for the interview, but it was starting to feel like the angel wing pendant represented the present as well as the past. What she'd lost, but also what she'd found along the way.

It was still dark out — too early to go downstairs and start making a racket at the coffee dispenser in the kitchen. She moved to her bedroom window instead, and sank down on the window seat. As far as she was concerned, every bedroom window should have a window seat. While growing up, it had been the perfect place to reflect and dream.

The faint glow of pre-dawn was just enough to illuminate her bedroom, transforming it into a rosy dollhouse. Her queen-

sized bed was covered with a nine-patch quilt that was pieced together in varying shades of lavender and white.

Turning her head to gaze out the window, she could barely make out the distant glow of streetlights in one direction. The line of evergreens between here and Main Street mostly shielded them from view.

In the other direction, she had a clear view of the thirteenth and newest house at the end of the street. Though there were no lights on in the windows, she detected a sliver of movement. A door on the second-story balcony opened, and the silhouette of a man in a Stetson took shape as he stepped outside. He walked to the railing to lean over it, propping a boot on one of the lower rungs.

She blinked at the realization that he was facing her bedroom window.

Seriously? She pressed her shoulders a little flatter against the wall in order to remain hidden behind the curtain.

A swirl of smoke rose from the man's mouth. No, not smoke. She was pretty sure the white rising from his mouth was from the warmth of his breath. He was either muttering to himself or singing. Since it was Sunday morning, he might even be praying.

She didn't realize she was leaning closer to the window for a better look until the man abruptly straightened. When he tipped the brim of his hat in her direction, her heart raced at the knowledge that he must have caught sight of her.

In the morning light that was growing ever brighter, she detected something eerily familiar about his height and the way he held his shoulders.

And then she knew.

It was Angel Castellano. *Of course!* She rolled her eyes, unable to imagine anyone else in town building something so over the top. As with everything else he did, he'd been making a statement when he'd constructed it — making it clear that he was no longer an outsider. That he was one of them now.

But better. You think you're better than the rest of us.

She yanked the curtain closed and stomped away from the window. She hated that she could no longer enjoy a moment of solitude in her own stinking bedroom without the irritating man's intrusion.

For a moment, she allowed herself the petty pleasure of hoping he'd step back inside his ridiculously large home and get lost in it. That way, she wouldn't have to endure his gloating expression during their upcoming interview over the fact that he'd caught her staring at him. In her defense, she hadn't even known he lived there!

The church bells gonged in the distance, ringing in the morning and reminding her that the century-old cathedral was within easy walking distance. In the past, most of her neighbors had opted to bundle up and make the short walk instead of driving to church. She hoped her mother felt up to maintaining that tradition this morning.

She hurried downstairs to find out, as well as grab a quick bite of leftover quiche.

"You look nice," her mother murmured as she breezed into the kitchen. She was already seated at the breakfast table in a royal blue velvet dress. A pair of brown snakeskin boots were crisscrossed beneath her chair.

"So do you." Willa was relieved to see how rested she looked. "I would've worn a dress, too, but I thought this made more sense for an interview." She waved at her pantsuit as she made a beeline for the coffee dispenser. Brewing a cup to go with her quiche, she joined her mother at the table.

"It's merely a formality," Ella Morgan assured with a flutter of her hand. "You and Angel have known each other your entire lives. You both know what you're getting into."

Do I? Willa's heart stuttered a few beats. She wasn't nearly as confident as her mother was about where things stood between her and Angel Castellano these days. Though she agreed he was very much interested in hiring her, she had no idea what kind of boss he was going to be. She sort of dreaded finding out.

If I find the situation unbearable, I can always quit.

But he had to know that, too. Something told her he wasn't going to make things that easy on either of them.

Her father joined them a few minutes later with their coats draped over one arm.

"Aren't you going to eat?" Willa eyed him in concern.

"Already did," he assured with a grin as he held up her mother's coat first to assist her into it.

After tugging on gloves and grabbing their hats from the hall tree, they stepped outside to the front porch. Willa was delighted to see their neighbors strolling in small clusters up the street. It was just like old times, with one exception.

A man separated himself from one of the clusters and approached their chalet. Pausing at the base of the porch steps, he tipped the brim of his Stetson at them.

Willa's heartbeat sped as she recognized Angel Castellano. His searing once-over made it a little harder to breathe. So did the fact that he looked every shade of incredible in his black overcoat and trousers, with his longish brown hair dragging his collar. He probably knew he was good looking, too. As if the grown up version of him needed another weapon in his arsenal to use against her!

"Good morning, Willa!" He crooked an arm at her.

She paused in confusion at the top of the steps with her hand resting on the railing. Hearing her name on his lips made it sound less countrified and more like a caress. It was unnerving.

Equally unnerving was the prospect of strolling arm-in-arm all the way to church with him, because it would totally give people the wrong idea. Unfortunately, it appeared that was exactly what he expected them to do.

"Oh, thank goodness," her mother exclaimed while her father escorted her down the steps. "Since there are icy patches all over the road, you can help each other stay on your feet."

She shot a worried look over her shoulder at her daughter's high-heeled ankle boots. "Plus, it'll allow you to get an early start on your interview. I, for one, can't *wait* to hear your hiring decision, Angel!"

Very subtle, Mom. Gritting her teeth, Willa hurried down the steps after her parents, yanking the tie of her white fur swing coat a little tighter. The sooner they reached the church, the sooner they could go their separate ways.

She'd tried to ignore Angel's arm, but he either misunderstood her intentions or purposely ignored them. Reaching for her gloved hand, he placed it on his arm and gently wrapped her fingers around his bicep.

Though she tried not to think about it, it was hard not to notice the way he flexed beneath her fingers. Clearly, he did more than whip up gingerbread dough for a living. Then again, with a home as ridiculously large as his, he probably owned his own gym.

He bent his head to speak in her ear. "Nice boots."

"Thanks." She kept her voice bland, unsure if he was complimenting her or making fun of her choice of footwear. "I owe you a thank you for one other thing," she added in the hopes of clearing the air between them before things got any more awkward.

"Yeah? What's that?"

As if you don't already know! In her agitation, she tightened her fingers around his arm, totally forgetting her plan to drop his arm as soon as possible. "For the cookies."

"You're welcome." His expression grew hooded as he flicked a glance at her face. "Did you like them?"

She ignored the question. "They were identical to the cookie that was delivered to my doorstep the night before I drove home to Pinetop." She scanned the bronze angles and planes of his features.

"Were they, now?" His expression remained hooded.

“Why did you do it?” she demanded impatiently. She was dying to know.

“Why do you assume it was me?” he countered. “My staff and I do a lot of baking, Willa. We put together dozens of to-go boxes every day. Anyone in town could’ve sent one of my cookies to you.”

“True.” *So, we’re back to playing games.* Her lips tightened. She should’ve expected his caginess. He was always working an angle. Though she hadn’t wanted him to be the sender, she was more certain than ever that the obnoxious man at her side had done the deed. “Well, whoever sent it wrote me the nicest note,” she informed him in a falsely sweet voice. Two could play at this game.

“You mean he didn’t sign it?” Angel sounded mildly derisive.

She shook her head.

“What a joker!”

She shot him a *gotcha* look. “Who says it was a guy? Like you pointed out, it could’ve been anyone.”

“Because it’s you.” He snorted, not looking the least bit cornered. “Trust me. It was a guy.”

She flushed, feeling like she’d lost ground again. Locking horns with the older version of Angel was starting to feel like being caught in a game where the rules kept changing.

At her sudden silence, he pressed, “What did the note say?”

“Six measly words,” she shot back uncharitably. “Maybe it was my own imagination filling in the rest of it. You know... the nice part.”

“Six words, huh?” His dark gaze twinkled devilishly at her. “Since we already established the fact that it was from a guy, it probably said something like this. Will you marry me, Willa Morgan?” Raising a hand in the air, he counted off each word as he uttered it. “Yep. That’s six words.”

A choking cough escaped her. In light of his childhood promise that he intended to marry her someday, their current conversation felt like more than a random guessing game. Undercurrents of awareness were zinging between them.

“Nothing that exciting,” she assured in a breathy voice. “All it said was, *I thought you might need this.*” She fell silent again, still unable to deny the truth behind the message.

“Did you?” Angel quirked one dark eyebrow at her.

“I did.” She hated admitting it to him, but her emotions were too muddled to fabricate another pithy comeback.

The church was in sight now. Her gaze latched on to it like it was a lifeline.

But Angel seemed in no hurry to get her there. He slowed their pace, allowing the distance between them and her parents to widen. “I’m glad one of my cookies found their way to you in Phoenix. If it brought you any comfort—”

“Who said I needed comfort?” She interrupted sharply.

“’Tis the season, Willa.” He didn’t seem too bothered by her outburst. “Between now and Christmas, my staff is under strict orders to bake tidings of comfort and joy into every entrée.” He reached over to lightly cover her hand with his. “I kind of like the idea that one of our cookies managed to spread a little Christmas cheer from our ovens to your home. Like most of the locals, I’m a big fan of yours.”

A big fan, huh? His abrupt change in tone made her head spin. Then again, that was probably the result he was gunning for — keeping her emotionally off balance. If she wasn’t careful, he’d have the clear upper hand during their interview.

She breathed in and out for a moment, searching for a way to put him in his place. “Just to be clear, I’ve never required compliments or gifts to motivate me to do my job. If you truly plan on hiring me, I only wish to be treated with respect.” *The same as everyone else.*

“I can do both, Willa.” He paused to let his words sink in. “If you’re not ready to take my word for it, just ask anyone who works for me.”

Though her heart skipped a beat at his caressing tone, hers remained chilly. “I’m mostly concerned about being treated with respect.” She’d been the butt of enough of his pranks already.

He abruptly removed his hand from hers. “This is starting to feel like third grade all over again.” His voice matched hers with coldness. “You just told me to back off, didn’t you?”

“Only because you’re a shameless opportunist,” she seethed. “When I didn’t immediately jump on your hint about a job offer last night, you used my mom to sway my sympathies. That’s how you operate. That’s how you’ve always operated.” She gestured angrily at him. “Capitalizing on every small advantage that ever came your way.” She pictured him clawing and climbing his way to the top.

“I fail to see how that makes me a bad person.” His dark gaze had grown steely. “Some might even call it the American way.”

“I don’t care what you call it. Just leave my family out of your...whatever this is.” She wasn’t sure what game he was playing, and she no longer cared. They were too old for games. “Your desperate need for approval or respectability or whatever it is you’re still seeking from us after all these years. You don’t need it anymore, Angel. You never did. Can’t you see that? You made it on your own.” If he’d been waiting for her to admit it, she could give him that.

“Yeah.” His shoulders grew rigid. “I did.” He didn’t look too happy about it, though, which she found surprising. “Forgive me for hoping we could lay aside our childish differences after all this time and finally be friends. Guess I was mistaken.”

Her heart ached guiltily at his words. She hadn’t started off their walk to church with the intention of picking a fight with him. However, it was as much his fault as hers. He was always crowding her, always goading her, always bringing out the worst in her.

They resumed their stroll in bitter silence. Only when they reached the church did he speak again. “You’re right about my

interest in hiring you, but you're wrong about my reasons." He angled his body between her and the busy street, using his hat to fan away the snowy over spray kicked up by a passing truck.

Wishing he wasn't standing so close, she cast a nervous glance around them. People were milling outside the beautiful old cathedral. Several were casting curious glances in their direction.

His mouth twisted at her obvious discomfort over being seen with him. "I'm not the monster you're trying so hard to make me out to be, Willa."

"I never said you were."

He talked right over her. "The fact that I try to bring only the finest talent on board at my dinner theater is not a character flaw. The biggest reason I want to hire you is because you're the best at what you do. If you're still too popular, too insecure, or too stuck up to come work for a man who wasn't born into one of Pinetop's founding families, it's your loss. As you pointed out, I was successful long before you returned to town." He slapped his Stetson back on his head. "I'll be waiting in my office after church for you to make up your mind." He turned away and stalked toward the covered portico.

Her parents were lingering there on one side of the double entrance doors, probably waiting for her to join them before they headed inside. Angel shook her father's hand when he reached them and pressed a kiss to her mother's cheek. Then he entered the building without a backward glance.

Her parents stared her way in puzzlement. Disappointment clouded Ella Morgan's gaze. But before Willa could join them, Bea Ashburn sailed up on her husband's arm.

Willa inwardly groaned. She was in no mood for any more confrontations. She was still too raw from her clash with Angel.

Save me a seat, she mouthed to her parents. Her mother nodded, shivering from the mountain breeze, and her father

quickly led her inside the church.

“I’ll catch up with you and the girls, hon!” Bea released her husband’s arm to give Willa a perfume-scented hug. Instead of heading into the church as his wife had suggested, however, Dr. Andrew Ashburn waited quietly to one side, watching their exchange with an unreadable expression. The Ashburns’ nanny hovered a few steps behind him with their china doll twins in tow. The girls were wearing matching navy dresses over thick white stockings and boots, plus navy berets that made them look like little sailors.

Or child models.

She wouldn’t put it past Bea to drag her offspring through the whole beauty pageant nonsense her own mom had put her through as a child. *Like mother, like daughter.* The two of them had tried to talk Ella Morgan into getting Willa involved, as well. Fortunately, Ella Morgan had stood her ground on the issue.

“You look like you just stepped out of a boardroom.” Bea’s nose wrinkled as her gaze traveled across Willa’s simple pantsuit and collided with her designer ankle boots from Italy. “Sweet boots!” She was a woman who recognized quality labels. Her own outfit was Prada from head to toe.

“You look pretty amazing yourself,” Willa murmured, well aware that her friend’s boardroom comment hadn’t been intended as a compliment. Funny how she was just now realizing that Bea had never been able to see past brands and labels. Once upon a time, Willa had been guilty of the same thing. Angel had more or less just finished accusing her of that. The fact that he wasn’t wrong filled her with shame.

What he didn’t know was that it had been a long time since she’d been that person. Like him, she’d changed. Maybe it was time to set the record straight with him about a few things. He was right about finally setting aside their childhood differences. She wasn’t convinced that would automatically make them friends, but she couldn’t honestly expect him to treat her with more respect if she wasn’t willing to extend him the same courtesy in return.

She glanced in the direction he'd gone, suddenly wishing she hadn't let him walk away angry like that.

Still thinking the worst of me.

Bea followed her gaze, her expression turning shrewd. "Was that Angel Castellano I saw walking with you to church?"

We both know it was. Willa didn't know why Bea was being so catty about it. As Angel had so painfully pointed out, they weren't in third grade anymore. It was time to grow up.

Bea giggled, not waiting for an answer. "He made his feelings about you pretty clear at dinner last night, huh?" She dropped her voice to a conspiratorial note. "It's hard to believe a nobody like him is still crushing on you after all this time!"

A nobody? Willa's lips parted in shock. Was that Bea's real opinion of him? Whether she approved of Angel Castellano or not, no one with half a brain could deny his success as a businessman. He was hardworking, talented, and full of determination. He always had been. No one had cut him any slack along the way, either. Certainly not the snob standing in front of her.

"I, um..." Willa found herself at a loss for words, which was rare.

"Say no more," Bea breezed. "Your expression already says it all." She hooked her arm through Willa's and towed her the rest of the way to the church entrance. "Not that I blame you for taking a second glance in his direction. I probably would, too, if I were in your shoes."

What's that supposed to mean? Willa's mouth tightened. It was like Bea was calling her old and desperate or something.

"He's rich, gorgeous, and owns an incredible home." Bea expelled a gusty sigh. "If only he didn't have so much...how should I put it? Dirt under his nails?" Her painted lips twisted sourly.

Willa couldn't have been more appalled by Bea's disgustingly unkind reference to his background as the son of migrant workers. It was beneath her to continue this

conversation. Her heart clenched in righteous indignation as she looked for a way to extricate herself from it.

Without meaning to, her gaze sought out his the moment they stepped inside the vestibule. She found him standing a few feet inside the open doors leading to the sanctuary. He was speaking with the minister. His head was framed in a perfect beam of light pouring through one of the stained glass windows. It created a set of prisms along the floor at his feet while forming a white glow around his head, giving him an angelic appearance. His head swiveled her way, and his expression darkened when he noted who she was with.

A fresh wave of shame washed over Willa. She offered him an apologetic smile.

He gave her a rigid nod and resumed his conversation with the minister.

“Yummy,” Bea sighed in her ear as the two men turned to walk down the aisle together. “If only...”

Unable to bear any more of her hateful commentary, Willa abruptly unlinked their arms. “My parents saved me a spot.” Ignoring Bea’s gasp of indignation, she threaded her way through the crowd in search of her parents.

She found Ella Morgan in one of the pews on the left, waving frantically at her. “There you are!” She stepped eagerly into the aisle to usher her daughter into the pew. “We were worried that Bea might steal you away from us during the service.”

“Not a chance.” Willa gave her a quick hug before moving in to stand beside her father. Her mother claimed the aisle spot, making a Willa sandwich out of her like they’d done so often when she was a kid.

Out of the corner of her eye, Willa watched Angel take a seat on one of the front pews, still conversing with Reverend Gilman. There was a sense of comfortable familiarity between the two men that indicated they were friends. *Interesting.*

Her interest in their relationship increased exponentially when the minister opened the service with prayer, then

beckoned Angel to the platform.

Mystified, Willa watched him remove his coat and suit jacket and drape them across the back of the pew. Then he strode up the platform stairs. Two rows of red-robed singers filed in from a side door and took their positions between a pair of enormous Christmas trees. They opened their choir books.

You have got to be kidding me! Willa shot an incredulous look at her parents. “When did the First Church of Pinetop get its own choir?” she hissed to her mother.

“When Angel showed up.”

Though Willa could feel her mother’s curious gaze on her, she couldn’t tear her eyes from the blur of Angel’s white shirtsleeves as he directed the choir. Though their four-part harmony was lovely, she was more engrossed in his precise, efficient movements that seemed to draw just the right notes and inflection from each singer at just the right time. On top of his skills as a chef turned business owner, he was apparently a talented musician, as well.

Her gaze narrowed on his deliciously broad shoulders. Was there anything he wasn’t good at? It was starting to seem as if everything the man touched turned to gold.

Strangely enough, the idea didn’t irk her the way it would have in the past. Maybe it was because she was still in defensive mode following Bea’s heartless criticism. Or maybe it was due to Ella Morgan’s obvious partiality towards him. She’d always been a good judge of character.

Or maybe it was because of some other reason entirely.



AT THE CLOSE OF THE SERVICE, WILLA IMPLORED HER PARENTS not to delay their lunch plans because of her. “Go on a date or something.” She shooed them out the double doors of the church.

“That’s not a bad idea.” Ella smiled warmly at her husband. “Let’s do it at home, though. I was planning on making it a surprise, but now is as good a time as any to tell you I have chili simmering in the crock pot.”

Her husband’s gaze widened with pleasure and appreciation. “You’re still the one, babe.” He reached for her hand and gave her an impromptu twirl in the parking lot.

Willa was surprised at how limp and thin her mother’s hair looked against her shoulders. It was almost as if...

She’s losing her hair! How did I not notice this before?

Now wasn’t the time to make an issue of it, though. She would renew her inquiries into her mom’s health as soon as she gave her half a chance. It was with a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach that Willa excused herself from them to head to her interview.

Ignoring the attempts of a few other church members to draw her into a conversation, she hurried another block and a half up Main Street. Walking around to the back of the theater, she took a seat on the lone bench resting outside the door of the theater’s administrative offices.

Someone had painted the door red. It made her smile.

Before knocking, she took a moment to simply breathe through the welcome stretch of silence. It was nice being away from the jabbering crowds of people at church. It was especially nice being away from Bea’s incessant complaining.

She fiddled with her navy scarf, tugging on the knot to secure it more snugly against her neck. Every day that brought them closer to Christmas had also come with a drop of a few degrees. The mountain ranges were white with snow, and the eaves of the storefronts were encrusted with icicles.

The scrape of a boot against the sidewalk alerted her to the fact someone was approaching.

Angel Castellano strolled around the building like a man on a mission. He slowed at the sight of her, his jaw tightening. “I wasn’t sure you’d come. What changed your mind?”

Surprised to discover he wasn't already inside waiting for her, she ignored the underlying barb his words held. She knew she deserved his censure.

"You did." It fascinated her that it had taken only one glance for him to determine she'd come to accept his job offer.

He eyed her cautiously. "I'm listening."

"You're not the only one who can recognize talent. I'm a pretty decent critic myself. What you did with the church choir back there..." She smiled at the memory. "I want to be a part of the changes taking place in this town. The good ones, anyway." She no longer wished to be a part of Bea's inner circle.

"For how long, Willa?" His voice was low and husky with hope.

It was a question she didn't have an answer for. She shook her head, hating how uncertain her future was. "Let me direct the Christmas pageant for you. It's all I have to offer today. I..." She glanced away, no longer able to meet his probing gaze. "You may have heard that my recording company is under new management." She swallowed hard, trying not to think about Billy. "Can I be perfectly honest with you?"

"Always."

"I came home to Pinetop to figure out what comes next for me."

The metal slats beneath her shifted as he took a seat beside her. His broad frame filled the bench, making their knees bump. "I can work with that." He draped an arm behind her, lightly cupping her shoulders. A few hours ago, she would've been furious by such a bold, presumptive move on his part. Not any longer.

She shot him a grateful look for agreeing to hire her under such a liquid time frame and found herself unable to look away. His dark gaze was filled with such hopeless longing that her breathing grew shallow.

Something was changing between them. Something she couldn't define. Something that made her want to both run and

stay.



CHAPTER 6: OLD AND NEW WOUNDS

Monday dawned colder than the day before, but with clear skies. A knock sounded on the Morgans' front door as Willa shrugged into her coat.

"I'll see who it is," she called to her mom, peeking into the entry foyer mirror to tuck a tendril of dark hair behind one ear. She wasn't sure why she bothered. The wind would toss it around again once she stepped outside. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail today, partly to get it out of her face and partly because it was one of her favorite hairstyles.

It was her first day on the job at Castellano's. Dressing for it had been a full hour of agonizing indecision. Yesterday, she'd made up her mind to keep things strictly professional between her and Angel, but that plan had expired. Whether she liked it or not, things were no longer strictly professional between them. They simply had too much history.

After debating her many clothing options, she'd finally decided to go back to being herself. Her friends back in Phoenix were accustomed to her wearing whatever she wanted to wear whenever she wanted to wear it. This morning, she'd been in the mood to don a pair of black fringed pants with a lacy black blouse that could be worn on or off the shoulders. The neckline was framed in black tulle lace, and the bodice was embroidered with turquoise flowers. She'd strung several turquoise necklaces together on top of it in varying lengths. To complete the outfit, she'd added a thick brown leather belt and matching cowgirl boots.

Her mother bustled into the foyer in a pair of brown corduroy slacks with a beige pullover turtleneck sweater. A fuzzy ivory vest was draped over it, and a long, teal scarf was loosely knotted around her neck. "At the rate you're going, whoever is standing out there is going to turn into an icicle," she chided.

"Sorry!" Willa discreetly eyed her mother through the mirror, noting that she was extra bundled up this morning.

Most people peeled off a few layers indoors to avoid roasting, but her mom seemed perfectly content to keep them on.

“That’s okay.” Ella Morgan’s eyes crinkled with humor as she reached for the door handle. “It’s probably Flash. We’re expecting another delivery this morning.”

Willa’s gaze fastened in heart-thudding anticipation on the door. *Or it might be Angel, stopping to pick me up on his way to the dinner theater.* She kind of hoped it was.

When her mother pulled open the door, Dr. Ashburn was standing on the other side. He took one look at Willa and mumbled something about paying them a quick visit on his way to the office.

“Good morning, doc!” Her mother beamed her usual welcoming smile at him. “Come in and join us for some tea. Or coffee. And before you ask about my health,” she tossed a happy glance over her shoulder at her daughter, “I feel absolutely wonderful! How could I not with Willa in town for Christmas?”

Andrew sent Willa a two-fingered salute as he stepped into the foyer. “It’s good to see you again, Willa.”

“It’s nice to see you, too.” She wiggled her fingers in the air at him. It had been no real surprise to her or anyone else in Pinetop when he’d grown from a bashful, studious child into the town doctor. His dad had been the town doctor before him, and his grandfather before that.

His face was ruddy from the winter temperatures, despite the thick plaid scarf that covered it. He unwound it and draped it on the hall tree. His fedora came off next, revealing a receding hairline. To Willa’s knowledge, he was the only man in town who wore a fedora — probably Bea’s doing. She’d always been big into European fashion.

He stepped closer to Willa with his hand outstretched. She shook it, wondering how he’d survived living with Bea for so long. Their marriage was one of those relationships the town had more or less expected. They’d grown up next door to each other, moved in the same social circles, blah, blah, blah, yawn.

He was kinder than his wife, a fortunate trait for someone whose income was tied directly to his bedside manner. Though Willa didn't mean for her mind to go there, she took a little unholy satisfaction in the fact that Bea's husband was a good three or four inches shorter than Angel. And though the four of them were roughly the same age, Andrew Ashburn looked considerably older. It was kind of ironic, considering Bea's endless trash talk about Angel, that she was married to a paunchy, balding man.

Just stop! Willa gave herself a mental shake as she returned to the mirror, fearing she was more like Bea than she wanted to be. She donned her favorite brown felt Stetson, reminding herself that Andrew couldn't help what he looked like. He was clearly on great terms with her mother. That was good enough for her.

"I have an appointment in town, so I'd better scoot." She purposely kept her words vague, blowing a kiss to her mom as she headed for the door.

Ella Morgan clapped her hands. "Willa has agreed to direct the Christmas pageant," she informed Andrew excitedly. "Isn't that fantastic?"

Willa wanted to groan out loud. Everyone in Pinetop knew what a gossip the doctor's wife was. Her mother might as well have shouted the news from the rooftop of their chalet.

Andrew Ashburn's gaze narrowed on Willa. "Guess that means you'll be spending a lot of time at Castellano's over the next few weeks?"

She shrugged. "I'll be putting in as many hours as it takes to deliver a Christmas pageant Pinetop can be proud of." Waving goodbye, she hastily made her exit. *Thanks a lot, Mom!* She so wasn't looking forward to her next conversation with Bea.

Though the sun was out, there was a bite in the air that gnawed right through Willa's coat. She'd always preferred walking the short distance to Main Street, but she soon wished she'd driven Tess's truck. Every few steps, someone stepped outside of the shops to hug and reminisce about old times. She

tried to keep their conversations brief, but more friendly faces kept popping around corners and joining her on the sidewalk. It was a quarter 'til ten when she finally arrived at Castellano's, a full forty-five minutes past her agreed upon start time.

Angel met her at the door to the administrative offices, his upper lip curled. "You're late." Irritation simmered in his dark gaze.

"I'm sorry. People kept stopping me. I'll drive next time. Promise!" She treated him to a sunny smile but didn't receive one in return.

She drank in the sight of him in his leather vest and white button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled. He was seriously killing it in jeans and boots today, though she could've lived without the impatience snarling up his face.

"You know what? I'm the most understanding guy around when it comes to illnesses, injuries, and rescuing children and small animals from traffic. Anything else just sounds like an excuse to me."

Oka-a-ay. She gaped at him. "I apologized and said it won't happen again. We're all professionals here."

"Are we, Willa?" He glanced pointedly at his watch. "You're almost an hour late and didn't even bother calling me. Did it even occur to you that I might've been worried?"

No. It hadn't. She studied him in confusion. "I'll call or text next time, okay?" The whole conversation was an uncomfortable reminder that she wasn't accustomed to answering to anyone but herself. "Just to be clear, I don't plan on there being a next time. You obviously like punctuality, and I respect that."

He shook his head at her. "I sure hope so, because we have two dozen cast members depending on you, and only a couple of weeks to pull everything off."

"Aye, aye, cap'n. We can do it." *Dial it down a little, will ya?*

If anything, his scowl grew more ferocious at her words. “I know you probably think I’m being a rear-end about this, but I’ve always preferred to be brutally honest about my expectations up front. It saves a lot of grief in the long run.”

“Fine. Lay them on me.” She folded her arms defiantly. *I think we can both agree you’re being a rear-end.*

“I want your best, Willa. Just like you’ve always given Desert Productions.” He jutted his chin at her.

It felt like he’d pulled out a knife and sliced right through her confidence. “I don’t believe in giving anything but my best,” she informed him through stiff lips. “If at any point you’re not satisfied with my performance, you can always give me the boot.” *Sheesh!* She was doing him a favor by helping out with the pageant. If he couldn’t see that, then coming to work for him was a really bad idea.

At his stony silence, she added in a brittle voice, “If you’re really that upset about the time, feel free to dock my pay. Or just don’t pay me at all.” Her mouth twisted defiantly. “I’ll still put on the pageant.” Maybe doing it for free would help ease her guilt a little over how badly she’d treated him in the past.

“Of course, I’m going to pay you!” He balled his fists at his sides, turning red. “That’s not what this is about.”

She stared helplessly at him, wondering what she was missing. The Angel she remembered was a little cocky — okay, a whole lot cocky — but he’d always been a pretty even-tempered guy. The way he was acting right now felt out of character for him.

They stared each other down, eyes shooting sparks at each other.

The truth slowly dawned on her that she’d trampled on his pride. After years of being made fun of by people like her, it was inevitable that her late arrival was something he’d find deeply offensive. Every instinct in her screamed that he longed to be taken seriously.

By me.

For once.

Overcome with remorse, she stepped around him into his office and started unzipping her coat. She tossed it on one of the guest chairs in front of his desk. It was an elegant executive monstrosity in cherry wood. She pictured him getting tons of work done at it.

He spun around to watch her, a vein throbbing in his neck.

She leaned back against his desk with both hands, searching for the words to make things right between them. “People really were waylaying me right and left on my way here. I really screwed up assuming I could just walk down the street like a normal person.” She shrugged. “I guess I let my guard down because I’m home. I would’ve never gotten away with something like that in Phoenix.” She shook her head ruefully. “Or any place else besides Pinetop, for that matter. Not without a bodyguard. So, please...just forgive me this once and give me another chance.”

He crossed his arms. “Are you looking for sympathy, Willa?” Though his question was sarcastic, the vein was no longer ticking in his neck.

Taking heart in that fact, she plowed onward. “I’m just trying to be as brutally honest with you as you’ve been with me. I’m going to throw something else out there while we’re going at it here. I know you saw me talking to Bea Ashburn at church yesterday. No doubt the sight of us together stirred some unpleasant memories for you, but the truth is...” She bit her lower lip. The entire encounter with Bea had been disappointing. “We’re no longer close.”

Angel’s gaze grew a tad less steely. “If we’re finished here, I’d like to show you around.” He gestured toward the door.

She pushed away from his desk, hating the rough start they’d gotten off to. “Since I’m baring my soul, I was kind of hoping you’d meet me halfway?”

He grimaced as she came to a halt in front of him. “I want to trust you, Willa. You have no idea how badly.”

Her heart twisted at his bleak tone. It hurt to hear him admit right out loud that he didn’t, in fact, trust her. “Okay,”

she sighed. “I’m ready for that tour.”



ANGEL FOUGHT TO GET HIS TEMPER UNDER CONTROL, BUT IT was difficult. Logic told him that he was over-reacting, but he’d been burnt by Willa and her friends too many times to take anything she said at face value. He’d spent his whole childhood idolizing her and longing for any scrap of human kindness she condescended to throw his way. Though she’d never been outright unkind to him like her friends had, she’d never defended him, either. She’d stood by silently, looking distressed at the way they were treating him, and somehow managed to keep his hopes up that someday they might be friends. Then she’d grown up and moved away.

The fact that she was back in Pinetop serving as his director of entertainment was like a dozen dreams coming true at the same time. He should have been over the moon about it. Instead, he found himself doubting her intentions, throwing up wall after wall of caution, and bracing himself for the day she would leave again. Or betray him. Or both.

As they headed toward the central stage, he studied the resigned set to her shoulders and her tight lips, wishing things could be different between them. But it wasn’t that simple. He was no longer a boy with nothing but pride to lose. He had a business to run and dozens of employees who depended on him for their paychecks. He couldn’t afford to jeopardize all that for his lifelong crush on Willa Morgan that was clearly going nowhere.

He’d been the world’s biggest fool to fall for someone like her when he was a kid, and he was being an even bigger fool now — falling for her all over again during the few weeks she had in town. He didn’t doubt for a second that she would leave again. A town this small couldn’t contain a light that bright. She was born for the stage. He’d listened to enough of her songs to realize that. If the new owner of Desert Productions couldn’t see that, then the guy didn’t deserve to have her on their label.

That's what I should've told her. Angel was more than a little angry at himself for leaving so many important things unsaid between them. He'd planned a very different first morning for her — right up to the moment she'd walked in late. At that point, he'd allowed his anger to speak louder than his heart.

What was I thinking? He blindly reached for her hand, longing to beg for her forgiveness for the way he'd acted. Realizing what he was doing, he stopped himself in the nick of time from clasping it.

Their fingers brushed, though. She shot a startled look up at him that he felt all the way to his toes.

The sound of splintering glass wrenched his attention away from her, making him dash ahead of her to the base of the stage.

Sheer pandemonium met him. Two workmen on ladders were attempting to replace some canister lights over the heads of those who were rehearsing. An actor with a white bedsheet playfully tossed around his shoulders was loudly reciting lines from center stage. A pianist in the corner pounded out the same few chords again and again and again. When he finally got them right, the guy playing the angel tried to join in and sing a few lines, but a fit of coughing stopped him.

Willa arrived at Angel's elbow, surveying the chaos with parted lips. He could only imagine what she was thinking.

"Please assure me the man wrapped like a mummy isn't the one you've cast in the role of Gabriel." She sounded like she was in physical pain.

"Not me. The last director," he affirmed grimly. "I'm afraid his head was too wrapped around New York to get much accomplished before he left."

She leaned closer, touching his arm conspiratorially. "Gabriel needs to be axed. I've seen better acting in kindergarten."

"Absolutely not!" He stared down at her, aghast, trying not to think about how perfect her fingers looked against the

sleeve of his shirt. “He has a wife and four children to support, plus a fifth one on the way.”

To his surprise, she burst out laughing. “I’m not the monster you seem to think I am.” She repeated his words from yesterday, patting his arm like a woman calming a small child. “I only meant to recast the guy, assuming you intend to let me do the job you’ve hired me for?”

“Of course. I—”

“Good.” Ignoring whatever else he was about to say, she left his side and sailed towards the stage like a ship cruising into battle. She clapped her hands to get their attention.

“Hey, everyone! I’m Willa Morgan, and I’m so excited to be directing our annual Christmas pageant.”

The noise on the stage abruptly died as heads spun in her direction.

The range of expressions on their faces would’ve been comical if Castellano’s wasn’t two short weeks away from opening night. Angel hastily jogged up the steps to join Willa on the stage. Moving to her side, he bent to speak directly in her ear. “I might oughta say a few words to them first.”

She grinned impishly at him. “We’re all ears, boss.”

Liking her playful insult way more than he should have, he longed to smile back at her and lose himself in some of her sunshine. Unfortunately, sunshine didn’t pay the bills.

Thrusting his fingers loosely in the pockets of his jeans, he faced his employees. “Most of you know who Willa is, because she grew up here. For the few of you who don’t, she’s been on stages around the world. She knows what she’s doing. That’s why I hired her. I expect you to give her your best, so we can give our town the best Christmas pageant they’ve seen yet.”

He paused so they could digest his words. “Don’t be surprised if she makes some changes. I’m giving her full license to swap your roles, adjust your lines, whatever it takes to pull this off in the short time we have left. You don’t like it?

You can go scrub toilets or pull leaves out of the gutters. You know me. I'm all about keeping everyone's options open."



THEIR SCATTERED CHUCKLES TOLD WILLA THAT ANGEL'S staff was well accustomed to his brand of teasing. He was good at being in charge. It was obvious from the expressions of those gathered around them that his employees both respected and adored him — something that didn't happen overnight. Those were things a person had to earn.

She glanced up at him again, seeing him with different eyes. Somewhere along the way, the little migrant boy had grown into a force to be reckoned with. She'd be wise to remember it. He certainly hadn't hesitated to set her straight in his office a few minutes ago.

"Permission to rock and roll now, Mr. Castellano?" she teased in a low voice.

"Yep." He regarded her soberly. "Let me know if you need anything." He seemed reluctant to leave her alone with his staff. Like him, though, she was good at what she did, and she was about to prove it.

"Relax. We've got this." She pointed to the two guys on ladders. "Do you mind climbing down real quick?"

With a quick glance in Angel's direction for affirmation, they scrambled down the ladders.

She shook their hands and reintroduced herself again. "Mind giving me the low-down on what you have left in the way of setup?"

She listened intently to their update, nodding and asking questions to clarify a few things. "Sounds great! So, here's what I'd like us to focus on next." After promising to clear the stage mid-afternoon so they could finish switching out light canisters, she put them to work backstage, building the set for the manger scene. It was the only way to get both tasks done without compromising safety.

She next waved over the guy playing the part of Gabriel.

“My apologies, Miss Morgan,” he wheezed, holding his elbow to his mouth to muffle another bout of coughing. “I was fine yesterday, but I woke up with a stupid cold this morning.”

She lifted the back of her hand to touch his forehead. “Doesn’t feel like a fever, but you should probably give your vocal cords a rest today. What’s your name?”

“Elmer Beachham.” He coughed again. “Believe me, I’d love to take my cough home, but I hate the thought of leaving you down a cast member.”

“I appreciate your commitment.” Her heart went out to him. It was no fun singing while under the weather. “That said, your best friends right now are hot tea and raw honey. I bet they have some in the kitchen.” Her voice was infused with sympathy. “Is there anyone learning your part for backup?” When his face fell, she hastily added, “Just until you’re well enough to tackle it again.” By then, she fully intended to have him reassigned to a different role.

“I don’t think so.” He looked doubtful. “We’ve been a little shorthanded—”

“I’ll do it,” Angel offered.

“Why, Mr. Castellano!” She twirled in his direction. She’d been trying to ignore the fact that he was still hovering. “I know you direct the church choir, but I didn’t know you could sing, as well.”

“There are a lot of things you don’t know about me, Miss Morgan.” He reached for Elmer Beachham’s dog-eared copy of the script. “You heard the lady, Elm. Hightail it to the kitchen so our chefs can get you squared away.”

With a grin that turned into a cough, Elmer yielded his script and jogged offstage

“What’s your pianist’s name?” she hissed.

“Porter.”

She waved at Porter. “Porter, let’s run through the opening notes for Gabriel’s first song, please. Mr. Castellano will be

playing backup for Elmer for a few days.”

Angel was more than ready when she gave them the cue to begin.

His rich baritone captivated everyone in the theater. Those who'd been working on set building stopped to listen.

Wow! Guess you weren't kidding when you said you could sing, cowboy. Willa listened in fascination while he nailed the role of Gabriel to the wall, beseeching Mary to trust the promises of the Lord, no matter how farfetched His plan for her life seemed. He assured her that she would soon give birth to the King of kings and Lord of lords.

Willa had planned to end the impromptu audition after a few lines. However, it was so good that she didn't have the willpower to do anything but listen all the way to the end.

The cast members clapped and cheered when it was over. She joined in the clapping.

Angel winked at her and waited until the noise died down to speak. “Well, director? How'd I do?”

“You're fishing again, Mr. Castellano.” Her words elicited a round of chuckles from the others on stage. Several of the employees who'd popped in from the kitchen to listen also guffawed. “You know you rocked it. I'm not sure if you can realistically add one more thing to your schedule, but...” Oh, how she was hoping that he would!

He snorted. “I'm only filling in until Elm feels better.”

“Even so, you're perfect for the part.” She beckoned him aside and lowered her voice so that only the two of them could hear what she said next. “I already have another role in mind for him when he returns.”

He folded his arms to scowl down at her. “I have a business to run, Willa.”

She mirrored his movements, knowing what she was about to say would goad him into agreeing. “It's understandable if you're a little gun-shy about not being in charge for once...”

He shook his head, eyes twinkling despite his scowl. “I created a monster the day I hired you.”

“Is that a yes, Mr. Castellano?”

“It’s an *I’ll think about it*, Miss Morgan.”



CHAPTER 7: ALLEY ENCOUNTER

Their first pageant rehearsal ran so close to the dinner theater's opening hours that Angel asked his kitchen staff to whip up a quick meal for the entire cast.

Angling his head at Willa, he indicated she should meet him in his office. "Debrief time, director."

Nodding tiredly, she watched his long legs stride across the stage and disappear down the hallway leading to the administrative offices. She followed at a slower pace, unable to work up the energy to walk any faster.

Since they'd been arguing earlier, she hadn't taken the time to look around his office. This time, she leisurely scanned the room. It was a much cozier space than his fortress at the end of the street she'd grown up on. The walls were lined with oak paneling, and a silver sword hung over the mantle. She imagined there was a story behind it, but she was too tired to ask about it. She was hoping to keep their first debriefing session short so she could get home, eat, and soak her aching limbs in a tub of hot water.

With a book.

And maybe a candle.

She was pretty sure she'd remembered to pack her pumpkin pie scented one. Just thinking about pumpkin pie made her stomach growl. It didn't help that the scents wafting from the kitchen were so delectable that they were making her inner organs want to kneel down and beg for a taste.

"It's inhuman to call a meeting this late in the day," she grumbled, as Angel waved her into one of the seats in front of his desk. "You're gonna hear from my union rep about this." She debated taking off her boots and propping her feet on the chair beside her, but she didn't want to spark another argument.

"Don't quit on me now, Director Morgan." His scoffing tone told her that he knew she didn't have a union rep. "I'll drive you home afterwards," he cajoled.

Oh? Her weary brain perked up a little. “Deal.” She plopped into the upholstered chair with a sigh that was more loud than ladylike.

He smirked and waved to someone behind her head. One of the waiters moved around her chair with a tray of soup and sandwiches. “Let’s eat first. Then talk.”

“The monster has a heart, after all.” She eagerly scooted her chair closer to his desk, not needing any more urging. The scents swirling up from the tray were making her drool inside her head. She was hungry enough to eat grass and moo in gratitude over it.

He handed her a bowl of soup and a white square porcelain plate with a sandwich cut in half. Lettuce and vegetables fluttered like lace from the sides of it.

The soup was floating with bits of potato and sausage. She tasted overtones of celery, onion, cayenne, and black pepper. Not overpowering, but just enough — the perfect blend of Cajun spices.

“This is delicious,” she moaned between bites. “You keep feeding me like this and I might follow your whip-cracking miserable hide to the ends of the earth, pleading for more.”

His bronze features lit beneath her praise. He started to say something, but stopped.

“What?” She waved her spoon at him. “I’m pretty sure we agreed to be honest with each other earlier. So if my performance today didn’t measure up to your expectations, then by all means, let me have it.” she drew a bracing breath and waited.

He shook his head, looking shamefaced. “I take it all back, Willa.”

“What?” She stared at him in confusion.

“Everything I said earlier. I take it back.”

She almost dropped her spoon. “Oh, my lands!” She gulped. “Are you seriously apologizing?” *To me?*

“Yeah. I lost my temper. Sorry about that. Thanks for not walking out on me.”

She blinked at his humble tone, trying to wrap her brain around the full one-eighty he was doing. Her heart raced at the genuine anxiety creasing the edges of his eyes. “I’m tougher than I look,” she informed him loftily. “It’s not like you’re the first jerk I’ve ever—” She choked off the rest of her sentence, instantly wishing she could recall her poor choice of words. “Sorry!” She clapped a hand over her mouth, sending him a mortified look. “Very tired here. The filter is slipping.”

“It’s okay.” His hard mouth twitched with humor. “I deserved that.” He fiddled with a pen on his desk. Then he locked gazes with her again. “Why didn’t you walk out, by the way? I wouldn’t have blamed you if you did.”

“Because I believe in what you’re doing here.” How could he not see that? “In your theater. In our town.” His soup was so delicious and filling that she was finding her second wind.

“You believe in me,” he repeated carefully, sitting forward in his seat. He held her gaze earnestly. “Rockstar Willa Morgan—”

“Technically, I’m a country western singer,” she interjected with a chuckle.

His dark gaze twinkled. “You surprised me today, too.”

“How?” She wrinkled her nose at him. It wasn’t like he couldn’t have pulled up a bazillion recordings on the internet if he’d wanted to see her in action.

“You worked your tail off.”

She ducked her head a little. “After showing up so late, I kind of felt like I owed you a little extra time on the back end.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about, and you know it.”

She straightened. “I don’t believe in doing anything halfway.”

“It’s more than that.” His gaze narrowed in speculation on her. “You truly care about people. It’s evident in everything

you said and did today. You had my staff eating out of your hand.”

She felt a flush rise to her cheeks. “And that’s hard for you to swallow, considering how awful I treated you when we were kids.”

“You were actually one of the nicer ones.”

“Nice would be stretching it.” The way she’d behaved back then was one of those things she desperately wished came with a do-over. “It’s not that I hated you. You and I were just...” She shook her head, trying to come up with the right word. “Rivals. Always going at it. Always in competition.”

He fiddled with his pen again. “Believe it or not, I was trying to impress you.”

“Well, it worked.” She smiled shyly at him.

“No kidding?” He raised his eyebrows comically, still fiddling with his pen. “Guess that’s why you left town without even saying goodbye, huh?”

“That’s not fair,” she protested. “If I recall correctly, you left town for college before I did.”

“Nope. That was only a visit. You did the actual leaving first.” He lapsed into silence.

She studied him for a moment. Then she murmured, “Considering where we’re sitting right now, maybe we weren’t meant to say goodbye.”

He searched her features. “That works for me.”

“While we’re on the topic of surprises, you sort of blew me away with your singing,” she confessed softly.

His expression relaxed.

“And this soup.” She spooned the last drop of it into her mouth, savoring it.

“So, we’re good now?” His gaze probed hers. “You and I?”

She nodded, lowering her spoon to her bowl. “We’re good.”

“Good.” He looked relieved. “I’ll drive you home as soon as you’re finished eating.”

She stared at him in surprise. “What about our debriefing?”

He spread his hands. “That’s all I’ve got.”

“Seriously? That’s it?” His only concern had been about clearing the air between them?

“That’s it,” he repeated, lips twitching.

“You don’t want to go over my recasting decisions or anything?”

He shrugged. “I was right there when it happened, Willa. You’ve been running things past me all day. So, unless there’s something else you need my input on...”

“Budgets, supplies...where do I even get started?” Her thoughts swam dizzily over all the things she didn’t know about how he liked to run things at Castellano’s. He’d answered most of her personnel related questions, but she still had a lot of other questions.

“Buy whatever you need. We’ve got room in the budget.” He pulled out his wallet and withdrew a credit card. “Use this.” He slid it across the desk to her.

She frowned at the card. “You’re giving me a blank check?”

“More like a company credit card. That’s one of mine. I’ll order you your own copy. If I put a rush on it, they’ll have it here in three days. Then we’ll swap.”

“I thought you said you didn’t trust me.” She picked up the credit card and stared at it in awe.

“Pretty sure I just finished taking back everything I said this morning.”

Then you do trust me. His admission flooded her with a warm and wonderful feeling. It also knotted her stomach too

much to sample her uneaten sandwich. “I think I’m ready to head out now. Hope you don’t mind me taking my sandwich with me.”

“Not at all. I’ll get it boxed up for you.” He reached for his phone and dialed the kitchen to order her a to-go box.

He paused to listen. “Three,” he informed the person on the other end of the line. “Yep. Thanks.” He ended the call.

When she stood to shrug on her coat, he hurried around his desk to assist her.

To cover her nervousness about having him standing so close, she started babbling about the first thing that came to her mind. “Porter showed me the order the last director put in for costumes. I was really glad to hear we have a seamstress working on something besides a bed sheet for Gabriel.”

“That we do.” As he helped uncurl her collar, his long fingers brushed the side of her neck. “It’s a white robe, braided gold belt, and some sort of halo that’s supposed to light up. I’m not clear on the details yet.”

She chuckled. “Of course, you’re not clear on how halos work. Despite your name, an angel you are not.”

“Neither are you,” he shot back wickedly. “I’ve never been fooled by those baby blues of yours. You’re so much more than a beautiful face. You’re a force to be reckoned with. Always have been. Always will be.”

She was struck wordless by his compliment. To collect her splintered thoughts, she glanced out his office window. *Just keep breathing*. Her heart felt like it was pounding out a thousand beats per minute.

Angel turned his head to follow her gaze. “It’s getting dark,” he mused. “I’d better get you home before your dad sends out a search party.”

She was grateful for the darkness outside as she gathered her things and prepared to head to the parking lot. She hoped the deepening shadows would keep people from noticing her and Angel in the same vehicle on the drive home. As much as

she adored Pinetop's cozy, small town atmosphere, it could turn into a hotbed of gossip in two snaps.

A waiter arrived from the kitchen, bearing a white paper bag with handles. He handed it to Willa.

"This is all for me?" She shot a wide-eyed look at Angel. The bag was much larger than the one she'd been expecting.

He waved a careless hand. "You said you wanted a to-go box."

She chuckled in disbelief as she peeked inside the bag. "But there's a whole stack of boxes in here!"

"Only three," he corrected. "Thought your parents might enjoy trying my latest soup recipe."

"Oh, they will," she agreed. "My mom swears you add a dash of pure magic to everything you dish up."

"Now there's a thought."

When she shot a questioning look at the untouched sandwich remaining on her plate, he slid her plate closer to his side of the desk. "You can leave this one. I'll either eat it tonight or take it home for later."

"Perfect. No waste." Having him claim her sandwich had a bit of an intimate feel to it.

As he opened the back door for her, it suddenly hit her that she had no idea what kind of vehicle he drove. Her curiosity was satisfied when he led her to a black Land Rover with silver hubcaps that gleamed in the moonlight. "Not as cool as your truck, but it tracks well in the snow." He used his remote to unlock it. Then he opened the passenger door for her.

"It's actually my friend's truck," she admitted.

Something flashed in his gaze. "Got a boyfriend?"

The fact that he'd instantly jumped to the wrong conclusion made her heart do a crazy little backflip. "Her name is Tess, and she has a mechanic friend who's been using her truck as his guinea pig to showcase some of the upgrades he installs at his shop."

“So, he’s Tess’s boyfriend?” He sounded relieved.

“She claims they’re just friends.”

“You don’t sound convinced.”

“I’m not.”

“What made you drive their mobile billboard to Pinetop?”
He assisted her into her seat.

“Six suitcases and a bunch of other stuff that wouldn’t fit into my Porsche.” She chuckled as she settled the enormous to-go bag on her lap and reached for the seatbelt. “I don’t pack light.”

“So, you’re a Porsche gal. Why am I not surprised?” He shut the door firmly behind her and moved around the hood of the SUV to take his place behind the steering wheel.

To her consternation, the night life on Main Street was still in full swing. The population of Pinetop must have grown during her absence. She really, really, really hoped none of them were paying too much attention to the black SUV cruising slowly past them. She wished Angel would pick up the pace a little.

A pair of dogs suddenly shot out from the narrow alley between two storefronts. They sprinted across the street directly in front of them.

“Whoa!” Angel mashed on his brakes, reaching for Willa’s shoulder.

Without thinking, Willa reached up to cover his hand with hers. “Are you okay over there?” Her voice shook a little. It had been a close call. She was amazed he hadn’t hit one of the dogs.

His answering look was so tender that her heart missed a beat. “Aww, are you worried about me?”

“There might be a little self-preservation in play,” she informed him, trying to sound nonchalant as she released her death grip on his hand. “You write my paycheck these days.” *And take up way too much of my head space.* She was suddenly glad he hadn’t been driving any faster.

“Looks like the to-go boxes survived.” He started driving again.

“Thanks again.” She clutched the bag tighter. “It was really kind of you to do this.” Though her parents had probably already eaten dinner, they would make a meal of his soup tomorrow for sure.



INSISTING THAT IT ONLY MADE SENSE FOR THEM TO CARPOOL, Angel fell into the habit of driving her to and from work. She tried not to think about how much speculation they were stirring across Pinetop about their relationship. There was no way the amount of time they were spending together wasn't being noticed by others.

Maybe it was her imagination, but it felt like Bea Ashburn had been avoiding her ever since the morning they'd walked into church together.

On Willa's second Monday in town, Angel escorted her into the dinner theater at the crack of nine like he did every morning. Instead of leading her to his office to drop off her coat, however, he unlocked the next door on the other side of his office.

Willa watched him curiously. Since the door had remained locked up to this point, she'd just assumed it was a storage closet.

It wasn't a storage closet. It was a whole separate office, not as big as his, but equally as nice. There was an antique oak desk in the center of the room, a leather swivel chair behind it in warm chocolate tones, and a single guest chair. Though the walls were bare, a trio of poinsettia plants filled the windowsill behind the desk.

Angel ushered her inside. “It's yours, Director Morgan. Feel free to use your company credit card to furnish it however you want.” Her card had arrived on Friday.

Her lips parted as she gazed around the room. “This is a really nice space, Angel. I, uh...this is great. Thank you!”

“You’re welcome.” He lounged in the doorway, watching her indulgently as she moved around the desk to give the leather chair a twirl.

“Does this mean you’re tired of sharing your office with me?” She shot him a mischievous smile.

“No.” He folded his arms.

“Are you sure about that?” She removed her coat and draped it across the back of the chair. “Ever since I’ve been home, my mom has been complaining that I leave a trail everywhere I go.” It was true, too. She’d brought an endless supply of hats, coats, gloves, purses, and scarves with her to Pinetop.

“I’m sure.” His cell phone rang. Holding up a finger to her, he lifted it to his ear. “Angel Castellano speaking.” He listened for a moment. “Yes. That would be great. Drive ‘em around back. I’ll meet you at the door.”

He disappeared down the hallway. She heard the back door open and close while she continued to explore her new office. She looked inside each desk drawer and was delighted to discover someone had already stocked them with pens, markers, sticky notes, paperclips, and hanging file folders. A stapler and tape dispenser rested on one side of her desk, and a set of file trays rested on the other side.

Angel returned, hefting a large basket on his shoulder. He carried it into the room and set it on her desk.

She peeked curiously over the top of it. “That’s a big basket. What’s in it? A body?”

He looked amused. “Just jars.”

“Containing a body?”

He snorted.

She leaned closer. “Because this would be a very clever way for a chef to sneak a body in or out of the building. Just saying.”

“You watch too much TV.”

“Right. In all my spare time,” she mocked. “I can’t even remember the last time I turned on a TV.”

“Tell it to your union rep.” He didn’t sound overly sympathetic. Lifting the first jar from the basket, he unwound the tea towel that had been wrapped around it. “Want to venture another guess?”

“Hmm.” As she reached for the jar, their fingers brushed. She liked how strong and capable his felt as they tangled with hers. It took her a moment to refocus her attention on the question. The jar in her hands contained a solid mixture that didn’t budge when she shook it. It was a deep rosy red dotted with seeds.

“Strawberry jelly?”

“Close enough. It’s fresh strawberry jam. Or spreadable fruit, as the makers prefer to call it. Less sugar,” he explained. “You can use it like jam, or even like canned fruit.”

“Fresh? This time of year?” She took a closer look at the beautiful red jam. “How?”

“Greenhouses.”

“This is going to be in great demand when word gets out.” Since there wasn’t a single jar of it in her mother’s kitchen, Willa could only presume it was a new product being unveiled by one of the locals.

“That’s the plan.” He looked contemplative.

Since he was being pretty close-mouthed on the details, she pressed, “To whom do we owe this winter miracle?”

“Christmas Tree Farm.” His voice was clipped. It was the farm on the outskirts of town where he’d grown up, a place that employed dozens of migrant workers. A year or so ago, an anonymous citizen had run a petition to shut it down after an outbreak of food poisoning they claimed had been traced back to a batch of the farm’s preserves. Willa’s mother had told her about it over the phone.

At her silence, Angel gave her an enigmatic look. “They’re hoping I’ll add it to our menu at the theater and help put them back on the map.” He eyed the jar she was still turning around in her hands. “What do you think?”

As she gazed at the jam, her mouth watered at the thought of spreading it on a slice of mixed grain bread. “I think your customers are about to fall in love with you all over again.”

“*Our* customers,” he corrected, looking greatly gratified by her answer.

“What do you have in mind for these beautiful berries, Chef Castellano?” It touched her that he valued her opinion on the topic.

He treated her to one of his slow, devastating smiles. “Strawberry tarts, strawberry cheesecake, strawberry crisp, strawberry shortcake, strawberry chocolate mousse, strawberry truffles...”

“Prediction. You do that, and you’ll double the population of this town.”

“There’s a thought.” He hitched his hip on the edge of her desk. “Would it change your mind about staying?”

“I don’t know.” She truly didn’t, though she suddenly longed to give him a different answer.

He quickly changed the subject. “I was thinking of taking some of this jam to a few shop owner friends. Care to join me?”

She really liked hearing that he still had a soft place in his heart for Christmas Tree Farm. It struck her that this was her chance to prove to him that she shared that soft spot. “Aw,” she teased. “Christmas is still a couple of weeks away and already you’re playing Santa.”

“It’s just a few jars of jam,” he muttered, looking embarrassed. “Before you ask, the answer is no. I don’t own a Santa costume.” He pulled out a dozen or so of the jars and set them on her desk, presumably to stir up some strawberry dessert at Castellano’s.

“Too bad.” She pretended to be disappointed. “I guess we’ll just have to carry the basket between us, looking friendly.” There was no point in driving since it was next to impossible to find a parking spot on Main Street this time of year. The stores were overflowing with holiday shoppers from the moment they opened.

She tugged her swing coat back on and donned her gloves. Then she reached for one side of the basket.

Though they were wearing jeans and boots, she felt a little like a Christmas elf as they left the dinner theater with the basket swinging between them. They nearly bumped into Flash Billings at the entrance of the first shop. He was leaving as they were entering.

“Ho! Ho! Ho!” Treating them to his best Santa laugh, he spread his hands, looking puzzled. “Hey! What gives? Are you trying to one-up Santa or what?”

“Nope. Your job is safe,” Angel assured him with a grin. “We’re just spreading a little holiday cheer from Christmas Tree Farm.”

“You don’t say!” Looking intrigued, Flash bent his grizzled white head over the basket and grew a hungry look.

“Take one,” Angel urged.

“Don’t mind if I do.” The elderly man plucked two jars from the basket, chuckling gleefully. “Now that the Mrs. is gone, I don’t get homemade treats very often.”

“Come by Castellano’s sometime,” Angel offered kindly. “I might have a spot for an extra taste tester on my crew.”

Unless it was a trick of the morning sun, Willa was pretty sure she saw Flash’s gaze mist a little. “I might just do that, kiddo.” He leaned in to clap Angel on the back. “In case you didn’t notice, I helped myself to two jars.”

He must have bragged about his jam to everyone he ran into, because Willa and Angel were thronged the moment they stepped back outside onto the sidewalk.

The basket of jam was emptied in no time. Willa watched moms, grandmothers, and cowboys scurry away with the jars clutched in their gloved hands or tucked inside their already full shopping bags.

“That was too easy.” She’d enjoyed every moment of the gift giving spree with Angel. They worked well together. It was something she’d discovered during her first day on the job at Castellano’s. They were very good at anticipating each other’s thoughts and next moves. Nobody had made a big deal about seeing them together, either. It was an all around successful outing.

Instead of answering, Angel stepped closer to her, canting his broad shoulders between her and the nearest alley. “Wait here a sec. I’ll be right back.” He pressed the empty basket into her hands.

She watched as he strode away from her and disappeared down the alley. Curious about what he was up to, she followed him to the entrance of it. An overflowing dumpster rested in the middle of it. Empty crates and boxes were propped against it. Wrinkling her nose, she took a step back. Her boot landed on something soft.

A screech of protest filled her ears, making her yelp in alarm and yank her foot back.

She saw a blur of movement as the poor critter she’d stepped on dashed between two boxes and hunkered there. Silence reigned once again. As she continued to watch, the creature peered out from between the boxes, fixing a pair of glowing green eyes on her. It was a cat.

“You poor thing,” she crooned, stepping farther into the alley. She crouched down to reach out a hand to him. “Did I step on your tail?”

He meowed and shimmied back a few inches.

“I’m so sorry, kitty.” She kept her hand out, making soft, soothing sounds until he crept slowly from his hiding spot. He had a matted ginger coat and paws that would’ve been white if they weren’t so dirty.

“Come on out, kitty, kitty.” He edged closer and cautiously rubbed his head against her fingers. Soon he was purring and tipping his head to one side to give her better access to his neck.

“You’re a friendly little guy.” She stroked the soft fur on the underside of his neck where it wasn’t so matted. “How does a bath sound?”

He purred harder.

“Ha! You’d pitch a fit if you understood what I said.” She set the basket on the ground next to her and tried to coax him into it.

“Want some help, lady?” A cowboy swaggered out from behind the dumpster. His Stetson was pulled so low over his forehead that it was impossible to see his eyes.

“Thanks, but I’m okay.” She straightened, surprised Angel hadn’t yet returned.

“We don’t mind helping,” another man chortled from behind her.

She spun around and nearly collided with a second cowboy. She hadn’t heard his approach. Scanning the entrance of the alley for a way of escape, she inched her fingers toward her pocket. They closed around the small bottle of pepper spray she always carried with her.

When the two men converged on her, she made her move. Whipping out the bottle, she sprayed it in the face of the man who reached her first.

He made a strangled sound and covered his face with his hands. “You little—!” he snarled.

The other cowboy bear hugged her from behind, trapping her arms at her sides.

“Coward!” she hissed, twisting and squirming frenziedly.

Muttering something she couldn’t understand, his arms tightened around her, making it difficult for her to breathe. “Hurry up, and take the shot,” he growled to his grumbling partner.

“No!” Willa screamed, kicking at his legs with all her might.

In the distance, a man shouted her name.

Willa’s heart thudded as she recognized the voice. “Angel,” she wheezed, renewing her struggles with more fervor than ever.

Both men froze. “That’s Castellano. Let’s get outta here.” The man who’d had her arms pinned abruptly let her go.

Angel charged up the alleyway in their direction, and the two men took off running.

The one she’d sprayed in the face grazed the wall of the building with his shoulder and stumbled.

Angel’s fist hooked him on the underside of the jaw and sent him back into the wall.

“Angel, I’m fine,” Willa called to him.

The second cowboy glanced back to check on his buddy, a mistake that he quickly regretted.

Angel sprinted to catch up with him, took a flying leap, and used the heel of his boot to send him careening into a stack of crates on the opposite side of the alley.

“Angel, stop!” Willa ran after him, truly terrified. She’d never seen him like this before. “I’m okay,” she repeated hoarsely.

He gripped her shoulders and steered her to the mouth of the alley. Then he turned her around to face her two assailants. “If you so much as think about laying a hand on this woman again, it’ll be the last thought you ever have,” he growled.

They walked in stony silence back to the dinner theater. Though Willa was grateful for the way he’d defended her, their festive gift delivery outing had been totally ruined.

He escorted her inside the building, tossed the empty basket inside his office, and continued on with her to her office. He stood silently in the doorway while she removed her coat. Then he turned to leave.

“Angel,” she pleaded. “Can we at least talk about what happened out there?”

“Not right now.” He jammed his hands in the pockets of his leather jacket.

“Why?”

“Because I might say something I regret.”

“I had pepper spray,” she informed him softly.

“Just...don’t.” He gave her a rigid head shake.

“I know how to protect myself,” she muttered.

“Not from people like them.” His jaw clenched.

Did that mean he knew the two men? “Who were they?”

“Bad news.” His mouth twisted bitterly. “The kind of people Bea Ashburn warns everybody about.”

She let out a pent up breath, knowing he meant they were from Christmas Tree Farm. “Shouldn’t we report them to the police?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll handle it.” His scowl grew more pronounced. “I asked you stay put,” he reminded in a terse voice. “Why did you follow me?”

“I don’t know.” She gestured helplessly at him. “Because it’s you, I guess. I trust you.” He could read whatever he wanted into that.

He shook his head in disgust. “Maybe you shouldn’t. There’s a gritty side of my life that’s not safe for you to—”

“You came back in time to help me,” she interrupted. “That’s all that matters.” She could tell the events from earlier had struck a chord with him.

He took a step toward her desk, then another. “Are you sure you’re not hurt?”

She moved around her desk, meeting him halfway. “I’m okay, thanks to you.” There was no denying the concern ravaging his features. She tipped her face up to his, longing for something to say that would erase his look of bitter self-

chastisement. For reasons she didn't understand, he seemed to be blaming himself for what had happened.

He reached out to touch the angel wing pendant around her throat. Though she'd worn it every day on the job, this was the first time he'd indicated he'd even noticed it. "I can't stand the thought of anything bad happening to you because of me."

"It won't, because you won't let it." Her insides melted into a gooey pool of warmth at his words. With a tremulous smile, she swayed closer to him.

"I don't know what I ever did to deserve this kind of trust from you." Cupping her face between his hands, he slowly lowered his mouth to hers.

A knock on the open door of her office had them jolting back from each other.

"There you are!" Ella Morgan flew into the room. "Flash called to tell me about the fight in the alley, and...well, I drove as fast I could to come check on you."

"I'm fine." Willa impulsively reached out to touch Angel's hand. "Please tell my mother that I'm fine."

He squeezed her hand and let it go. "I think you can take it from here, director." With one last soul-searing look, he strode from her office.



CHAPTER 8: POLAR CHALLENGE

The moment Angel's broad shoulders disappeared around the corner, Ella Morgan shot her daughter an astonished look. Her mouth was rounded into an O. "Did I seriously walk in on what I think I walked in on?"

Willa made a soft snorting sound. "Your timing was impeccable." Her voice was dry. She'd been half a second away from being kissed by Angel Castellano. The thought robbed her of her breath.

"So, are you and he—?" Her mother spoke in a loud whisper, gesturing wildly toward the door.

"I don't know. I'll let you know when I figure it out." Willa moved behind her desk and plopped shakily into her chair. She gestured for her mom to come in and take a load off. "Are you feeling better this morning?" She eyed her worriedly, remembering how early she'd gone to bed the night before.

"Don't you dare change the subject!" Ella Morgan fisted her hands on the edge of her daughter's desk as she took a seat in her guest chair. "I want to know everything," she declared dramatically.

Willa raised and lowered her shoulders. "He drove me crazy when we were kids. And now that we're working together, he's driving me a whole different kind of crazy." To her mortification, tears prickled behind her eyelids.

"You care for him." It wasn't a question. Her mother sat back with a contented sigh.

"Please don't read too much into this." Willa opened one of her drawers to pull out a tissue. "It's...complicated."

"Love always is."

"Love!" Willa wasn't anywhere near ready to start putting labels on things. "I didn't say anything about love."

"You heard me." Her mother smoothed her hands over the knees of her black and gray plaid slacks. She looked younger today. Different.

It took a second for Willa to realize why. “You cut your hair.” She leaned closer to her mother, cocking her head sideways. “I like it.” The style made it look thicker and healthier.

Her mother grew still. “It’s a wig.” She shook her head to make the ends of her hair slap against her cheeks. “Sometimes it’s easier to just toss this thing on and dash out the door.”

Willa nodded at the explanation, but her gut told her that her mother wasn’t being perfectly honest. Most women didn’t just up and buy wigs to run errands in. Nice wigs like the one her mom had on were pricey. There had to be more to it.

Her mother traced the corner of her desk. “When you showed up out of the blue the other day, I felt like screaming for joy. I get the impression that’s the way Angel Castellano feels every time he looks at you.”

“If he does, I don’t deserve it, Mom.” Willa’s voice broke. Though it was still morning, it felt like it had been a long, full day already.

“Oh, sweetie!” Her mother looked distressed. “What’s going on?”

Willa spread her hands. “When we were growing up, I stood by and did nothing while other kids made fun of him.”

“What other people do is not your fault,” her mother gasped.

“Then why do I still feel so bad about it?”

“Maybe because you’re in love with him.”

“I don’t think I’m ready to call it that, Mom.” Willa didn’t want her mother to get her hopes up just yet.

“Well, whatever you want to call it,” Ella Morgan’s expression was infused with maternal understanding, “I can tell you this. He feels the same way about you.”



ANGEL STALKED PAST HIS OFFICE TO THE PARKING LOT, wishing he hadn't jumped the gun with Willa before the moment was right. He didn't know what he'd been thinking, trying to kiss her in a spot where anyone could walk in on them.

And someone had.

It was hilariously awful that the person who'd interrupted them was her own mother. He could only imagine the cross examination she was giving her daughter right now. As far as he was concerned, they were fortunate Ella Morgan had been the one to walk in on them. It could have been someone far worse, like Bea Ashburn.

As he leaped inside his SUV and revved the motor, he supposed the most important thing about his almost kiss with Willa was that she'd let it happen.

As he pulled onto Main Street and headed away from town, he relived the way she'd leaned toward him, not looking the least bit repulsed by what was happening between them. If they'd been alone only a second or two longer, he would finally know what it felt like to have her mouth pressed to his. Yanking off his Stetson and tossing it into the passenger seat, he gave himself a mental kick, wondering if he was reading too much into a kiss that had never happened. It was hard not to, though. As bad of an idea as it was to get his hopes up in Willa Morgan's direction, he was doing it.

Again.

And if there was any chance she was finally opening up to the idea of dating him after all these years, there were a few things he needed to handle first.

A couple of the shop owners on Main Street waved. He waved back, grateful at how quick they'd been to welcome him to the Pinetop Business District. Yeah, there were a few stuffed shirts in their fold, like Andrew Ashburn, but most folks had been both kind and helpful since the day he'd purchased the ancient Pinetop Trade Center. A few city council members initially freaked out at the thought of him tearing it down, but they changed their tune as soon as he

commenced the massive restoration project that was now called Castellano's.

What had endeared him the most to the old-timers was the small museum and gift shop in the entry foyer. He'd built it to commemorate Pinetop's earliest years. The walls of the museum were lined with black-and-white photos of everything from past tree lighting ceremonies in Town Square to the first recorded holiday parade in Pinetop history.

He even had a few photographs hanging with scenes around Christmas Tree Farm. One of them was of him and a circle of his friends with their arms slung around each other. It had been taken in the dead of winter only seconds before they jumped in unison into a cattle pond. It was the first of many subsequent polar plunges.

When his feet first sliced through the water, he'd never been so cold in all his life. For a few heart-stopping moments, he'd feared he might pass out and end up at the bottom of the pond. But he'd survived the ordeal and been foolish enough to participate again in the event, year after year for the past decade. This year was the first year he was probably going to skip it. At the age of twenty-eight, he figured he was getting too old for stuff like that.

Christmas Tree Farm sprawled across the foothills of the White Mountains on the outskirts of town. A tiered set of farm fields cascaded down the slopes. Though the snootiest families in town had always turned their noses up at the number of seasonal and part-time workers the aging Mr. and Mrs. Peterson employed there, the fact remained that Christmas Tree Farm was largely responsible for feeding Pinetop.

Though folks didn't talk about it, most of the town's farm-fresh eggs, poultry, milk, and cheese came from there. So did their vegetables, fruit, and beef. For years, the downtown shop owners had been purchasing their home-grown goods, repackaging them, and slapping their own labels on them. Angel had never understood why the Petersons hadn't fought harder to establish their own brand. Maybe if they had, the locals would've been more accepting of the ranch as a whole.

He shook his head as he turned his SUV onto the heavily rutted driveway leading to the Petersons' farmhouse. It was snow-packed and slippery, a clear indication they were neither expecting company nor encouraging visitors.

They'd always been a bit on the reclusive side, but this was the worst shape he'd ever seen the driveway in. A handful of rusty pickup trucks were parked at odd angles on both the circle driveway and front yard. Two had cardboard taped over missing windows. One had the bumper duck-taped in place. While growing up, Angel hadn't paid any attention to stuff like that. What he did remember was all the fun he and his friends had, spitting on their fingers and leaving countless messages and drawings in the dusty paint.

Shaking his head at the memory, he parked next to one of the pickups and leaped to the ground. It struck him as a little odd that there were no kids in the front yard building snowmen or kicking around a ball. That's where he and his friends would've been back in the day.

Jogging up the porch steps, he knocked on the front door. He felt a little weird about doing that, too. Once upon a time, he would've just walked right in.

It swung open while he was raising his hand to knock a second time. Tom Peterson stood there in his overalls and sock feet. Though he pushed the door wider and gestured for Angel to enter, he didn't so much as crack a smile.

"It's about time you showed up," he grouched. Looking Angel up and down, he inquired, "Where are your swimming trunks?"

Angel's eyebrows rose while his heart sank. "I take it the polar plunge is today?"

Tom Peterson snorted. "I take it you forgot all about it?"

"I'm a little old for that, don't you think?" Angel countered mildly. As he stepped inside the farmhouse, the shabbiness of the place struck at the very core of him. The whole house looked in need of a good cleaning. Dust clung to everything. A paper plate with a pile of chicken wing bones

rested on the coffee table in the living room to his right. Cups in all shapes and sizes, some empty and some partially full, were perched on every available surface — the mantle, both windowsills, and on the floor beside the couch.

“Where’s Pam?” And everyone else, for that matter. Angel glanced around the empty living room, frowning.

“Guess you haven’t heard. She’s not feeling too good these days.” The old farmer raised his chin, his silvery eyes sparking with suppressed anger.

“Why? What’s wrong?” Concern leaped into Angel’s chest.

There was no answer.

“Why didn’t you call me?” he pressed, sensing something was wrong.

“The phone rings in both directions, son.”

“Where is she?” he grated out.

“In bed.”

“May I see her?”

“Not sure there’s any point.” Tom shrugged. “But suit yourself.” He angled his head down the hallway where the bedroom he and his wife shared was located.

Angel took off at a jog. He stopped and paused in the open doorway, knocking before slowly peeking his head around the corner.

There was no answer.

Pam Peterson was propped on a pile of faded pillows with her eyes closed. Her wispy gray hair hung limply against the shoulders of a faded red cardigan. She lay so still that Angel feared she might have slipped away in the time it had taken Farmer Tom to come open the front door for him.

“Pam,” he rasped, stepping into the room.

Her eyelids fluttered open. “Angel,” she sighed, holding her hands out to him. They trembled as she waited for him to

approach the bed. “You came back. I always knew you would.”

It made his heart ache to hear the longing in her voice. “I only live a few miles away.” He took her hands in his and bent to kiss her forehead. “If you can ever talk that rascalion husband of yours into bringing you to Castellano’s, dinner’s on the house. Always,” he assured fervently.

“I always knew you’d come back,” she repeated in a voice that vibrated with age.

It slowly dawned on Angel that she didn’t seem to be registering much of what he was saying. She recognized him, but that was the extent of it.

Movement in the doorway alerted him to the fact that Tom was standing there.

“How long has she been like this?” Angel asked quietly.

“Few months.” The bleakness in Tom’s voice was telling. “She knows me some days. Other days, she doesn’t. She certainly recognizes you.”

No wonder the house was dirty! Angel glanced around the room, mentally taking stock of the dust and grime. “Any chance you’ll let me send out a cleaning service to get this place whipped back into shape for the holidays?” If he made a few phone calls, he could probably have a team out here by tomorrow.

“I don’t need a bunch of strangers traipsing through here.” Looking supremely irritated, Tom jammed his hands in his pockets.

It wasn’t an outright no. Angel nodded. It looked like he’d be collecting some cleaning supplies at the office and doing the deed himself.

“When you pulled up, I was hoping you were here to run the polar plunge.” Tom angled his head at the bedroom window facing the backyard.

Angel gently lowered Pam’s hands to her lap. Then he moved to the window. In the distance, he could see a bonfire

leaping beside the pond. A hodgepodge of canopies was arranged in a semi-circle around the fire. More smoke puffed from a trio of grills nearby.

“There they are.” He nodded, feeling a sense of pride burgeon in his chest. Though Pam wouldn’t be cooking up her usual holiday feasts this year, the army of farm hands at Christmas Tree Farm would continue to celebrate in their own way. They were poor, but they were family. They always figured out a way to make do.

Tom moved across the room to join him at the window. “Not everyone out there is too thrilled about how you beat up two of our own this morning.”

“Our own?” Angel glared at the man he’d once looked up to like a grandfather, especially after his parents had passed. “They came into town and assaulted an innocent woman!”

“That’s not what I heard.” Tom looked troubled.

“I was there when it happened. They’re fortunate all I did was give them a dusting down.”

“So you didn’t call the police?” Tom looked relieved. “I was wondering.”

“I guess this means you’re still making border runs, eh?” Angel took the man’s silence as his answer. “Back in the day, folks without green cards kept their heads down.” They didn’t trot into downtown in broad daylight to terrorize unarmed women.

“They didn’t plan to hurt her.” Tom’s chin came out stubbornly. “Said all they were gonna do was take her picture.”

“Why?” The elderly man’s explanation didn’t make Angel feel any better.

“I dunno. Overheard ‘em bragging about some website that pays ‘em for posting pictures of girls.”

Angel’s blood chilled. He couldn’t think of any good reason to do such a thing. “Either you put a stop to it, or I will.” There was a time when Tom hadn’t tolerated a lick of

poor behavior from his employees. Like Pam, maybe he was losing the trail.

Tom shrugged. "It's your funeral."

Angel glared at his words. "The last thing you need is to have the law shut you down after I just went to a lot of trouble spreading the word about your strawberry jam."

A ghost of a smile lit the old man's features. "You did?"

"I'll be serving it at the dinner theater, too, so you'd best get your jam making crew busy whipping up some more. Pronto!" Angel stomped past him and headed down the hall toward the back door. Man, but it was disheartening to see how bad things had gotten during his absence from the farm.

As he made his way down the porch steps, a cluster of boys shot past him, kicking a soccer ball between them.

Angel's foot shot out and captured the ball, holding it against the ground. "Where's the goal?" He raised an eyebrow at them.

They stared back at him, open-mouthed. One of them finally pointed toward two trees about twenty yards away.

He nodded back. "How about me against all of you?"

They nodded, snorting with laughter. Before they had a chance to recover, he took off running. They came hollering and chasing after him. One of the smaller boys jumped on his back and rode him like a pony.

Angel chuckled and kept dribbling. It would've been easier if he was wearing sneakers, but he had years of yard ball experience on his side.

They were fast and lithe, though. No doubt about it. When they failed to steal the ball from him, they managed to careen around him in time to form a wall of writhing little bodies in front of the goal.

With a wicked grin, he drew back his leg and lobbed it high. Despite their Olympic worthy jumps, it sailed over their heads and bounced to the ground behind them.

They converged on him, cheering at the tops of their lungs. Then they launched themselves on top of him in a massive dog pile of arms, legs, and sweaty boy bodies.

“We heard you made it to the professionals,” one kid chortled. “Which team are you on?”

Angel was surprised by his announcement. “Guess you could say I made my own team, kiddo.” He ruffled the boy’s hair. “It’s called Castellano’s. Recruited my own players and everything.”

The boy stared back in wonder. “When I grow up, I’m gonna form my own team, too.”

“You do that, kid.”

The boys scrambled off him and were soon immersed in their next round of scrimmaging. Angel curled to his feet and dusted off his jeans. As he approached the pond, he waved at the group of migrant workers flipping burgers at the grills.

“Morning.”

One of the men glanced up and nodded at him. The others darted quick looks his way, but otherwise kept their heads down.

“Well, look what the wind blew in.” A hand came down on his shoulder from behind.

Angel spun around with his hand out. “Emilio!” It felt like ages since he’d last seen Tom Peterson’s ranch foreman. He and Emilio Navarro had been as thick as thieves while growing up together. After Angel left town on a college scholarship, Emilio had continued to move up the ranks at Christmas Tree Farm.

They embraced like the brothers they’d always considered themselves to be.

“You still know how to get dirty. I’ll give you that.” Emilio curled his upper lip at Angel as he pushed back his well-worn leather Stetson to survey his friend’s dirt-spattered jeans. “Guess that fancy college education didn’t completely ruin you after all.”

Angel hated to hear how allergic his friend remained toward the idea of a higher education. He cocked his head in challenge. “If you want to take a run at me and that ball later on, old man...”

“Think I’ll pass.” Emilio muffled a yawn, jamming his hands inside the pockets of his faded jeans. “Since a certain polar plunging champion ducked out of his duties, I’m stuck running the challenge this year.”

“Champion?” Angel grimaced. “All I did was not drown for ten years straight.”

“That’s good enough for me.” Emilio’s bronze features turned sly. “How about you lead the charge today and show the younger ones how it’s done?”

No way! Not gonna happen. Angel shook his head. “Sorry. Didn’t bring my trunks.”

“I’ll lend you a pair.”

Angel didn’t answer. He’d just caught sight of the two punks he’d encountered in the alley yesterday. He took a step toward them.

They slunk behind one of the canopies out of sight.

“I think you’ve got a real problem on your hands with those two,” he warned in a low voice.

Emilio followed his gaze and sighed. “Already had a talk with them. They didn’t know Willa was your woman. It won’t happen again.”

That was news to him, too, but he let it slide. He was in no mood to discuss his complicated relationship with Willa Morgan. “You need to get ‘em off that website before something worse happens,” he warned.

Emilio shrugged. “They’re strapped for cash. You know how it is. Better to snap a few unwanted photos than have their brains beat out during an illegal boxing tourney.”

“I can’t think of one good reason anyone would pay them to be snapping unsolicited photos.” His jaw tightened. “The

first time one of those girls turns up missing, you're gonna wish you'd listened to me."

"I'm listening, but they're desperate." Emilio shook his head, looking bleak. "And with Pam's medical bills skyrocketing, there's not a horse hair's chance of me giving them a raise anytime soon."

"Send them my way," Angel offered.

Though Emilio's expression softened in gratitude, he shook his head. "No can do. They don't have their green cards."

It didn't sound like they were working on them, either. "Then I'll help them fill out applications after hours."

"The one named Diego has a baby on the way. So, unless you have a way of making those cards appear by February, March at the latest..." Emilio shook his head again.

Angel did a quick mental calculation and determined that the mother-to-be was roughly seven months along. "What about the guy's wife?" he asked quickly. "Does she have a green card?"

"She doesn't need one." He pursed his lips thoughtfully. "She was born and raised in the States."

Well, that would certainly make what Angel had in mind easier to pull off. "Think she'd have any interest in working at a dinner theater?"

Emilio pointed toward the canopy the two thugs had disappeared beneath. "Only one way to find out."

As the two men made their way to the canopy, the pair of thugs held up their hands in defense.

Emilio pointed at the one with the black eye. "This is Jorge." The other one he identified as Diego.

"We're sorry about this morning," Jorge assured quickly, keeping his hands in the air. "We don't want no more trouble."

"Prove it." Angel met his gaze — one eye of it, anyway. The other one was nearly swollen shut from their encounter in

the alley yesterday. “Meet me at Castellano’s after hours tonight, so we can apply for your green card.” It was always tricky filling out an online application for an unskilled migrant worker, but Angel had a few contacts at the state level who might be able to help move things along.

“Can’t.” The dusty cowboy ducked his head.

“Can’t or won’t?”

His friend, Diego, had stubbornly kept his silence throughout the entire conversation so far.

Angel turned his attention to him. “Aren’t you about to be a dad?” When the guy still refused to talk, Angel stabbed a thumb in the air at him and glanced at Emilio for confirmation.

His friend nodded.

“How about this?” Angel sidled closer to the young father-to-be. “You and me. Polar plunge. If you come up first, you get to keep doing stupid stuff on the dark web that’ll probably get you deported at some point. If I come up first, you apply for your green card tonight. My office. Eleven o’clock sharp.”

“You’re twice my age.” Diego lifted his gaze to treat Angel to a sullen look. “How about I just let you save your pride and we just call it a draw?”

“You look older than fourteen, but okay.” Angel raised his voice to address the growing crowd of curious onlookers. “I’m challenging this guy to start the polar plunge with me.” He pointed at Diego. “Ten minutes from now, we’ll jump from Flat Rock.” It was the stony ledge overlooking the east side of the pond. “First one back to the surface wins!”

His words were met with a smatter of claps and cheers.

Diego pushed his Stetson back to glower at him. “I didn’t agree to nothin’.”

“Then you’re gonna disappoint a lot of people.” Angel waved at the cheering onlookers, knowing the guy’s pride wouldn’t hold out for long. He’d show up. “My advice? Go change into swimming trunks. I’ll have a clear advantage if you’re still in jeans and boots.”

Emilio led Angel back to the farmhouse, growling in undertones to him, “I sure hope you know what you’re doing. Diego’s a hard nut to crack, and you’ve made him madder than a hornet twice in the same twenty-four hours.”

“I’m well aware.” But Angel hadn’t gotten to where he was by playing it safe. He’d learned that some of the best things in life were worth a little risk. “How about you just lend me those trunks you were talking about and let me worry about my own hide?”

Emilio shook his head, grimacing. “I can lend you a pair of trunks, but there’s no switch to turn off my worrying. It’s what I do best. Just ask Old Tom.” He waved a hand at the rundown farmhouse behind them. “Someone has to do it now that the Petersons are declining.”

From Angel’s perspective, that was putting the situation mildly. Without some intervention, Christmas Tree Farm didn’t look like it was going to be around much longer. He wished there was some way to start that intervention without diving half-dressed into a frigid pond, but Farmer Tom was right. Angel had been gone too long, and he was surrounded by too many new faces. If he was going to get the latest crop of migrant workers to trust him, he was going to have to do it the old-fashioned way. He was going to have to earn it.

Emilio stomped to his beat-up Chevy truck in the side yard and stomped back with a pair of board shorts in one gloved hand. They were Christmas red and dotted with snowmen. “Don’t ask.” He shoved them into his friend’s hand.

Angel snickered as he held them up in front of him.

“Fine! My sister found them on a clearance rack downtown.”

“I didn’t ask,” Angel reminded. He was still snickering as he jogged to the farmhouse to change into them.

Tom held the back door open for him, eyeing the board shorts with interest. “I thought you said you were too old for this nonsense.”

“I am.” Angel brushed past him. “Probably gonna die out there today. But if I don’t die, those punks will have to meet me in my office after hours to apply for their green cards. That’s the deal.”

Not expecting an answer, Angel strode into the hall bathroom and shut the door. He emerged with his boots on and his jacket unzipped over the goofy shorts. He knew he looked ridiculous.

Tom walked him in silence to the back door. “Maybe I was wrong about you.”

“No, you weren’t.” Angel faced him. “You and Pam poured your life into mine. You instilled a strong work ethic in me and my friends, made us do our homework, and rewarded us with homemade ice cream afterward. If it weren’t for you, I’d have never made it to college and probably never amounted to much.”

A sheen of tears glistened in the older fellow’s eyes. “Guess I never amounted to much, either.”

“Wrong answer.” Angel faced him soberly.

“Look at the place, son.” Tom waved a hand, looking ready to weep. “It’s falling down around our ears, and I’m not getting any younger. Neither is Pam.”

“That’s why I’m going to come back tomorrow with a work crew. No strangers,” he promised when the aging farmer started to protest. “We’ll keep it in the family like we’ve always done. But you’ve gotta promise me something in return.”

Farmer Tom scowled at him, sniffing damply.

“Like you said, the phone rings in both directions. I would have dropped everything and come running when you needed me, if only you’d called.”

Tom looked down at his boots. “Now that you’ve made it to the big leagues, didn’t reckon you’d want to be bothered with us anymore.”

Angel snorted. “Maybe you need to get a better look at these snowman shorts.”

Tom barked out a laugh as dry as paper. “I did, and they’re making my eyes sore.”

“I think you mean I look like a complete idiot, but I’ve got a lot riding on this polar plunge, and so do you.” He pushed open the door.

“Maybe I’d better start praying for you right now.” Tom stood in the doorway and watched him head back outside.

“Now you’re talking,” Angel called to him without turning around.

As expected, Diego was waiting at the edge of the pond. His dark eyes shot daggers at Angel. He assumed a boxer’s stance and punched the air a few times. “You’re gonna lose,” he taunted. “In case you haven’t figured it out, I didn’t fight back on purpose yesterday.”

Angel had suspected as much. It raised his opinion of the punk a little. Apparently, he had a twisted sense of honor buried somewhere inside that hard head of his.

Which gave him an idea. “Just because you didn’t fight back doesn’t mean I would’ve lost.” He shrugged out of his coat and pulled off his boots. Then he stepped closer to the cowboy so only the two of them could hear what he said next. “If you make sure I come up first in the plunge, there might be a job at Castellano’s with your wife’s name on it.”

Hope leaped into Diego’s hard features. He quickly squashed it. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were trying to bribe me into losing.”

“What I gave you is a choice. The rest is up to you.” Angel held the man’s gaze, refusing to back down. Not too long ago, Willa had accused him of being a heartless opportunist. She was only half right. He was an opportunist alright, but his heart was very much intact.

Neither man spoke as they took their positions on Flat Rock. Angel’s feet felt like two blocks of ice, and he was pretty sure every appendage was turning blue.

Emilio raised a cap gun into the air. “On your marks.” He cocked the gun. “Get set.” He paused dramatically. “Goooooo!” He fired the cap gun.

Angel leaped. Out of the corner of his eye, he noted Diego hesitating a little before he made his jump. The crowd of spectators cheered at the tops of their lungs as the toes of the two men sliced through the water.

It felt just like Angel’s first jump a decade earlier. The water enveloped him, sucking every last ounce of heat from his body. His internal organs felt flash frozen. As his body sank, he wavered between consciousness and unconsciousness. Only when he stopped sinking and started to bob upward did he find the strength to kick his legs. He clawed at the water with every ounce of energy remaining in him.

He broke the surface, gasping for air and feeling like his lungs were about to explode. By some miracle, Flat Rock was only a few strokes ahead. The moment he made it to the base of the rock, hands reached down to pull him up.

A split second later, Diego shot to the surface like a stick of dynamite. He yanked himself out of the water unassisted and stalked to the awaiting bonfire.

Angel followed at a slower pace, grateful for the heated towels and blankets the cheering farm hands had thrown around him.

“I’m getting too old for this,” he muttered to Diego when he joined him by the fire. His heart was singing over the decision the hard-nosed father-to-be had made. This time, there was no doubt in Angel’s mind that the younger cowboy had let him win.

“Yeah, you are.” Diego’s voice sounded like he was grinning.

“Eleven o’clock. My office,” Angel retorted. “And bring your wife so I can meet her.”



CHAPTER 9: NEW EMPLOYEE

Angel debated driving home first to change, but he had too much work piling up at the office. His trip to Christmas Tree Farm had put him at least two hours behind on all the things he had on his calendar for the day, not the least of which was a meeting with his beautiful entertainment director.

It was supposed to have taken place at noon. He'd missed it by a long shot, so he knew he had some apologizing to do... just as soon as he made a few phone calls. He slunk through the back door to the administrative offices and closed it noiselessly. Then he crept to his office and shut the door, locking it behind him.

"You're late." Willa swiveled around in his desk chair to face him, pointing at her watch and smirking. "I think we both know what happened the last time a member of management tried that at Castellano's."

"Hoisted by my own petard." He removed his Stetson and tossed it on his desk, running a hand through his damp hair. He slowly rounded the desk, wishing he could roll back time and pick up where they'd left off before her mother's untimely visit.

"Why's your hair wet?" Willa's smirk disappeared. In its place was a look of concern. She stood when he halted in front of her, reaching up to tug a strand of hair behind his neck.

His eyes grew heavy lidded as he absorbed the wonder of her touch and nearness. "It's a long story," he informed her huskily. The fact that the door was shut and locked was sending all sorts of crazy ideas through his head. Whatever came next, there'd be no one walking in on them this time.

"We're already starting our meeting over an hour late." Her smile was challenging. "What's a few more minutes?" Instead of lowering her hand, she twined her arms around his neck and tipped her face up to his.

"What are you doing, Willa?" His gaze dropped longingly to her mouth as his stunned brain tried to catch up with what

was happening.

“Finishing what we started earlier.” Her cheeks grew rosy. “Unless I misread something between us...”

“You didn’t.” He tipped his forehead against hers, glorying in the fact that she was finally surrendering to what had been percolating between them for days. She was every last one of his wildest dreams — from as far back as he could remember to this very moment — wrapped into one slender, dark-haired woman in jeans.

He wrapped his arms around her, drawing her closer. Then he brushed his mouth over hers. Once. Twice. Her lips were as warm, soft, and giving as the rest of her. “Willa,” he muttered. It felt like he’d waited a thousand years for this moment.

“You’re freezing,” she whispered against his lips.

“Not anymore.” He deepened their kiss, allowing her to feel his strongest hopes and most impossible dreams where she was concerned. Everything he’d ever wanted and worked for, this was his reward.

He’d finally made his peace with his past and taken the first steps toward building a bridge back to his roots — not because he needed it so much as they needed him. Maybe he couldn’t entirely shield the lovely woman in his arms from the grittier parts of his life, but he no longer felt like he had to. The way she was returning his kisses assured him that she was accepting him just the way he was.

The pond water had chilled him to his bones, but Willa’s kisses were like splashes of liquid sunlight, warming him from the inside out. He never wanted to let her go, never wanted to stop drinking in her sweetness.

But he did, so he could gaze deeply into her eyes. “I love you, Willa. I always have.”

She caught her lower lip between her teeth. “Why?” She sounded so incredulous that he chuckled.

“Because you’re you.” He reached up to smooth her hair back from her face, pausing to tangle his fingers in her ponytail like he’d always dreamed of doing. It felt like pliable

strands of silk. A few tiny silver clips shaped like butterflies dotted one side of her hair. They matched the angel wing pendant she was wearing at her throat. Though he'd never asked her about it, he'd been wondering if she was wearing it for him. Or because of him. Or for some other reason.

"We weren't even friends for the longest time. You were my biggest rival," she reminded, frowning a little.

"And your biggest admirer," he assured tenderly.

"Even back then?"

"Even then." He made a scoffing sound. "Why do you look so surprised? It's not like I ever tried to hide my feelings."

"We were just kids, Angel. And when I came back to town this time..." She shook her head. "I was no longer sure you felt the same way. You were so...hard to read."

"Only because I thought I'd lost you." He drew his thumb across the underside of her chin. "To your career...and to Billy Rivers." There. He'd finally said it. He watched her expression closely.

She made no attempt to dodge the underlying question he'd posed. "He was my mentor, singing coach, and closest friend for years." Her voice hitched. "I know a lot of people assumed it would turn into something more. I guess I did, too, for a while." She drew a deep breath. "But it didn't."

He frowned in surprise. "You mean you and he weren't...?"

"No. We weren't together."

How was that possible? The press had them all but married. "Everyone thought you were dating."

"He tried to steer things in that direction. We went out to dinner a number of times. He even lit a candle or two." Her forehead wrinkled as she struggled to explain something that didn't seem to make any more sense to her than it did to him. "But there was always something holding us back. Or maybe it

was just me holding back. It's like I wasn't truly free to give my heart to him. Does that make any sense?"

"It does now." He unthreaded his fingers from her hair, tracing the line of her cheek and the curve of her throat. The pads of his fingers brushed over the silver angel wing pendant. Someday he was going to ask her about it, but not now.

"I think maybe we were always working our way to this." Her smile was a little wobbly as she stretched to her tiptoes to touch her lips to his once again.

He accepted what she offered, nipping hungrily at her lush lower lip. After waiting so long for her to come to the realization they were meant for each other, he was in heaven.

"I love you, too," she murmured in a choked voice. "I didn't mean for it to happen. It just did."

His heart pounded at her admission. "I was pushing pretty hard for this." He cupped her cheek. "On my knees," he added in a rough voice.

"Are you serious?" She sounded awed.

"It felt impossible, but I just couldn't give up on us." Even after Billy's tragic passing, it had felt like a long shot. "Being your number one guy is something I've prayed for most of my life, though I always knew it wasn't likely. Then, out of the blue, you came home."

"It's your cookie ornament that turned the tide, I think." She smoothed a hand over his shirt. "You're the one who made it, right?"

"I did."

"But you said you weren't the one who sent it." She looked so disappointed that he was emboldened to share the rest of the story.

"Not directly. When you stayed off the grid for four months straight, I got worried. So worried that I prayed and baked all night long. I packaged up the angel cookie ornament the next morning, slapped an address label on it, and set it on a cabinet in the kitchen. The staff started to arrive, and I got

distracted by work. When I finally returned to the kitchen to take it to the post office, it was gone. I questioned everyone on duty that morning, but nobody remembered seeing it. It was like it had disappeared into thin air.” He recalled the despair he’d felt at the realization that it was likely gone forever. Sure, he could’ve baked her another ornament, but the missing cookie was the one he’d worked on decorating and praying over all night long. It wouldn’t have been the same.

“Well, someone sent it.” Her fingers curled against his shoulder.

“So it would seem.”

She tipped her head back again to search his face. “You truly have no idea who did it?”

“No.” It felt like a miracle that it had reached her.

“Next question.” Her expression grew mischievous. “Why didn’t you sign the card, you joker?”

He chuckled at her use of the insult he’d given himself during their last conversation about this. “Wasn’t sure you’d appreciate hearing from me.”

“Well, I did.” She twined her arms around his neck again. “Your gift arrived when I needed it the most, and the message you wrote is what brought me home.”

He could think of only one appropriate answer to such a heartfelt declaration. Swooping in, he covered her lips with his.



WILLA FLOATED OUT OF ANGEL’S OFFICE AN HOUR LATER, wondering if it was humanly possible for a woman in love to concentrate on mundane things like work. It was hard, so much harder than usual. Fortunately, she’d spent the last several days coaching and coaxing Castellano’s cast and choir to a much better place than where they’d started.

She was so impressed with the solo of the woman playing the part of Mary that it gave her an idea. She pulled her aside after the rehearsal.

“Hey, Mindy! What are the odds I can talk you into a Christmas pageant teaser performance this evening?” She spelled out her plan to offer their audience a sneak preview of roughly half of Mary’s solo, followed by a short medley of snippets from a few other cast members’ parts. They would end the evening with a thirty-second dance routine — yet another sneak peek at what was coming in the final days leading up to Christmas.

“Omigosh! Are you serious?” Mindy was a twenty-one-year-old who’d grown up on Christmas Tree Farm. She’d come to work at Castellano’s as a waitress the day she’d turned sixteen. She’d slowly worked her way onto the stage by first serving as a background cast member, then several backup parts. According to Angel, it had taken more than two years for her to polish her stage presence enough to land her first role. As far as he was concerned, she’d truly earned it.

Willa agreed. “I’m serious.” She high-fived the sparkling-eyed actress. The way her new boyfriend was always taking chances on new talent was something Willa had quickly grown to appreciate about him. Yes, it was more work for her as his entertainment director, but he’d managed to scout some pretty decent talent for his theater by keeping such an open mind.

Mindy’s squeal of delight made Willa smile. “I can’t think of a better way to sell tickets to the pageant. It’ll be like putting on a live commercial.”

“That’s my hope.”

“You’re seriously one of the best things that’s ever happened to me, Willa Morgan.” Mindy tossed her dark braids over her shoulders and threw her arms around Willa. “I can’t thank you enough for all the extra voice coaching lately. It’s really made a difference.”

Willa hugged her back. “You have a lot of natural talent, Mindy. All I’ve done is pull out more of what’s already inside you.” She let Mindy go and stepped back. “One more thing.

As hard as it's going to be, I'd like to keep tonight's grand finale to ourselves."

Mindy's dark eyes widened. "You really think we can surprise the boss?"

"No guarantees, but I'm going to try." Willa couldn't wait to see Angel's expression after they pulled it off.

The rest of the afternoon passed in a happy blur. A few times, Angel breezed into the dining room to listen in to what was happening on stage. For the umpteenth time, he inquired worriedly, "You sure you don't need me for backup this afternoon?"

Willa shook her head, smiling warmly at him. She was so happy that it felt like her eyes were dripping rainbows. She hoped none of the other employees noticed it since she and Angel hadn't yet gotten around to discussing when they were going to go public with their relationship.

He pulled her aside a few minutes before the opening act of their evening performance. "Hey, I almost forgot to tell you, but I scheduled an interview after closing time. Any interest in sitting in on it?"

"After closing time?" She shot him an are-you-crazy look. By then, they'd both be worn slap out.

"It's more or less a favor to a friend." He shrugged ruefully. "His name is Emilio. I'll introduce you sometime. Soon. Short version is they've been having a hard time lately out at Christmas Tree Farm." He went on to describe Mrs. Peterson's declining health, which had taken Mr. Peterson's focus off of ranch management. "And now they're having all kinds of discipline issues with the younger guys." He looked troubled. "Money has always been tight for the migrant workers, but things are worse than usual. If I can hire Diego's wife, it might be the one thing that keeps him on the right side of the law."

"And out of dark alleys, I hope." She gave a shiver at the memory of being waylaid by him in one.

“That’s the plan. Diego will be accompanying her and possibly one other cowboy named Jorge.” He gave her a worried look. “You know how I told you I’d handle the situation in the alley?”

She nodded wordlessly.

“This is how I’m doing it. If it doesn’t work, I’m calling the police. I’ve already warned the powers-that-be at Christmas Tree Farm.”

“Then let’s hope it works.” Like her mother, he’d proven to be an inherently decent judge of character. Her gaze dropped to his rolled sleeves and well corded arms. It was impossible not to notice every time he flexed them.

He followed her gaze. “Like what you see, Director Morgan?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Mr. Castellano.” She tipped her nose up a few inches. “When I’m on the job, I prefer to keep things strictly professional.”

He leaned closer to rasp in her ear. “I guess that means another quick meeting in my office before the show starts is out of the question?”

“Completely out of the question, Mr. Castellano. It’s almost show time, and our cast needs me.”

“Too bad.” His dark gaze dropped to her lips. “If you change your mind...”

A muffled laugh escaped her at how badly she wanted to take him up on his offer. “Please don’t make this any harder than it already is,” she pleaded.

“That’s a better answer.” He straightened, looking satisfied. “Not the one I was hoping for, but I can live with it.” He raised a finger in the air. “So long as you agree to sit in on the interview and debrief with me afterward.” He winked suggestively as he said the word *debrief*.

“You’re the boss.” She fluttered her lashes at him. “So, if you truly need me at the interview, I’ll be there.”

He dropped his voice again. “I need you, Willa.”

She swallowed a sigh at the longing in his voice. “At the interview?”

“That, too. I need you all the time.” He stepped closer to lightly touch his fingers to hers. Then he was gone.

She stared wistfully after him. *And now I have stars dripping from my eyes along with the rainbows.*

The front door to the theater opened and closed. A redheaded woman Willa had never met breezed into the dining room.

“Angel!” Her beige unbuttoned coat and blue jeans were a blur as she made a beeline for the handsome owner of Castellano’s. She launched herself at him, half-laughing and half-crying as she fell into his embrace. “I’ve never been so happy to see anyone in all my life. When I heard you wanted to hire me...”

The rest of what she said was muffled against the front of his shirt.

“Eh, Julia?” Looking astounded, Angel tried to unwind her arms from around his middle.

A bronze cowboy followed a few steps behind the woman. Willa instantly recognized his sneering swagger and tattered jeans with the worn out knees. It was one of the two men who’d harassed her in the alley. Diego, she presumed, since his gaze never wavered from the redheaded woman. His wife?

The longer the redhead remained in Angel’s embrace, the darker his expression grew. He wagged a finger between the two of them after Angel finally succeeded in stepping back from her. “I take it you two know each other?”

“We go way back.” Julia gave a trill of laughter that sounded forced to Willa. “We even went on a few ice cream dates.” She pressed a hand to her blooming belly.

Willa felt something hard and heavy settle beneath her ribcage. Really? Angel had actually dated this woman? This very pregnant woman? She sought out his gaze for confirmation, but he didn’t look her way. If her claim was

true... *Then so much for his insistence that he'd been praying his entire life for a chance to be with me!*

Diego's sneer grew more pronounced. "Wow, Castellano. I've always heard you were a real go-getter. Didn't realize that included roping in your ex-girlfriends."

Ex-girlfriends, as in plural? Willa's eyes grew wider. She didn't recall Angel doing much pairing off when they were teenagers. Even during homecoming and prom, he'd shown up with a whole group of friends from Christmas Tree Farm. Their idea of dressing up had entailed nothing more than throwing blazers over their jeans. Willa would never forget after the way her friends had privately bemoaned their lack of style.

"First of all, I had no idea who your wife was, Diego." Angel's voice was deceptively mild. The only thing that gave away his rising level of irritation was the hurried glance he finally cast in Willa's direction. "Just like you had no idea Willa is the woman I love when you first met her."

"You? In love?" Julia's expression turned mocking. "Like you've ever done anything without an agenda."

His jaw grew flinty. "True. Like when I set up this interview, I thought I was helping out a friend. Maybe I was wrong?" He raised an eyebrow at Diego.

The two of them engaged in a staring match, neither giving ground.

The hard set of Angel's features didn't entirely mask his disappointment. Seeing it was enough to slice through Willa's jealousy. Whether Julia was telling the truth about their ice cream dates was irrelevant to the fact that Angel was doing everything he could to keep a few wayward migrant workers out of jail.

Willa decided it was time to enter the conversation. She glided forward with a hand outstretched. "Hi! I'm Willa Morgan, the entertainment director at Castellano's. You must be the candidate we'll be interviewing this evening." She forced a smile. "You're early. I like that."

Julia blinked in surprise. “Willa Morgan?” she squeaked. “I, um...I’ve heard you on the radio.”

Willa kept her smile pasted on, though it was hard. “It sounds like you share my love for country music?”

“Totally!”

“Any chance you sing?”

Julia nodded vehemently. “I’ve never had any formal training, but I’ve always dreamed of singing on stage just like you,” she gushed.

It was a line Willa had heard hundreds of times over the years, probably thousands of times. In her experience, most people who “dreamed of being just like her” weren’t willing to put in the time and effort to get there. She steeled her heart as she met Angel’s gaze. “Maybe we could squeeze in a quick audition this evening, as well? If she meets my standards, Mr. Castellano, I may be taking this employee off your hands. Sorry, not sorry. Waitresses are easier to find than singers.”

Diego’s angry gaze flickered between Angel and Willa. “Meaning my wife would report to you instead of him?” He stabbed a thumb in Angel’s direction.

“Bingo!” She pointed both forefingers at him like pistols.

“Then maybe we still have a deal.” His shoulders relaxed.

“Good choice.” Angel’s voice was as dry as sandpaper. “We’ll reconvene in my office after the show.” He angled his head at one of the tables up by the stage. “If you want to stay and watch it, I keep a table reserved up front. Just have a seat, and my staff will take care of you.”

Diego’s upper lip curled. “Nah, we’ll just wait in the truck.” He took a step toward the exit.

“It’s on the house,” Willa assured. “Perks of attending an interview at Castellano’s.”

Though his sneer remained in place, Diego switched directions and gestured at Julia to follow him to the table Angel had pointed out.

Willa waited until they were out of earshot. “So, she’s an ex-girlfriend? And only one of many, apparently.”

Angel groaned. “Can we not do this right now?”

“Do what?” She gave him an innocent look. “It seems only fair that you’d warn me about any other ex-girlfriends on staff.”

“No warnings necessary. Not unless you break up with me.” He grimaced. “In which case, you’d still be the only member of that club. Though Julia and I ended up at some of the same group outings back on the farm, she was just a kid. We certainly never dated. I’m not sure why she’d say something like that in front of her husband. He operates on a short enough fuse as it is.”

Though relief flooded Willa at his words, her inner caution flags continued to wave. Clearly, Julia bore watching.

He gave her a sideways glance. “Are you serious about taking her off my hands? Because, if you are—”

“I’m serious.” Her voice was firm. “This is my town, too. We don’t want a repeat of what happened in the alley.”

“Is it, Willa?” His expression grew bleak. “Not too long ago, you made it clear you were only here for a holiday visit.”

“I know.” She drew a deep breath. “But that was before I understood how sick my Mom is and before you told me you love me.”

The front door of the theater opened and closed again. “Willa,” a man crowed.

She froze as she recognized his voice. Whipping her head toward the door, she gasped, “Mick? What are you doing here?”

“Pinning down my favorite country singing star, that’s what!” He was a tall, slender man with a blonde receding hairline. His suit was custom tailored, and his cuff links glinted with real diamonds as he strode her way with his arms outstretched. “You don’t write. You don’t call. You left me no

choice but to deliver my incredible news face-to-face.” He reached for both of her hands and bent closer to kiss her cheek.

“What news?” He was wearing so much cologne that it gave her an instant headache. Her insides knotted at the very real possibility he’d come to fire her from Desert Productions in person — in front of her boyfriend boss and everyone he employed.

Mick held her at arm’s length. Instead of answering her question, he eyed the silver angel wing at her throat. “You’re still wearing my gift. I’m touched.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Willa saw Angel’s shoulders stiffen. “I thought all the employees received them.” She reached up to touch the delicate pendant.

“Yep. From me. It means a lot that you have it on tonight.”

She was tempted to yank it off right then and there. “So, what news do you have for me?” *We might as well get it over with now.* She took a few steps back, forcing him to drop his hands from her arms.

“The best in the west!” His smile was exultant. “If you’d returned any of my calls, you would already know about the Country Jam Fest Tour.”

Disappointment rolled through her at the realization he was only toying with her. The Country Jam Fest was next to impossible to get on. She knew, because his brother had massaged every one of his contacts in the music industry for three years straight in the hopes of landing her the lead singing slot.

Mick looked taken aback by her expression. “What am I missing here? This is huge, Willa. The once-in-a-lifetime kind of huge. The only right answer to an opportunity like this is yes.”

She wanted to believe him, but there was simply no way he’d succeeded at something Billy had failed at. “I’ve been off the air waves for four straight months,” she reminded. “The world has all but forgotten me,” she added sadly. *My fault entirely for falling apart after your brother passed.*

He snorted. “Tell that to the Country Music Hall of Fame, since they’ll be inducting you come January.”

Her mouth fell open. “Mick, it’s not cool to joke about stuff like that.”

“It’s no joke.” He stepped closer to rest his hands on her shoulders.

“How?” she demanded.

He shrugged. “As much as I’d like to take credit for it, this was all Billy’s doing. Something he apparently had in the works for ages.”

At her gasp, his gaze lit with elation. “Yet another reason you’re going to say yes to this.”

She pressed a hand to her heart, knowing better than anyone else how hard Billy had worked to make this happen. *You did it, my friend. You finally did it!* If only he’d lived to see it happen.

“Welcome back, Willa!” Mick’s premature celebration jangled in her ears, reminding her that she had a very tough decision ahead.



CHAPTER 10: THE CHRISTMAS PAGEANT

One Week Later

Angel watched the opening performance of the Pinetop Christmas Pageant from the head table. The first act flew by with flawless precision, thanks to the many hours of hard work Willa had poured into the lives of his cast members. He was truly grateful to have someone of her caliber directing the production. He would've done anything to make her a permanent member of his staff. However, he was pretty sure they were about to say goodbye to each other. Again. This time for good.

His heart turned to stone every time he thought about it, which was constantly.

Why, Lord? He knew it was foolish to question God, but he couldn't help it. His heart was too bruised not to pray about it. *Why allow our paths to even cross again if I'm only going to have to let her go?*

Since no answer seemed forthcoming, he tried to focus his attention on the pageant again. The cast was back to its full numbers, so his own singing talents hadn't been necessary this evening. Willa had tried her hardest to talk him into keeping the part of Gabriel, but he'd turned her down. His heart was no longer in it.

When the intermission rolled around, he headed for his office before the lights in the dinner theater flipped back on. It was the only way to avoid being thronged by friends and guests. Normally, he enjoyed the meeting and mingling part of his job, but not tonight. He wasn't in the mood.

He locked himself in his office and didn't bother turning on the light. Instead of taking a seat at his desk, he strode to the window overlooking the amphitheater. Jamming his hands in his pockets, he watched the audience give his cast a well-deserved standing ovation. It went on and on and on.

The real thanks went to Willa Morgan. He couldn't have pulled off a Christmas pageant like this on such short notice

without her help, certainly not one of this quality. Having the honor and privilege of working up close and personal with her like this was only going to make it that much harder to say goodbye.

Christmas was only eight days away. Eight measly days. That was it. Then the woman he'd waited a lifetime to date would get back in her borrowed truck and hit the road. She was going to leave a crack a mile wide in his heart.

A light knock sounded on his door.

He stiffened, hoping whoever it was would assume his office was empty and go away.

Silence settled over the room. Then a key scraped in the lock.

You have got to be kidding me! Preparing to give the intruder a tongue lashing they wouldn't soon forget, he had his hands on his hips by the time the door cracked open.

"Angel?"

Every cell in his body tightened at the sound of Willa's voice. "I had the door locked for a reason." His voice came out as rusty as the first truck he'd ever owned.

"You left me no choice," she sighed, stepping inside the room and closing the door behind her. "You've been avoiding me all week."

"What can I say? It's the busiest time of year." He wondered why she'd bothered chasing him down, since they had less than twenty minutes until the second act of the pageant began. She would need to be back out there soon. She should probably be out there right now.

"Then you're just going to have to carve out a little time for me." She moved across the room to flip on his desk lamp. She squared her shoulders as she faced him. "We need to talk."

"About what?" He gazed bleakly down at her, longing to take her in his arms but knowing it wouldn't ease the ache in his heart over her pending departure.

“You know what.” She shook her head sadly at him. “Why are you doing this?”

Her question stunned him. A curl of anger shot through him. “Because I don’t want to influence your decision about the concert tour,” he exploded. “I know how much it means to you.”

She fisted her hands on her hips to match his stance. “Isn’t that kind of your job to influence my decisions?”

“My job?” He clenched his jaw, not understanding what she was getting at. “Pretty sure that responsibility rests entirely on Mick Rivers and your agent.” And the dead man who’d somehow managed to make all of her dreams come true from the grave. How was a lousy boyfriend supposed to compete with that?

“Really? Because I thought you and I were dating.” Unshed tears glinted in her eyes.

“For how much longer, Willa?” He was unable to staunch the bitterness in his voice.

“That’s up to us to decide. You and me, Angel. Not anyone else.”

“Kind of feels like I don’t have much of a vote.”

“I can’t believe you said that!” She looked aghast. “You’re the man I love, so you’re part of this decision. The biggest part!”

He narrowed his gaze on hers, wishing he could believe that. “Then why is this the first time you’ve asked for my opinion on the topic?”

“Because you’ve been impossible to pin down.” Her voice hitched.

“Maybe I can’t bear the thought of you leaving.” He glanced away from her, swallowing hard. “I reckon it’s easier to just not talk about it.”

“Then give me a reason to stay!”

“What do you want from me, Willa?” His head swiveled back to hers, not sure what more he could give her. She already owned his heart.

“Oh, Angel! You’re such a guy!”

He couldn’t have been more confused. It didn’t seem logical that she expected an apology for something like that.

As she watched him, a tear slipped past her lashes and streaked down her cheek. It was followed by a small torrent of more tears.

“Aw, baby, don’t cry!” Unable to bear the sight of her weeping, he held out his arms to her.

She stepped eagerly into them. “If I turn down Mick’s offer,” she quavered, “he’s going to boot me from Desert Productions. You understand that, right?”

No, I didn’t know that, because you didn’t tell me. If there was any truth to her claim, though, Mick Rivers was a bigger idiot than he’d given the guy credit for. A burst of hope clogged in his chest as he struggled to process what Willa was really trying to tell him.

Hugging her tightly, he said the only thing that made sense to his dazed male brain. “Good thing you already have a solid job lined up here in Pinetop.”

“Do I?” Her voice was softly pleading. “You specifically hired me as your interim director. The last time I checked, that’s not a permanent position.”

He couldn’t believe she felt the need to even ask something so ridiculous. Threading a hand through her hair to cup the back of her head, he muttered, “You say that like everything I am and ever will be isn’t yours for the taking.”

She was silent for a moment. Then her eyes started to glow through her tears. She twined her arms around his neck, inquiring in a breathless voice, “Could you be a little more specific, Mr. Castellano?”

“Yes. Don’t leave Pinetop. Ever. Or Castellano’s. Be my full-time girlfriend, entertainment director, business partner,

and—”

The door to his office flew open, interrupting what he was about to say next. Though Willa twisted around to see who it was, she didn't step away from him. Her hands slid slowly down his arms and remained on his biceps.

“Oh, there you are,” Julia sang out, not looking the least bit repentant at catching them together.

At the sight of Angel's expression, her smile faded. “So, um, I'm really sorry to barge in here like this, but...” She threw an anxious glance over her shoulder. “Everyone is looking for you two. I think they sent me in here since I'm the newest employee and the most expendable if you decide to kill the messenger.”

“Guess we better get going.” Angel watched Julia press her hand nervously to her chest. Against his better judgment, he'd hired her a week ago. So far, Willa only had good things to say about her, making him hope it wouldn't turn out to be as big of a mistake as he feared.

“So, I still have a job?” Julia's red painted lips twisted into a pleading pout.

“For now.” He scowled at her, not minding the least bit that she'd caught him with Willa in his arms. He hoped it laid to rest any residual hopes Julia might still be harboring in his direction. He'd yet to fully forgive her for using him to make her husband jealous. Despite her shenanigans, Diego had followed through with his green card application, though. It felt like a war had been avoided. Or at least postponed.

“Good.” The expectant mother twirled awkwardly around and started to walk away. Then she paused in the doorway. “The day you hired me, you probably saved my marriage, you know.”

No, he didn't know that. Since she seemed to be waiting for an answer, he drawled, “Glad to hear it.” He'd mainly done it to help out the Petersons and Emilio. Fortunately for her, their enormous show of gratitude made it worth the sacrifice of putting up with her attitude.

“No, you’re not,” she snapped. “You hate the thought of being stuck with me on your payroll indefinitely. It’s a good thing I report to Willa. Otherwise, I might already be job hunting.”

His eyebrows rose in amazement. *Okay*, he mouthed to his girlfriend.

Willa was kind enough to accept the conversation ball he’d frantically lobbed in her direction. “Hey, Julia. Thanks for coming to get us.” Her voice was soothing. “Tell the others we’ll be back out there in exactly one minute.”

Angel bent his head down to press his cheek against her damp one as Julia finally left them alone again. “Exactly one minute, huh?” It wasn’t nearly long enough for him.

“If you want more time with me, Mr. Castellano, here’s an idea. Quit avoiding me,” she retorted, leaning back in his arms to dab at the edges of her eyes.

“Fine.” He reached around her to snatch a tissue off his desk. He pressed it into her hand. “Want to meet back here after the show?”

“Meet you? Yes. But I’d rather go somewhere that’s not work related.” She glanced at her watch as she continued to pat her face dry. “We’re down to thirty seconds.”

“Okay. New plan. Meet me back here after the show, and I’ll take you somewhere else.”

“Will the door be locked?” she countered, tilting her head sassily at him.

“Does it matter?” He bent to press a hard kiss to her mouth. “You have a master key.” She also owned the key to his heart.

She made a face at him. “Yes, it matters!”

He kissed her again. “Just meet me here, please?”

“It’s a date,” she promised softly. Then she stepped away from him and headed out the door that Julia had left wide open.

He was utterly entranced by the way her long, green dress swished around her slender curves.

Then the truth slammed into him. He was letting her walk away again. It's what he'd been doing all week.

"Wait!" There was a desperate edge to his voice as he jogged to catch up with her.

"Careful, Mr. Castellano," she teased. "If we continue being seen together, people will talk."

"They've been talking since the day you came to work for me, babe," he pointed out dryly.

"No, I'm pretty sure it was before that." She lifted her tear-stained face to his. On the days when her makeup had been perfect, she'd never before looked so beautiful to him. "On my first visit to your dinner theater, you started their tongues wagging over your ridiculous Willa Vanilla Pudding." She shuddered. "I can't believe you dragged my most horrific nickname out of the bag like it was no big deal."

"I think it's cute." He winked at her.

"You would, since you and your awful friends are the ones who made it up!"

"The things boys do to get the attention of girls they like," he scoffed in a husky voice. Her answering blush was the only answer he got since they were thronged by security guards the moment they stepped into the hallway.

They were escorted backstage by no less than six of them. Cast members were dashing frenziedly around, giving last-minute tweaks to costumes and makeup.

"Five minute delay on curtain opening time," Angel announced firmly. Since he owned the place, he had that kind of authority.

Giving him a grateful look, Willa had the stage manager reset the clock on the master computer that controlled the music, special effects, and countless other functions.

Angel marched up to the guy playing the part of Gabriel and bent to speak in his ear. "You want to head home early this

evening?”

The actor looked surprised. Then he grinned. “Sure thing, boss.” He shed his robe in two snaps and handed it over. His earpiece and wireless headset followed.

Angel quickly donned them, not sure if Willa even noticed. She was too busy going over Julia’s lines with her.

Wonder tugged at his heart as he watched them together. Willa was really good with people. Even someone as difficult as Julia was like putty in her hands. Like a potter molding a piece of clay, she knew exactly when and where to press and for how long. The first act of tonight’s pageant had been proof of that. The standing ovation had gone on for a full five minutes. He knew because he’d timed it. He couldn’t wait to deliver his personal thank you to her after the show.

After he took care of another piece of unfinished business between them — the most important one. Her plea for him to give her a reason to stay in Pinetop was still ringing in his ears.

And he’d finally come up with the perfect reason. He couldn’t wait to share it with her.



WILLA HURRIED TO THE DRESSING ROOM RESERVED FOR MARY, the mother of Jesus, to don her robe and sandals. Julia had done an amazing job pretending to go over her backup lines again until Angel had exited the backstage area. It was Julia’s finest acting yet, making Willa wonder if she needed to revise her opinion of the young mother-to-be. It was beginning to look as if Julia truly had a future in acting. She certainly had a gift for spinning pure fiction.

The truth was that Willa and Julia had been going over Willa’s lines.

Though she had an important decision to deliver to Mick Rivers in the next forty-eight hours, and Christmas Tree Farm still needed a lot of help to get them back on their feet

financially, a few rogue cowboys were still skulking around the alleys on Main Street, and Bea Ashburn still had her nose ten inches in the air, tonight most people had chosen to lay aside their differences for a few hours like they did every year for the Annual Pinetop Christmas Pageant.

Though Ella Morgan wasn't feeling well, she, too, had insisted on attending their opening night. All across the audience were faces that Willa had known and adored her entire life. Folks who'd cheered her on at school plays, sporting events, and high school graduation. Folks who'd sent her gifts in college, then purchased tickets to come watch her in concert during her many singing tours.

And now it was her turn to give back to them.

Only seconds after she received the cue to take her place on set, the stage curtains swished back open. By the time the spotlight landed on her, her elbows were resting on the windowsill of a clay and rock dwelling from Biblical times. She gazed dreamily at the starry ceiling. Her jolt when Gabriel floated down from the heavens, however, was no act.

She'd not been expecting Angel to be the one wearing a robe and wings this evening. He'd turned her down flat every time she'd asked him to.

The audience gasped in awe, because he was suspended by chords that were invisible to them. Thanks to a very clever set of stage hands and special effects artists, he appeared to be flying.

My very own Angel. She couldn't believe it had taken her this many years to recognize that fact. Like an angel in disguise, he'd always been there for her — teasing and taunting her, adoring her, sometimes protecting her, and always pushing her to give her best in everything she endeavored. Yes, it had partly been out of fear of being bested by him, but there was no denying the profound effect he'd had on her life.

Since they'd co-written several parts of tonight's script, she knew it by heart. Together, they delivered a powerful and heart-wrenching duet. To give their audience the most

authentic performance possible, Willa pictured what it must have felt like for the real Mary to discover she would soon bear a son who would become the Savior of the world. She infused her own awe into the lines, her own fears and misgivings, her own cautious hope and joy. She grew genuinely emotional as the scene progressed.

The tears trickling down her cheeks were real ones — not a difficult feat, considering she'd been weeping in Angel's arms only minutes earlier. So much hinged on her upcoming date with him this evening. On the decision she was determined they would make together.

When she sang the final line, people shot to their feet across the dinner theater. The thunderous applause was followed by shouts for an encore.

She and Angel exchanged a silent message, then launched into a brief encore that led seamlessly to the next scene.

The manger scene was as enthralling as the electrifying opening act. Angel had arranged to have two real sheep delivered to the stage from Christmas Tree Farm, and a new mother in Pinetop had agreed to allow her infant son to pose as baby Jesus. Thankfully, he only cried once and slept through the rest of it. It was an earthy and moving rendition of the age-old story.

The final scene of the pageant involved a mix of visits from the wise men and Gabriel, the performance of the celestial choir, and a joyous grand finale that comprised the entire cast. Instead of assembling on the sidelines for the usual roll call, however, the cast scurried around the stage, quickly transforming it into a winter wonderland.

The strands of starlight twinkled brighter overhead, and someone turned the snow machine back on. Willa watched in growing puzzlement, wondering what was happening and why she hadn't been briefed on whatever changes were taking place.

A group of singers swooped down on her and whisked her into her dressing room to hustle her out of Mary's robe and into the festive green dress she'd worn to the theater this

evening. They just as quickly hustled her back to the darkened stage and plopped her down in a high-back chair.

“What is going on?” she hissed.

No one answered.

The curtains swished back open, and Angel joined her on stage. He’d changed back into his master of ceremonies dark suit. However, he still didn’t begin the final roll call of the cast and crew. Instead, he signaled for the stringed quartet to strike up a soft country tune that made her think of family holidays and home.

He strode purposefully in her direction and took a knee in front of her.

He reached for her hands. “I love you, Willa.” Since his microphone was on, his words echoed across the entire theater.

She caught her breath as a collective gasp rose around them.

She’d never seen his dark gaze so full of hope and longing. “I made a promise to this town when I was eight years old that it’s taken me over twenty years to keep. Tonight, I’d like to make good on that promise by asking you this.” He gripped her hands tighter. “Will you marry me?”

In all her years of singing and performing, Willa had lost count of the number of times she’d been proposed to. She’d had flowers thrown on stage, poetry composed in her name, and mountains of gifts delivered to her dressing room. But not a single word or gift had ever resonated as beautifully in her heart as Angel’s simple words of love.

They were born from a lifetime of dueling words and matching wits with her. He spoke from a singular brand of commitment that had never wavered, even when she’d given him no reason to hope for this.

“Yes!” She wanted to say so much more, but her throat was too choked with emotion. “Yes,” she murmured again.

Exultation lit his gaze. He palmed her cheek and leaned in to cover her mouth with his.

It wasn't a quick or casual kiss. It was tender and worshipful, everything a true love's kiss should be. A moment in time in which they traded hearts and promised to treasure them forever and always.

The ring he slid on her finger looked blurry through her tears as he drew her to her feet to stand beside him. The audience erupted with another round of applause, this time to celebrate the momentous proposal they'd all gotten to witness. It felt like the room was overflowing with joy.

At Angel's signal, the narrator standing at the corner of the stage started calling out names. The cast hurried to take their places on either side of them — bowing, waving, and smiling. When the last name was called, Angel gave them the cue to join hands.

The Castellano's cast took their final bow together.



IT WAS NEARLY A FULL TWO HOURS LATER BEFORE WILLA AND Angel could break away from all the happy well wishers. They escaped to his office at the first opportunity.

“I want you to stay in Pinetop and be mine.” He raised her hand to his lips to kiss her fingers one by one.

“I want that, too.” She smiled dreamily up at him. Mick Rivers' offer hadn't been the least bit tempting. That part of her life was over. She'd known it for a few months now. What she hadn't known until she'd come home to Pinetop was what was supposed to come next.

But now she did, and it was more beautiful than anything she'd ever imagined. It wasn't the only beautiful thing in the room. She also couldn't stop staring at the gorgeous square diamond Angel had given her.

“You still want to get out of here?” He angled his head at the coat she'd tossed across the back of one of his office chairs.

She nodded happily, and he helped her put it on.

They walked hand-in-hand to the door and exited the theater, continuing down the sidewalk alongside Main Street in contented silence. The Christmas lights made it enchanting at night. The pine trees were swaying in the breeze, and a star-studded sky twinkled above their heads.

“Mind if I ask you something?” Angel squeezed Willa’s hand.

“It depends on the question,” she teased.

“Cute.” He dropped her hand to loop an arm around her shoulders. He drew her closer. “Why are you still wearing the angel wing pendant Mick gave you?”

She tipped her head against his arm. “Initially, I wore it to commemorate a life well lived that was cut too short. When I arrived in Pinetop, I continued wearing it because of you. Though I lost someone I cared deeply for, I gained someone that I loved even more.” She gave him a wobbly smile. “I’m not sure if I said that perfectly.”

“It works for me.” He nuzzled her cheek. “In case you’re wondering, I wouldn’t change a thing about your journey or mine — not a single curve or bump in the road, since every bit of it is what led us back to each other.”

“That sounded like poetry,” she sighed. “Just like the card you sent me with the angel cookie ornament. Profoundly beautiful and exactly what I needed to hear.”

He chuckled quietly. “And to think that just a few hours ago, you were complaining about the nickname I gave you all those years ago.”

“Don’t say it,” she squealed, dissolving into laughter. “You know how much I can’t stand it.”

“What’s so bad about it?” He swooped lower to kiss the soft skin behind her ear, making her laugh harder.

“I don’t know. All I can tell you is I’m still recovering from the trauma of you dragging it back out, dusting it off, and using it on me in public the other day.”

“Maybe I should only call you that when we’re alone,” he crooned in her ear.

“You’re an awful human being!”

“Is that why you agreed to marry me?” He paused on the sidewalk to spin her to face him.

“No. I’m pretty sure it’s because I like the way you kiss me.”

“I aim to please.” Though his tone was teasing, the toasty kiss he gave her made the winter air feel like it was lit by a thousand bonfires.

It was so good to be home. Willa vowed on the spot that she was never leaving again. Everyone and everything that mattered the most to her were here.

“I love you, Angel,” she murmured against his lips.

“I’ve waited so long to hear you say that back to me.” He cupped her face in his hands, kissing her with his gaze. “Pretty sure I was born loving you, Willa.”

“Don’t ever stop,” she whispered.

“I won’t.” The stars were his witness as he sealed the promise with another breath-stealing kiss.



EPILOGUE

Christmas Day

Angel's arms were so full of gifts that he had to lean forward and bump the doorbell of the Morgans' mountain chalet with his elbow. He'd agreed to meet them for brunch at ten. It was five minutes 'til.

The door popped open almost immediately.

"Oh, wow!" Willa reached out to grab the two packages balanced precariously on the tippy top of his stack. "You're loaded down there, Santa."

"Merry Christmas, Willa." He stepped inside, drinking in her red palazzo pants and flowy white blouse. After traveling the world, her style was an eclectic mix of city girl and country chic. Most of all, it was uniquely hers. He had no doubt she'd be setting new trends in Pinetop soon. *Move over, Bea Ashburn.*

"Merry Christmas, Angel." Willa's smile grew tremulous as she shut the door and spun back in his direction, "Our very first Christmas together."

"I love you." He leaned closer to plant a slow, tender kiss on her. Next year, he hoped to ring in the holidays around their own tree in their own home.

"I love you, too." She caressed his cheek, drawing a finger down the line of his jaw. "So much."

Hearing her say that was like hearing ten thousand answered prayers, because he was pretty sure he'd begged God at least that many times to soften her heart toward him.

"Seriously, Angel! You didn't have to do all this," she scolded as she led him to the living room. "What part of *just come* didn't you understand?"

He stood patiently by the Christmas tree while she unloaded the packages from his arms. "Just humor me, babe." She was poetry in motion to him as she artfully arrayed his gifts beneath the branches. "It's been a long time since I had anyone to buy gifts for. Okay, maybe that's not entirely true."

He chuckled as he pictured the other pile of packages he'd loaded into the back of his SUV.

“Oh?” She straightened and gave him a mock severe look. “Are we on the topic of ex-girlfriends again?”

“Hardly,” he scoffed. “I was referring to the kids at Christmas Tree Farm.”

Her eyes grew wide as she set his last gift under the tree. “You really did play Santa this year!” She bobbed up like a jack-in-the-box to wrap her hands around his arm. “Start talking and tell me everything!” As usual, her excitement about anything concerning Christmas Tree Farm bordered on palpable. So much so that he couldn't believe he'd wasted so much time worrying about what she thought of his humble upbringing. Every time he came up with another idea for improving the lives of the farm's residents, she was right there beside him, rolling up her sleeves and asking how she could help.

Instead of sitting on the sofa, they ended up at the window overlooking the mountains. It was snowing again, just enough to make it feel like they were standing inside a snow globe.

Angel slid his arms around her from behind and rested his cheek against hers. “My first gift arrived at the farm yesterday,” he confided in a low voice. “Emilio promised to keep it out of sight until I get there this afternoon to help assemble it.”

“Oo! What are you two building this time?”

“A swing set.”

“You are totally taking me with you!” Her gasp of delight was impossible to resist.

“Deal.” He tipped her chin in his direction to brush his mouth against hers. It was like sampling pure joy. “There are toys in the back of my vehicle. Some of the theater staff helped me wrap everything.”

She looked mystified. “Why is this the first time I'm hearing about the wrapping fest?”

“Because it happened on Christmas Eve, and you were needed at home.” He traced the underside of her lip with his thumb to smooth out the pucker. “As much as I enjoy having you all to myself, I’m on a mission to stay on your parents’ good side.”

“An excellent plan!” Ella Morgan’s firm voice carried across the room to them.

Angel twirled Willa around and found her mother standing beside the Christmas tree. Her too-thin body was ensconced in a long, red dress that seemed designed to hide her gauntness as much as to keep her warm. She held a wide silver platter with hands that trembled a little.

“Whoa! That’s a huge tray!” He dropped his arms from Willa’s waist and hurried forward to take it from her. It was piled with every finger food imaginable — rolled slices of meat, a variety of cheese cubes, olives, grapes, strawberries, and blueberries. In a separate compartment on the tray were at least three different kinds of crackers and a heaping pile of tart-sized blueberry muffins. “Where do you want me to put it?”

“Right there.” She pointed to the wide glass-topped coffee table in front of the sofa. “I hope you brought your appetite, because Will is pulling a quiche out of the oven as we speak.”

“It sounds delicious.” Though she’d insisted he take the day off from cooking, he’d sent over a box of iced gingerbread cookies the evening before. After years of living in Pinetop and serving its residents, he happened to know they were her favorite. For Willa, he’d sent over a different box. It contained an all-new strawberry cheesecake recipe he planned to debut on New Year’s Day at the dinner theater, a recipe he hoped would help Christmas Tree Farm establish their reputation as master gardeners of winter strawberries.

“Good. We’ll eat and trade war stories about our week. Then we’ll open gifts.” Ella Morgan’s eyes widened as she caught sight of the extra packages under the tree. “I see you didn’t come empty handed.” She shot a mildly accusing look at her daughter as she took a seat on the sofa.

Willa held up her hands in defense. “I told him to just come like you said.” She plopped down in the loveseat adjacent to her mother and patted the cushion for Angel to join her. “He didn’t listen.”

“Getting all practiced up for married life, I see.” Her father snickered as he walked into the room with a red porcelain dish steaming with quiche. “At my age, all you have to do is turn down your hearing aids to restore the peace.”

Angel wasn’t touching that conversation with a ten-foot pole. “I plead the fifth,” he declared solemnly.

Everyone laughed.

Ella wagged a finger at him. “My almost son-in-law is a very wise man.”

Her show of motherly affection reached deep inside his heart, filling all the dark and lonely places left by his dearly departed parents. All his adult life, he’d privately envied the guys with mothers-in-law, even the guys who were constantly complaining about theirs. He already adored his to pieces and didn’t see that ever changing.

For as long as we have left together. As much as he didn’t want to think about it, he knew Willa was worried sick about her mother’s health. Unfortunately, she hadn’t been very forthcoming about her declining condition.

Yet.

He suspected she would open up soon, now that Willa was home to stay. He wouldn’t be surprised if she waited until after the holidays, though. That’s just how Ella Morgan was — always thinking about others’ needs ahead of her own.

As Will scooped quiche onto plates and handed them out, she gestured at the silver platter on the coffee table. “Help yourselves to whatever else you want. There’s coffee and tea at the beverage bar against the wall.” She waited until everyone had a plate of food in their laps and a mug of their beverage of choice before speaking again.

“Since I’ve already eaten, I hope you don’t mind me taking the floor first.” She settled back in her seat, crossing her legs

and looping her hands around her knee.

Willa gaped in surprise at her. “What do you mean, you’ve already eaten?”

“I’m on a special diet, hon.”

“Since when?” Willa laid down her fork.

“It’s something new that Dr. Ashburn started me on a few days ago. Though most people hate dieting, I’d like to think of it as one of the two biggest Christmas gifts I’ve ever received.”

Willa paled a little. “Mom, if there’s something you need to tell us...”

“That’s exactly what I’m doing, sweetie. I know you’ve been worried about me, but I had my reasons for waiting until today to tell you what’s been going on with my health.”

Looking ill, Willa set her plate on the coffee table and scooted closer to Angel.

He set his plate next to hers and curled an arm around her shoulders.

“Please keep in mind this story has a happy ending.” Ella Morgan glanced down at her hands. “Because it doesn’t start off that way.”

Willa’s shoulders tensed. “Why? What’s going on, Mom?”

“I was diagnosed with breast cancer four months ago today, hon.”

Willa made a whimpering sound. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

Angel hugged her tighter, sensing there was more to her mother’s story.

“Because you’d already suffered one tremendous loss. I couldn’t put anything else on your shoulders at the time.”

“Mom!” Willa’s eyes welled with tears.

“I just couldn’t.” Her mother shook her head. “Not until you had a chance to bounce back a little, which brings me to

the next part of my story. When your father asked me what I wanted for Christmas this year, I told him there was only one thing on my list.” She pointed at Willa. “I wanted you to come. I prayed for it every day after my diagnosis. So did your father and Flash Billings.”

Willa blinked and dabbed at the edges of her eyes. “Flash knows about your diagnosis?”

Her mother nodded sheepishly. “It’s pretty hard to hide stuff like that from your mailman and your hair stylist. He kept insisting I should tell you right away.”

“I wish you would’ve listened to him, Mom.” Willa’s voice shook. “You’re the only mom I have. I had a right to know this stuff.”

“That’s what he said, and he was determined to make it happen whether I chose to speak up or not. He even drove to Castellano’s to order you one of Angel’s famous cookies. He said if anything would bring you home to Pinetop, it was a taste of your mama’s favorite gingerbread. By some miracle, they had a box packaged up with your address label on it when he arrived. All he had to do was stick it in the mail.”

“Oh, my goodness!” Willa exchanged a tearful look with Angel. “So *that’s* who sent it to me.”

Her mother’s smile was triumphant. “And it worked! My baby girl came home for Christmas.” Her smile took on a faraway look. “And that’s when I decided I wanted one more gift this year.”

“The pageant,” Willa quavered. “That’s why you wanted to see me in action again.”

Her mother made a scoffing sound and swiped at the air. “Actually, I considered that to be part of the first gift. The second gift I prayed for was something entirely different.” She paused to beam a beauteous smile at everyone in the room. “And the Lord saw fit to grant my second request, as well.” She spread her hands. “My cancer is in remission.”

“Oh, Mom!” Willa leaped up from her seat and flew to her mother’s side. They hugged, cried, laughed, and hugged some

more. “That’s it! Christmas is over. I have everything I want,” she sighed.

“Not even!” her mother chided. “We’re just getting started.” She pointed at the pile of gifts under the tree. “Angel, if you’ll do the honors, please.”

“My pleasure.” Being included in the Morgans’ family Christmas celebration was the biggest gift of all to a bachelor like him.

While snooty folks like the Ashburns envied him for being the richest guy in Pinetop, he’d also been the loneliest until now.

As he watched Willa open his latest masterpiece — an elaborate, three-dimensional gingerbread cookie in the shape of his home — he knew he finally had everything he’d ever wanted.

She read the note accompanying it and blushed.

Let’s set the date.

Waving the card at him, she teased, “Whoever wrote this didn’t sign it.”

“My bad.” He rose from his crouch beside the tree, whipping out a pen as he moved behind the sofa.

Ignoring the card she was still waving, he tipped her head back and gave her an upside-down kiss. “How does a New Year’s Day wedding sound to you?”

Her mother’s alarmed squeak made him grin against Willa’s mouth. “No?” He kissed her again. “How about January second, then?”

It earned him another gasp from his soon-to-be mother-in-law. “Babe, if I’m going in the wrong direction, just let me know. I certainly don’t mind us tying the knot sooner. Today, tomorrow...”

Ella Morgan made a growling sound in the back of her throat. “It’s a good thing you bought a few goodwill points last night with those cookies you sent over.” She fisted her hands on her hips. “Because the absolute soonest I can see us pulling

off a proper church wedding is..." She paused, wrinkling her forehead in consideration. "March. No, make that April. May or June would be even better."

"But you think March is possible?" The wistfulness in Willa's voice as she met her mother's gaze made Angel's heart thud in anticipation. He sensed they were close to reaching a consensus with her mother.

Ella Morgan pursed her lips. "Just barely. Not March the first, though. It's National Pig Day," she explained with a shudder.

"What?" Angel looked helplessly down at Willa for an explanation.

She held up a hand to halt whatever her mother was about to say next. "Do not punish him for his innocence, Mom. He has no idea what he just started." She tipped her face up to him. "You truly have no idea. Just take my word for it when I say there's a national day for everything. Since my mother chairs the Pinetop parade committee, she knows them all by heart."

"How about March the second?" he interjected quickly.

"Old Stuff Day and Reuben Grill Day?" Ella Morgan didn't look too enamored by his suggestion. "March the third, on the other hand, is Peach Blossom Day and World Day of Prayer."

When no objections were voiced to either occasion, Willa smiled sweetly at him. "I think we have a wedding date."

"Thank you." He kissed her again. "Let the countdown begin." Moving back around the sofa, he took a seat beside her. Since they weren't expected at Christmas Tree Farm for another couple of hours, he'd planned one more surprise before then. He glanced at his watch, estimating it would arrive at any moment.

The doorbell rang.

Willa's mother glanced in puzzlement across the living room. "I wasn't expecting anyone else to join us. Were you?" She posed the question to them collectively.

“Well, now that you mention it,” Angel drawled, standing and holding out his hands to Willa.

“Please assure me that’s not the minister coming to marry you,” her mother admonished tartly as he tugged Willa to her feet.

“Don’t I wish!” Angel steered his fiancée toward the front door, smiling widely as he pulled it open for her.

At the base of the porch steps stood a gleaming red sleigh. A team of four horses pranced in the snow, anxious to take off again.

Flash Billings was decked out in his Santa suit, holding the reins in a pair of fuzzy red gloves. “Ho, ho, ho! Merry Christmas!” His long, white beard shivered in the mountain breeze. “All aboard the Pinetop Express!”

“All of us?” Ella Morgan hurried to join them in the doorway. Her husband was right behind her.

“Yes. It’s for the whole family,” Angel assured, raising Willa’s hands to his lips. *My family.*

“Well, what are we waiting for?” She gave a bounce of excitement.

He dropped her hands to retrieve her coat from the hall tree, and they were soon cruising across the snowy slopes of Pinetop. After voicing a few concerns about the frigid temperatures, Ella had allowed her husband to bundle her into her hat and coat. Her cheeks were flushed with more color than Angel had seen on them in months as she pointed out and exclaimed over each white-tailed deer and elk they passed.

“This is amazing. Thank you!” With a sigh of pure happiness, Willa tipped her head against Angel’s shoulder. “There’s no place like Pinetop, is there?”

“Nowhere in the world,” he agreed fervently, especially now that the woman who owned his heart was back in town. He watched a snowflake flutter down and land on her eyelashes.

“That’s it!” She abruptly straightened and blinked away the melting ice crystals. “I’m inviting Tess Cardwell to our wedding, and I’m not taking no for an answer.”

“Who’s Tess?” He smiled indulgently at her, adoring the fact that she was already mentally composing their guest list.

“A dear friend back in Phoenix who could really use a dose of Pinetop.”

“I look forward to meeting her.”

“Oh, it’s not going to be easy getting her here.” Her voice was rueful. “I might need your help prying my favorite waitress out of the diner where she works.” She made a scooping motion. “From what I understand, money is tight, so she never takes vacations.”

“A waitress, eh?” It fascinated him to no end to discover that the biggest country music star in the west considered a lowly waitress to be one of her dearest friends. Willa continued to be full of surprises. Good ones.

Willa pointed gleefully at him as it dawned on her what he was thinking. “She’s allergic to all forms of charity, but I like how you think.”

“It’s not charity to offer someone a job at Castellano’s.” He bent his head closer to hers, liking her friend already. “You just say the word, and I’ll extend the offer.”

“We’ll have to get her here first,” Willa reminded with a sigh, “in case you missed that part.”

“How hard can it be?” He cuddled her closer. “All it took was a gingerbread cookie to reel you in, babe.”

“So cocky,” she hissed. “But, again. I like how you think. Let’s do it!” She turned to tenderly bump noses with him. “Roll it out with patience, ice it with a swirl of clever timing, and sprinkle it with extra prayer. Trust me. Her situation calls for it.”

“Consider it done.” With a quick glance at her parents to ensure their attention was still on the surrounding wildlife, he couldn’t resist touching his lips to hers again. Though he was

anxious for their wedding date to roll around in March, a guy only got one first Christmas with the love of his life. He fully intended to savor every ounce of it.



Want to read about Tess Cardwell's trip to Pinetop for Willa and Angel's wedding? And the storm that forces her to spend a snowbound weekend with the singlest, hunkiest cowboy foreman in Arizona?

Keep turning to take a peek at

[Cowboy Foreman in Love for Christmas](#)

a sweet rags-to-riches Christmas romance!



SNEAK PREVIEW: COWBOY FOREMAN IN LOVE FOR CHRISTMAS

Tess Cardwell stared at the wrinkled, tear-stained wedding invitation in her hands. She'd received it three days earlier from the kindest, most generous person she'd ever known. The white monogrammed card hadn't arrived with the wrinkles or tear stains, of course. She was the one who'd added those extra details to it.

Willa Morgan, the biggest country music star in the west, was getting married. Any decent human being would have been happy for her, but all Tess could scrape up was despair.

Everybody at the diner where she worked was talking about the upcoming wedding of their favorite celebrity. There was literally no place in Phoenix to run and hide from the horrible news.

It made her madder than a hornet every time she read the second name on the invitation — Angel Castellano, with his dreamy sounding name and even dreamier sounding dinner theater. Willa had bragged up a storm about him over the phone, but all she'd done was make Tess want to hunt him down and shake him until his dreamy teeth rattled.

Because he was taking Willa away from her. Not just for the holidays like the lovely singer had originally planned. He was taking her away for good.

With a sob of sheer anguish, Tess crumpled the wedding invitation and threw it across her tiny studio apartment. It landed against the wall and fluttered to the hardwood floor with a soft papery thud.

Omigosh! She stared after it in consternation. *What have I done?* In the next moment, she was leaping off the bed, finger-combing her auburn hair away from her eyes, and bending to retrieve the precious card. She carefully smoothed it out again, plopped belly-down across her bed, and cried over it some more.

A knock sounded on her front door.

She twisted around to stare blearily at it through her tears. She wasn't expecting company.

Whoever you are, please go away! Not in the mood to chat here.

A second knock sounded at the door, then a third. *Are you for real?* Realizing that her mystery visitor wasn't any good at taking hints, she rolled out of bed with a sigh of resignation. It was Sunday night, for crying out loud! Most people were in bed by now.

Stomping across the room, she peeked through the keyhole and scowled. From the glow of the streetlights, she could see nobody on the other side.

That's weird.

She opened the door, popped her head around it, and glanced both ways across the third-story balcony. There was no one out there. Puzzled, she replayed the three knocks in her head.

I know what I heard.

Assuming she'd been pranked by a neighbor kid, she started to close the door. That's when she noticed the small square box resting on her doormat. It was wrapped in brown paper and tied with twine.

Someone left me a gift? She bent to snatch it up and discovered that it was indeed addressed to her. It was totally unexpected, considering that it wasn't her birthday or anything.

But there was no denying the name on the address label was hers — Tessa May Caldwell. Her full name, which was a

little odd! Very few people in the world even knew her middle name, and the ones who did had no idea where she lived.

The first person that came to mind, though, was... *No! Please don't let it be him, Lord!*

She quickly backed into her apartment, slammed the door shut, and bolted it behind her.

It's not him, she assured herself firmly. *He's in jail now. He can't hurt me or anyone else anymore.* Just thinking about her ex, though, was enough to make her shiver. Dane Taggart's cruelty was the sole reason she'd left her hometown seven years ago without leaving a forwarding address. Not that she had any strong ties left there. After her mom died, she'd been bounced around to no less than three foster homes.

Her gaze dropped to the box she was still clutching. *It's just a gift, silly! Not a venomous snake.* Despite the inner scolding she gave herself, her hands shook a little as she carried it to the kitchen bar. They continued to shake as she untied the twine and tore open the box.

A small white card fell to the cabinet. She picked it up and scanned the message scrawled on it.

I want you at my wedding, and I'm not taking no for an answer.

With a gasp of delight, she dropped the card. Though it wasn't signed, there was only one person in the world who could've written it — Willa Morgan, soon to be Willa Castellano.

Tess grimaced at the reminder that a four-hour drive would forever separate them after her friend got married. Four whole stinking hours! With a work schedule like hers, she'd be lucky to pay Willa a visit once or twice per year. It was so unfair!

She gave the white gift box she'd unwrapped a hard look, trying to find some sort of fault with it, but she couldn't. The box was beautiful. A cluster of white eyelet snowflakes was etched into each side of it. Plus, it smelled like gingerbread, her favorite dessert on the planet.

Opening the lid, she gaped at what was inside. *No way!* A gingerbread cookie ornament in the shape of a star was nestled on a bed of white cloth. It was tied with a cheery red ribbon.

“Oh-h-h!” she breathed, lifting the ornament and letting it swing in the air. Someone had put an incredible amount of detail into the icing.

Probably the heartless Angel Castellano! Tess wrinkled her nose at the realization that she was contradicting herself. There was no way the guy was completely heartless if he’d created such a lovely gift for one of his fiancée’s friends. A woman he’d never met, no less.

The gingerbread ornament smelled so delicious that she was tempted to take a bite out of it on the spot. However, she wouldn’t be able to hang it on her tree next Christmas if she ate it.

New plan. No eat-y the cookie.

As she laid the ornament back in its box, she wished she still believed in make-belief stuff like wishing on stars, because there was a whole list of things she would’ve wished for. However, she’d stopped believing in Santa and the Easter Bunny years ago. Besides, nothing on her wish list fell in the realistic category, anyway.

For one thing, she desperately wanted to quit her weekend nanny job at the Rileys. It’s what their four spoiled daughters wanted, too. They took enormous pride in the fact that they’d run off their last three nannies with their mean-spirited pranks. The only reason Tess had stuck it out as long as she had was because she was more desperate for a paycheck than most folks.

However, that didn’t keep her from longing to hop in her truck, that Willa had recently borrowed and returned, and leave Phoenix behind like Willa had done.

Yay for you! Her friend had escaped the suffocating desert heat, gritty sandstorms, and crush of people that constantly overflowed the city sidewalks.

I would totally jump at the chance to go somewhere smaller and quieter. Oh, and cooler. Emphasis on cooler!

More than anything in the world, though, she wanted to attend Willa's wedding.

Unfortunately, that would entail asking off from work, and she didn't get paid when she wasn't working. Since she lived paycheck to paycheck, she did a quick mental calculation and decided that the most pay she could survive without was two day's worth. Any more than that, and she wouldn't be able to pay her bills.

With a sigh of regret, she left the cookie ornament sitting next to Willa's wedding invitation on the tiny bistro table in her kitchenette. Heading to the bathroom, she showered and changed into her most comfy pink sweatshirt and gray sweats. Turning off the lamp on her nightstand, she flopped back on the mattress and stared wide-eyed into the darkness.

Night time was always the hardest time for her. Every day, all week long, all year-round. It was when she didn't have her work at the diner or the Rileys to distract her from the fact that she was twenty-six-years-old with nothing to show for it.

Since she had no college degree, she worked from sunup to sundown six days per week at her two hourly jobs. She crammed everything else into her one day off — laundry, grocery shopping, vacuuming, oil changes, and an occasional trip to the doctor's office. Then she woke up the next morning and started the same grind all over again.

The unexpected friendship she'd struck up with Willa Morgan had been the one bright spot in her dreary existence, and now Willa was gone.

She inwardly replayed their final conversation before Willa had driven away.

You should come to Pinetop with me.

Don't I wish, Tess had sighed. But the tips are too good this time of year. Sorry!

Later in the conversation, Willa had repeated her invitation.

I really hope you get to visit Pinetop with me someday. You would honestly love it there.

Tess had given her a sad smile. *Maybe someday*, she'd muttered, knowing the chances were slim to none. All it would take was one tire blow-out on the road, and she'd be in over her head with expenses she couldn't afford.

Though playing it safe was the sensible thing to do, a suffocating feeling settled over Tess.

I'm a prisoner here.

Funny how all it had taken was a stinking gingerbread cookie ornament to make her realize that.

I'm going to fill the same glasses of tea and soda, deliver the same hamburgers and fries to the same tables, and come back to these same four walls again and again and again until the day I die.

Unless I take a few risks and live a little.

She sat up in bed, swung her legs to the floor, and headed back to the bistro table in the kitchenette. Reaching for the winsome cookie star, she marveled at how the glossy white icing picked up the glow of moonlight through the window over the sink. The delicious scent of gingerbread surrounded her with childhood memories of family and home, warming her heart. With those memories came a flicker of hope that quickly blossomed into something bigger and bolder.

If she RSVP'd a big *Heck, yeah!* to Willa's invitation, the woman would have no choice but to quit hounding her about it. *I could call in sick to work or something.* Tess faked a quick cough to test out the idea. *Or just tell my shift manager the truth.*

She was the most reliable employee on the planet. There was no way the guy would say no to her only request for time off in four years, right?

As she mentally started throwing clothes into a suitcase, it dawned on her that she had nothing to wear to a wedding. No dress and no money to buy one. Willa wouldn't care, though.

She wasn't like that. All it would take to make her happy was showing up.

When Tess thought about it like that, the decision became infinitely easier.

That's it! I'm going to Pinetop. I'm actually going to Pinetop!



Hope you enjoyed the excerpt from

[Cowboy Foreman in Love for Christmas](#)

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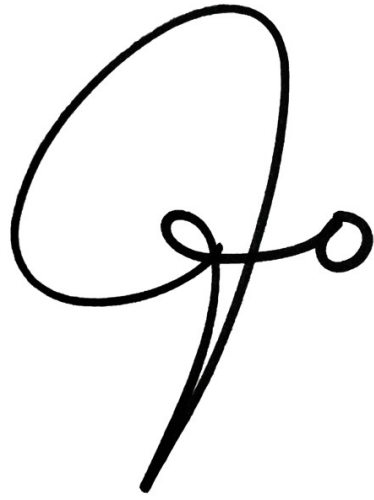
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SNEAK PREVIEW: MR. YEAH,
RIGHT. AS IF...



A *cowboy trying to get the woman of his dreams to fall in love with him before she figures out she's been pranked into dating him...*

Lacey Perry wears the Miss Texas crown for being a champion of humanitarian causes. When she finds out that a small town cowboy is secretly sending supplies to her favorite orphanage in Dallas, she decides to thank him for his generosity:

- With a surprise visit
- In person
- On his birthday

It's the kind of publicity stunt her social media followers are sure to love. Except she soon finds out it's not the only stunt in play. Between a missed flight, too many mixed signals to count, and an unexpected attraction, does her visit with Emerson stand a chance at turning into a real relationship? Or will her followers rate it as her worst dating disaster yet?

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Mr. Yeah, Right. As If... — Emerson & Fox's stories

Much love,

Jo

SNEAK PREVIEW: NOT GOOD
ENOUGH HERO

After a cowboy in a work release program rescues a bubbly romance author from the back of a runaway horse, she makes it her mission to convince him he's hero material...

Saint Riley is no saint, and he certainly doesn't believe in happily-ever-afters, but the newest guest at Anderson Ranch is a big believer in stuff like that. In fact, Jana Marlowe can't stop daydreaming about his bravery. No man has ever before risked his personal safety to protect her. She's also never seen a man fight an attraction the way he fights theirs.

When he dodges her every attempt to thank him, she jokingly writes him into her next romance book — a separate version, of course, for his eyes alone. It was never supposed to be published, much less become a bestseller and bring a ton of real trouble rolling into town.

As danger snowballs her way, Saint struggles to overcome his past and become the man she believes he can be.



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ABOUT JO



Jo is an Amazon bestselling author of sweet and inspirational romance stories about faith, hope, love and family drama with a few Texas-sized detours into comedy.

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