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One There Was a Lawman

DIANA PALMER



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Table of Contents

Also by.

Title Page

Copyright Page

Once There Was a Lawman

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Once There Was a Lawman

DIANA PALMER

To Dr. Mark McCracken and all the other doctors at North Georgia Medical Center, in Gainesville, GA, South Tower, 5th floor, who took such wonderful care of me when I was so sick with Covid-19 pneumonia in the summer of 2021. And to the doctors who tried so hard to save my husband, James, who did not survive. With the greatest respect.

Chapter One

Thomas Kincaid Jones hated the little Colorado town of Raven Springs on sight. He was a city man, from Chicago. He liked the music of traffic, the horns, the eternal movement around him. Here, there was nothing to see, not much to do. Raven Springs, just a few miles out of Benton, Colorado, where he was temporarily assigned on a case, was the end of the world. It was a little town in northwestern Colorado, surrounded by majestic snow-covered mountains, with a small and tight-knit population that seemed to disdain any stranger. The holiday season had apparently been kicked off even before Thanksgiving, because the town was decked out in lights and Christmas decorations in the store windows. And Christmas was at least three weeks away.

He hated Christmas. It was a cold Christmas morning in Chicago when the woman he loved told him that she'd met somebody else and fallen in love, really in love, and that she was leaving him. He'd tried to talk her out of it. They'd been in an on-off relationship for months, and he'd been on the verge of proposing. He knew she dated other men, but he'd been fairly certain that there was no real competition. Well, not until that morning, when she'd hit him in the gut with her confession.

Maybe it hadn't been love as much as physical attraction that held them together, but he'd felt lost when she left town. He'd decided then and there that he wouldn't ever let another woman get that close to him. Six years ago, that had happened. And while he'd had infrequent liaisons, he'd never loved any of them. If a woman could think of men as disposable, surely it was fair play for a man to consider them disposable. He was still bitter about Angie taking off with another man. Especially when he'd considered marriage for the first time in his life.

Just before she left, there had been one last, parting shot. She didn't really want to spend her life with a man in law enforcement who could be killed anytime he went out on a case. She hated guns. He'd thought she was just using that as an excuse. Probably she had. She'd never acted like she cared.

He had a job, his service with the Chicago Police Department, and he'd been in Army Intelligence while he was in the service, in between law enforcement positions. Any man could be killed, by a car crash, a riot, a flaming meteor hitting the ground. Law enforcement had its risks, but so did life itself. He didn't dwell on that, anyway. He was a good shot and he had a solid background, starting at his service with the Chicago Police Department right out of school. He'd wanted something more adventurous, though, so even before Angie left him, he'd applied for a job with the Bureau. After months of checking and rechecking, they'd hired him. He'd had physical encounters with criminals, of course. One memorable one was right outside the local FBI office: two guys trying to kill each other over a girl. He'd stepped in, without thinking about it, and separated them. His reward had been a knife slashing into his chest. He'd subdued the suspect and called for backup, bleeding all the while. One of the local police officers, a man he knew, insisted that he go to the emergency room for treatment. He still had the scar. It wasn't too noticeable, in the thick hair that covered the solid muscle of his chest. But it was long and deep.

He was a big guy, over six feet, not fat but husky and broad-shouldered, like a wrestler. He had thick black hair and large hands. His eyes were dark and piercing, and he almost never smiled. They'd called him Stone Face back in Chicago. Not in front of him, though. Not ever.

He was bored out of his mind. He was here on a case for the FBI. It was a federal crime, kidnapping, and he was partnering with local law enforcement to apprehend the perpetrator who'd left his heavily bound hostage—a young woman—to freeze to death in a lonely, unheated, mountain cabin.

Stuff of heroes, this assignment, he kept telling himself as he cleaned the .45 caliber automatic on a table in his motel room. Except he didn't feel like a hero. He missed the city. All you could hear in this place were barking dogs and even damned singing crickets! There was one in the room right now, driving him nuts. Why was it here in the first place, in the dead of winter? He'd tried to find it, finally realizing it was just outside the room, not in it. And he couldn't very well go

to the room next to his, in the dark, trying to shoot a cricket. He imagined the occupant of the room would take offense if he asked to be let in on a search-and-destroy mission.

He knew his size could be intimidating. He'd played football in college, but he was a little past that now, at thirty-six. The job had become his life. He'd been with the Bureau going on six years now. He was comfortably settled, often applauded for his devotion to duty. Now, here he sat in this little dinky motel room in the back of beyond, listening to that damned cricket. It was absurd!

Before this came up in Raven Springs, Tom had been assigned another case in Denver. Since he was the closest agent to the small town, and the case he was on wasn't urgent, he'd been requested to help Jeff Ralston, the local sheriff, find the perpetrator who'd collected ransom for a dead hostage. The case had twists and turns like a snake, and it was especially sad at this time of year.

He was out of humor already, being reminded, every step he took, of Christmas. He wasn't looking forward to being stuck here for any lengthy period of time. Maybe the perp would feel guilty and present himself at the sheriff's office, hands outstretched for the handcuffs. He chuckled to himself. Sure. That was how it worked.

* * *

He'd just finished cleaning his .45 automatic and was putting away his cleaning tools when there was a knock at his motel room door. He holstered the automatic on his hip, and went to the door, one hand on the butt of the weapon. He was always cautious.

He opened the door a crack and was met by pale, icy-silver eyes in a pretty face, surrounded by long, blond, wavy hair that she was quickly plaiting.

"Yes?" he asked coldly.

"Do you drive a black Crown Victoria?" she asked politely.

"Yes."

"Did you park it in a driveway next to the motel?"

He blinked. “Yes.”

“Well, would you mind moving it?” she asked curtly. “I’d like to get my car out of my driveway so that I can go to work!”

He held up his arm and looked at his watch. His thick dark brows arched. “It’s almost eleven. What the hell kind of job do you have, pole dancing at a bar?”

Her eyes flashed pale lightning at him. “My job is none of your business. Will you please move your car?”

He shrugged. “If I must.”

He followed her out the door. She wasn’t tall. The top of her head came to his shoulder. She was slender and not bad looking at all. She had on a coat that had seen a lot of wear. There was a button missing on one sleeve. Her shoes were thick-soled and laced up. He wondered what sort of work she did. Maybe she cleaned offices. Didn’t they do that at night?

He got into his car, started it, and backed down the driveway. He pulled in next to the curb and got out, locking it back up.

“Just for future reference,” she said, “this is not part of the motel parking lot.”

He pursed his lips and studied her. Indignant. Young. Very young. He glanced past her at a house that needed more repairs than he could take in all at once.

“I’ll keep it in mind,” he said.

For the first time, she noticed the pistol in its holster. “You’re wearing a gun.”

“Goes with the job.”

“You’re an assassin?” she asked with a snarky smile.

He glared at her. “FBI.”

“Oh. The horrible kidnapping,” she said. She nodded. “I knew her. Julie Crane. She was a sweet, kind person. She was standoffish if she didn’t know you, but people understood why she was like she was. I can’t imagine that anybody would hurt

her. Of course, her stepfather has money, but they didn't get along. He was crazy in love with his wife. When she got lung cancer and went in for treatment, he went with her. He even hired a nurse to do private duty with her when she got really bad." She made a face. "Nobody liked the nurse. Julie certainly didn't—she said the nurse took credit for what Julie did when she cared for her mother. May Strickland, that's the nurse, wouldn't even change the bed linen."

"Well, aren't you a buffet of news."

"You look like you'd need to eat a buffet twice a day," she returned, giving him a long look.

"I'm big-boned," he said resentfully.

"Salads are very good for you. So is yoghurt."

"I don't need health advice from kids, thanks."

She drew herself up to her full height. "I'm not a kid! I'm twenty-five."

"You're a kid. Drive carefully."

She made a face at him. "I always drive carefully."

He stood on the sidewalk and watched her back out. She went over the curb, almost hit his car, got into gear on the second try and putted down the street. The vehicle she was driving was pouring black smoke and it looked to be at least twenty years old. He shook his head. Talk about town characters, he told himself.

* * *

The next morning, he was sitting in Jeff Ralston's office, drinking coffee and going over witness statements.

"There was a kid last night who mentioned some things about the victim," he began.

"Who?"

"No idea. I was parked in her driveway next to the motel. Blonde, silver eyes, comes up to my shoulder. And twenty-five years old."

“Oh, yes. Annalisa Davis,” Jeff replied with a warm smile. “She lost her dad last year.” He didn’t say how. That was Anna’s business. “Her mother died a couple of years before that. She insisted on staying in the house, although it’s falling apart around her ears. Proud as the devil. She won’t let anybody help her.”

Annalisa. It suited her somehow. “She’s got a mouth on her,” he remarked.

Jeff chuckled. “Just like her late mother. But she’s a sucker for lost pets, small animals, and little children.”

Something stirred deep inside him. He smothered it. The kid was years too young, and he didn’t even know her. Best not to get involved.

“About the victim—” he began.

“Julie Crane,” Jeff interrupted. “Her stepdad’s filthy rich; he inherited all the money Julie’s mother had, and it was a lot. He’s kept the nurse who took care of his late wife. Her name is May Strickland. She and Julie didn’t get along at all. I guess May wasn’t mourning the loss. She acts like she owns the place, the maid, Alice, told my cousin at the grocery store. She convinced Granger Downing that he needed constant monitoring of his blood pressure.”

Tom was taking notes on a phone app. “Did Julie get along with her stepfather?”

“Not really. She was autistic, but high-functioning. She could drive a car, cook, things like that, but she was hard to get along with if she didn’t know you. Her mother loved her and took care of her. When she got sick, Julie took care of her. Her mother died of lung cancer, and Julie was left with her mother’s husband and the nurse. She didn’t like either one of them.”

“Her stepfather, how did he feel about his stepdaughter?” he asked, looking up.

“He’s an abrasive man when you first meet him, but he’s got a soft heart. He liked Julie, but she made his life a misery,” Jeff explained.

“Well, that dots a few I’s,” Tom mused. “I’ll do a background check on him and the nurse.”

“There’s also a handyman, a friend of the nurse’s, named Billy Turner,” Jeff said. “Two more unpleasant people you’ll never meet.”

“Doesn’t bother me,” Tom said imperturbably. “I’m used to unpleasant people.”

Jeff just smiled.

* * *

His background check didn’t turn up anything out of the ordinary. Granger Downing, Julie’s stepfather, was a big noise among the country club set. He was loaded, although it seemed to be Julie’s late mother who’d had all the money and he’d just inherited it.

He’d checked out the victim as well. Most people spoke kindly of her. She hadn’t been a social person, but she had no real enemies that he could ascertain. *Follow the money* was a tenet that all law enforcement people tuned into. It was usually a good idea to do that. So Tom started checking into the victim’s stepfather’s bank account.

He was just coming back to the motel after a long and tiring morning when the smoke-pouring car-thing pulled into the driveway next to the motel. He got out of his vehicle and walked up to the young woman just getting out of hers.

“Rings and valves,” he said.

She gave him a blank look.

“Rings and valves. Your car’s pouring smoke.”

She cocked her head and stared at him. She looked young and worn-out. “It thinks it’s an old-time locomotive,” she replied. “Don’t pay attention to it, or you’ll encourage it.”

One eyebrow arched and his dark eyes twinkled.

“You’re out early,” she pointed out.

“So are you. Is pole dancing very lucrative?”

She glared at him. "I am not a pole dancer."

He smiled at her. "You're very young," he said quietly.

"Thanks, gramps," she tossed back.

He chuckled. She was a firecracker "What do you do, really?"

"I feed and water helpless things."

"That's a strange answer."

"It's the only kind you're getting, too," she said. "Why are you out so early?"

"Detecting."

"Oh, Julie Crane's murder," she said, and nodded.

"Yes. You knew her."

"She went to school with me."

"Care to enlarge on that a bit?"

"I would, but I'm asleep on my feet."

"How about coffee and breakfast?"

She hesitated.

"I have a testimonial from my district supervisor that I'm dependable and safe to be let loose around young women."

She laughed.

"Have you had breakfast?" he asked.

She shook her head. "We had a last-minute emergency, so I got off late. I'm starved."

"So am I. Who serves a good breakfast?"

"The new waffle place on the corner."

He led her to his car, pausing to put his computer and paperwork on the back seat.

"You're messy," she pointed out.

"I said you could have breakfast, not point out my bad habits."

“Sorry. I’ll save it for after breakfast. And I buy my own, in case you need to know.”

His eyebrows arched. “Why?”

“So I won’t be accused of letting an FBI agent bribe me.”

“I never bribe women with food,” he said curtly.

“Oh, I see. You don’t like women.”

“Got it.” He got in under the wheel and drove them to the fast food joint. They walked in together.

“Why don’t you like women?” she asked.

“Because I used to be involved with one. She took off with another guy.”

“Sorry.”

He glanced at her. “You married?”

“Not on your life.”

“Did you used to be involved with somebody too?” he asked.

She went quiet. “I want a waffle and bacon and black coffee, Sadie,” she told the woman at the counter.

“I heard there was a flap on last night. You get it worked out?”

She smiled at the woman. “Just about.”

“And what will you have, sir?” Sadie asked Tom.

“Same as her,” he replied.

“How easy to please you both are,” Sadie mused, used to people studying the menu for ten minutes only to decide they’d just have coffee.

“Only when it comes to food,” Tom replied.

“I thought you were that sort of man,” Annalisa mused.

“Oh, and separate checks, Sadie,” Annalisa called back over her shoulder.

“Got it.”

They found a booth at the back of the waffle house and sat down. She pushed back a wisp of blond hair that had escaped the braid she'd pinned around the top of her head.

"Don't you wear it down?" he asked, studying her.

"It gets in my way when I'm working," she said. She sighed, leaning forward with her chin in her propped-up hands. "I'm so tired."

She looked it. He wondered what sort of job she had. She was wearing a colorful shirt under her coat, with plain colored slacks. Must be a cleaning job, he told himself. She wasn't old enough to have a profession.

"Tell me all you know about Julie Crane."

"I covered most of it last night," she said. "She had some issues, but she was pretty good in school, especially with math. She was a whiz. She could do calculus and trig in the fourth grade. I couldn't even manage it in high school. She loved numbers."

"Did you know her well?"

"We were friends, sort of." She smiled sadly. "She gave me a necklace before she died. Real gold. I wear it on special occasions and think of her. I liked her a lot. I think she liked me, too. She certainly trusted me."

"Any evidence that the stepfather was doing things to her?"

"You mean ... ? Oh, I see. No. He wasn't that sort. He tried to make friends with her, because he truly loved her mother, but she was jealous of him with her mother, and she wouldn't let him get to know her. Her mother was an invalid after the lung cancer started to work on her. She could barely get out of bed. Julie took good care of her, right up until the end; in spite of the so-called nurse who never did a thing she wasn't ordered to do! The cancer shouldn't have killed her that quickly, but I guess every case is different. I helped, until her mother's nurse thought I was trying to take over her job and complained to Mr. Downing. So I got handed my walking papers. That was sort of odd, you know, that the nurse

objected to anybody helping her patient; as if she had something to hide.”

“Julie sounds like a fine person.”

“She really was, and what happened to her was so, so sad.” He was taking notes. Any tidbit might be the key to unlock a case. He overlooked nothing. He said that to Annalisa, his dark eyes steady on her face.

“You never know when a tiny clue will blow open a case.” She nodded, and when he went back to making notes on his cell phone, she studied him. In his thirties, she surmised, probably on the wrong side of thirty-five. He was very good-looking. But she’d had her problems with men who thought the same thing about her. She’d been pursued by several, but she had no interest in them. She’d never felt anything at all with the boys she’d dated. She still felt very little. Men just didn’t affect her.

Well, not until now. She studied that strong face with its chiseled mouth and high cheekbones and felt herself tingling all over. Odd reaction, especially to a man she didn’t really know. He was everything she didn’t like in a man. Big. Authoritative. Overbearing. He was also in law enforcement. That brought back really hard memories of her late father, who’d been all those things. Her father had dominated her completely, ordered her life, told her what to do, nitpicked everything. He’d run off any boys she might have become interested in. They couldn’t get past him. He liked having Annalisa at home to do the housework and cook and take care of him. He wasn’t losing that for some overheated boy who’d never stay with her anyway. He also wanted Annalisa to look after her mother and do all the housework when her mother’s heart started to fail. Poor Julie had the same problems at her home, too. It was why Annalisa and Julie had been friends. Neither of them saw a way out that didn’t involve tragedy. There had been no escape for Annalisa even after her mother died suddenly late one night of a major heart attack. Her father was too important in the community. He drank, a lot, but everybody protected him. Not that he was ever abusive to his daughter. He never lifted his hand to her. He was just

overbearing and belligerent. And, at least, Annalisa was still alive. But poor Julie had died.

She threw off the memory. Everyone thought she missed her dad. She didn't. She wasn't certain that she'd ever loved him. He'd been verbally, although never physically, abusive to her late mother. Despite the misery of her marriage, her mother was deeply in love with her father. She never stopped loving him, no matter what he said when he drank. She once told Annalisa that she didn't know why her father was the way he was, but that he'd been a good, kind man when she married him.

Annalisa's training had been a blessing. At least her father had agreed to that, and it was a good thing, because she had a job that she loved, that paid her expenses. Well, except for the house. It was falling apart over her head. She really didn't have the capital to fix anything. If it fell in one day, she'd have no place to live. She'd have to rent a room or something. Probably a good idea not to think too hard about that.

"Do you always brood over things?" her companion asked suddenly.

She looked up, startled. "How did you know?"

"Understanding body language is part of my job. I have all sorts of skills."

"I hope one of them isn't breaking and entering," she said calmly.

"I have not broken and entered anything," he huffed.

"Not ever?" she probed, eyes twinkling.

"I broke a door in once, where a woman was being assaulted."

"What about the man who assaulted her?"

"Oh, he ran into a wall and got a black eye. They suspected I'd done it to him, but the perp backed up my story very quickly." He smiled angelically.

"Good for you," she said curtly. "Men like that should be put in stocks in the middle of towns."

“There you go, getting medieval again.”

“It wasn’t me, it was you getting medieval,” she shot back.

He grinned at her. His dark eyes twinkled. It impressed her. He seemed very different when he smiled. She smiled back involuntarily.

“Maybe we both should be living back in the dark ages,” she suggested.

“Good luck finding a time machine, especially in my hotel. It has a cricket,” he muttered. “A cricket! In the middle of winter, for God’s sake!”

“The cricket is in a cricket box. The man staying in the motel takes it everywhere with him. It’s a pet.” She didn’t tell him how she knew. The man was from out of town, but he was visiting a friend where she worked.

He gaped at her. “A cricket? He keeps a cricket for a pet? Why not a dog or a cat?”

“He said he had a dog. It tore up the floor in his kitchen, twice, and the cat he got to replace it ripped his furniture to shreds. He says a cricket can’t do either of those things.”

He just shook his head. “It takes all kinds, I guess. Maybe I can get used to it.”

She smiled. “Earplugs,” she suggested. “It’s how I sleep late. My neighbor on the other side is in a band. He has drums. He practices early in the morning.” She sighed. “It’s a wonder that I’m not mentally disarranged.”

“Except for wanting to put people in stocks.”

“Even you must agree that some people would benefit from it,” she pointed out.

He chuckled. “I guess so.”

She finished her coffee, and stood up. “Thanks for the company,” she said, and the tiredness showed on her pretty face now. “I’m going home to bed.”

“Remember to put in the earplugs,” he suggested. He got up too, and they both headed for the exit.

“I may need to double them.” She laughed. “See you, Chicago,” she added, giving him a nickname.

“See you, Raven girl.”

“Actually, I feed ravens,” she said, a little hesitantly. “They come every day to the back deck. My father hated them. He shot one. I buried it myself.” She felt uneasy that she’d said what she did. “Forget I said that, please, people in town revered my father. They thought he was a great cop.”

“Your dad was a cop?” he asked, surprised, as they reached his car and he opened the door for her.

She nodded. “He was chief of police here, in fact.”

“How did he die?”

She bit her lip.

He moved a step closer. Just a step, but she tensed. “How?” he repeated softly.

“One of the local stores was robbed by an escaped fugitive. He ran and my father ran after him, into an alley. The perp spun around and put a bullet right through my father’s head.” She turned away. “It was a while ago.”

“I’m so sorry,” he said, and meant it.

She forced herself not to cry. It was a public place. She took a deep breath.

“Thanks for listening,” she said after a minute. She turned and looked up at him with eyes that were still too bright. “He was a hero to the townspeople. But that was his public face. People are different behind closed doors.”

“Some people,” he agreed. “You never know until afterwards.”

“You’re not married.”

“No. But I lived with a woman on and off for a few years. I bought a set of rings, the day before she told me she was leaving.” His eyes were sad. “Sometimes you don’t know people even when you live with them.”

“I guess we’re both clued in about that, wouldn’t you say?” she asked.

“Do you want to get married?”

“No,” she said at once. She drew in a long breath. “I just want to go to sleep. I’m worn out.”

He nodded. His dark eyes twinkled. “Pole dancing can do that to you,” he remarked facetiously. Whatever she worked at, she wasn’t a pole dancer. But it was fun to tease her and watch her silver eyes flash at him. She had beautiful eyes.

She made a face. “You wish. Good night.”

“It’s morning.”

She shrugged. “Whatever.” Her eyes twinkled at him. “Different points of view.”

“So they say.” He smiled at her, and drove her home.

His smile made her heart flutter. She wondered about it all the way to her bedroom, but she was asleep before she puzzled it out.

* * *

Meanwhile, Tom was working a new angle on the kidnapping case. If the young woman was fine with people she knew, and the kidnapper had been a stranger, why hadn’t she screamed for help? According to what he’d found out, there was a maid and a housekeeper who both lived in the home, and there was a security guard who was on duty outside after dark. He’d need to talk to all three of them.

He phoned the number at the Downing home and was told that Mr. Downing was too busy to come to the phone. This was after he heard Downing in the background saying hell would freeze over before he’d have anybody in law enforcement in his home, and the FBI agent could go to hell. Tom found that not only entertaining, but useful to know. As Mr. Downing would soon find out.

* * *

His first stop was Jeff Rawlings’s office.

“You’re out early.” Jeff chuckled. “Want coffee?”

“I just had a cup, thanks. I need you to do something for me.”

“Sure. What?”

“Pull Downing in for questioning in the death of his daughter.”

Jeff made a terrible face. “If I do that, he’ll sue me and the county and probably the governor. The man is nice, until something upsets him, but he has enough money and power to blow the pants off half the city council. He’s dangerous.”

“Is he, really?” Tom asked. He began to smile. “Okay, then. I’ll do it my way.”

Jeff was wary. “And what, exactly, is your way?” he asked worriedly.

Tom just smiled. It wasn’t a pleasant smile at all.

Chapter Two

Several hours later, in the company of a fellow senior agent of the FBI from Denver, Doug Reynolds, both men got in the Crown Victoria and drove straight to the Downing residence. It was in a gated community, so they had to show ID. They flashed their badges at the guard, using their most intimidating expressions, and drove right up to the front door.

They knocked. The maid came, saw the two men, and froze.

“FBI,” Tom said curtly, and showed his badge. His fellow agent did the same. They didn’t smile.

“We need to see Mr. Downing at once,” Tom added. He gave her the look again. It was intimidating.

“Come ... come right this way. Mr. Downing and his, uh, May, his nurse are having dinner. They’re in the big dining room ...”

“How nice.” Tom urged her ahead.

* * *

Downing was in his late forties, belligerent, without a hint of manners or courtesy. He yelled at the poor maid for interrupting his dinner and then glared at the newcomers while the older woman with him, May, went a pasty white. Tom decided he had to have an interview with her—but alone.

“Get back to work, Alice, and next time you ask me before you let anybody in that door at night!”

The maid, young and scared, agreed, glanced with a rueful smile at Tom, and went back to her chores.

Well, what do you want?” Downing demanded. “You’re interrupting my meal!”

“FBI,” Tom said, producing the badge again. His colleague did the same.

“FBI?” His eyes grew big with surprise. “You can’t just walk in here, without a warrant!”

“We’re not searching the place, Mr. Downing. We’re investigating your stepdaughter’s kidnapping and murder, and if you have nothing to hide, you’ll speak with us.”

Downing was at a loss for words. He backtracked immediately when he realized why the men had come. “It was a tragic loss. My poor Julie. I was fond of her. She was like her late mother, gentle and kind, except for that unpredictable temper!” He shook his head. “I thought we had the ransom taken care of. Well, maybe I shouldn’t have stopped by the country club after I delivered it,” he added with a grimace. “I had some sizeable investments with a friend who was only going to be in town for a night. I was only there for ten minutes.” He averted his eyes from the two agents’ faces with a rough sigh. “Too late now to regret it. The kidnappers apparently just left her to die.” His eyes met Tom’s again “She was blue all over and cold as ice when I got to her,” he added shortly. “Now I’m no medic, but I don’t think that could happen in the few minutes between the phone call I got and the time I arrived at the destination to pay the money.”

“Wait,” Tom said. “You paid the money before you went to the country club?”

“Of course I did,” the older man said belligerently. “I may be hard to get along with, but I’m not cruel. I wouldn’t let so much as a stray dog die if I could save it with money!”

Tom was frowning and taking notes. “What time did you pay the ransom?”

“Let me see, it was seven o’clock that evening,” he murmured, thinking back. After I left the money, I went to the country club and stayed for maybe ten minutes. Then, when I got the message where to find Julie, I went straight to the area the kidnappers said she was being held.”

“You spoke with them?”

“Sort of,” he said. “It was a robot voice, telling me where to take the money. When I got there, in an abandoned office, the door was unlocked, there was a note on the table that said to leave the money and get out and I’d get instructions.”

“Did you?” Tom continued.

Downing nodded. “I got a text on my cell phone.”

“May I see the message?”

Downing was reluctant and hesitated.

“I can get a warrant, if you need one,” Tom said quietly.

Downing sighed. “No. I want to see the kidnappers caught.” He pulled up the message and handed the phone to Tom.

Tom read the message. It was in stilted English and very brief. It gave a location and instructions, nothing more. Tom pulled up the number the call had come from, copied it, and handed the phone back. “Don’t erase that,” Tom told him. “If we catch the kidnappers, it will become evidence.”

“All right.”

Tom looked up the number and let out a muffled curse. “It’s a fake number,” he said curtly. “One used by scammers. There’s a list of them online.”

“I get those damned calls all the time,” Downing said with some irritation. “The last one was from Russia!”

“I guess times are hard all over,” Tom replied, “even there.”

“What else do you need, Agent Jones?” Downing asked.

“Nothing more right now. There were no people at the place where you paid the ransom,” he continued, “and you saw no vehicles nearby?”

“No to both questions. Julie’s mother would be heartbroken if she was still alive. Julie had good days and bad, but she was kindness itself to her mother.” Downing hesitated for a few seconds and averted his eyes. “If she died by the time I got to her, why was her body already cold and stiff?” he added after a minute. “Rigor doesn’t set in that quickly, does it, even in cold weather?”

“I’ll get back to you on that when we have the report from the crime lab,” Tom replied. He glanced at May, next to Downing, who was fidgeting in her chair. The young maid, Alice, was hovering. She glanced at her boss and winced.

“I’ll need to interview your household employees sometime in the next few days. I’ll call first,” Tom said, backing down a little from his initial confrontational stance now that Downing was cooperating. The man’s new attitude had surprised him.

Downing just nodded. “That will be all right.” He drew in a long breath. “We haven’t even planned the funeral,” he said after a minute. “No sense in that until we have her ... her back,” he said, refusing to say the word “body.”

Tom noticed that. He got up, along with Doug. “Thank you for your time,” he said formally.

“If you find out anything, will you let me know?” Downing asked. “I won’t ask you to tell me any details that might hinder the case. I’d just like to know how it’s going.”

“I can do that,” Tom assured him.

“Alice will see you out,” Downing said, motioning to the hovering woman. He reached for his coffee cup. “I don’t understand why she was so cold ...”

The two men walked behind the maid to the front door, out of earshot of Downing and his female companion, who’d looked very relieved when they got up to leave.

“He seems very mean,” Alice said, her voice lowered. “But he’s not really like that. I’ve been here for five years. He genuinely loved his wife. People say he just married her for her money, but they didn’t see how things went around here every day. Julie had moods and she resented anyone coming between her and her mother, so she didn’t like him very much.”

Tom was taking mental notes. “No arguments over money?”

“Well, Mrs. Downing’s nurse, May, has extravagant tastes. She moved right in, supposedly to take care of his wife when he advertised for someone to do private duty. She isn’t the nurturing kind. I think Julie was resentful of that, too, because May was always hanging on her stepfather. Just not where his wife would notice. He was upset when the cancer was diagnosed and May had been a nurse in a nursing home at some point. She said she knew how to do daily care for an

invalid.” Alice made a face. “Poor Mrs. Downing was wet half the time and never had anything to drink or eat unless I took it to her. Well, except once, just before she died. May took her a cup of some tea that she said she wanted to try. That was the only kindly act I ever saw her do, too. I tried to tell Mr. Downing that Mrs. Downing wasn’t really having anything done for her by anybody except Julie, but May could twist things to make him do what she liked, where his wife was concerned. She was always watching me ... speak of the devil,” she whispered without looking at the door.

“And that’s how you get to Ray’s barbeque,” Alice said in her normal speaking voice. “But don’t turn off at the first red light, or you’ll end up in Catelow ... Do you need something, May?” she added, glancing at the hall doorway.

“What? Oh, no, no, he just wondered what was keeping you. He wants more coffee.” May nodded at the men and went quickly back the way she’d come.

“See?” Alice asked.

Tom did. “Thanks,” he said. “It’s good to have some idea of the character of the people you deal with in cases like this.”

“Mr. Downing’s bark is worse than his bite, and Julie was an angel. May is out for everything she can get. She’s supposedly monitoring Mr. Downing’s blood pressure and looking after him while he mourns his wife. She convinced him that he needed that badly. Meanwhile her ex-boyfriend was hired to do odd jobs around here, but what he does mostly is watch May.”

Tom pursed his lips. “You’ve been a lot of help. We’ll be in touch.”

Alice grinned. She ushered them to the front door. “Have a nice evening. Don’t forget about the turnoff, now,” she added to continue the fiction of giving directions, because she caught a glimpse of May hovering in the next room.

“No problem. We love barbeque. Thanks again.”

* * *

“Well, wasn’t that informative?” Doug asked.

“It’s a dandy start, all right,” Tom said, nodding. “I’m going to have a busy week.” He glanced at the other man. “Thanks for coming down to assist. I thought I’d need a battering ram. Downing surprised me.”

“You don’t really know people when you have polite conversation with them. Anybody who works for them, on the other hand, is a great source of information.”

“As we just found out. Well, let’s get you to the airport.” They got into the car and pulled out into the road. “Downing’s nurse at the table with him was almost dancing in her chair. Far too nervous to conceal a crime; it takes somebody with better nerves. A little sympathy and the threat of life in prison and she’ll sing like a canary bird.” Doug chuckled.

“I hear you.” Tom turned the car toward the airport. “It was a horrible crime, badly thought out and poorly executed.” He shook his head. “I won’t mess up the case by speculating, but if you plan to kill somebody for money, you’d better have a plan that doesn’t finger you before the body’s cold.”

“Amazing that they’d try it in a small town, as well, where people grew up together.”

“Small towns.” Tom made a face. “I’d go nuts if I had to stay here long. I miss Chicago.”

“I like small towns,” his companion said with a smile. “I married a girl from a little town south of Minneapolis. She couldn’t stand life in the city, so I moved where she grew up. After a while, I not only got used to it, I actually like it there.”

“I’d never get used to it,” Tom said. “There’s a guy in the room next to mine who’s got a damned pet cricket. He takes it with him when he travels.” He glanced at the other man. “First time I ever really thought seriously about homicide.”

“Crickets are nice. You should stop gulping down your life and try living one day at a time,” came the amused suggestion. “You’ll be old before your time.”

“I am old before my time,” Tom replied. “Well, we’re here,” he said as he pulled into a parking space. They got out together and his companion picked up his bag.

“Thanks for the help,” Tom said, shaking hands. “Have a safe trip home.”

“No problem. I have to stop by the gift shop on the way to my flight,” he added with a chuckle. “My youngest boy’s birthday is tomorrow. He’ll be two years old.” He sighed. “He wants a stuffed Pokémon. I had to write down the name so I wouldn’t forget. There are dozens of those things!”

Tom grimaced. “You with kids,” he said on a sigh. “I never thought about them. I move around too much.”

“I move around, too. Kids are great. I can’t imagine life without mine. All three of them,” he added with a grin. “I hope you catch the killer,” he added, somber. “Any human being who’d let a young woman freeze to death has no heart at all.”

“Yeah,” Tom agreed. “It’s money,” he added. “She was the only member of her family left, and her stepfather inherited. I’m not completely convinced that he didn’t have some involvement, but he doesn’t act as if he did. That woman, on the other hand ...”

“Brutal, to let someone freeze to death on purpose,” Doug said.

“And Downing was right on one score, rigor doesn’t set in that fast. My best guess would be that the young woman was long dead by the time they got the ransom money. No witnesses.”

“Exactly what I was thinking,” Doug replied. “Better make sure the crime lab dots all the I’s and crosses all the T’s. This is going to be an evidence case.”

“I’ll make sure the evidence isn’t tainted,” Tom told him.

“I like being able to pay my bills and feed my family,” the other man said. “But money is way down the list of things I’d harm somebody over. In fact, it’s not even on the list.”

“Same here. Greed.” He shook his head. “It’s landed plenty of people in federal prison. And if I can prove that anybody in Downing’s household had anything to do with his stepdaughter’s death, I’ll help them right into an orange jumpsuit.”

“I’ll keep my fingers crossed for you.”

* * *

Tom drove back to Raven Springs, dragged into his motel room and sat down. He was too tired to go out and get supper. He wasn’t certain that he was even hungry. He’d spooked at least one potential witness. That woman sitting next to Granger Downing, May-something, she was high on his list. She knew something. He was going to find out what.

He pulled off his clothes and got into his black pajama bottoms. They were actually sweat pants, but he slept in them. He couldn’t abide an undershirt in bed, so that went in with the laundry. He’d have to find a coin laundromat somewhere and get his clothes washed. It looked as though he was going to be here for a while. It was great to have Doug come out, Tom thought, nice of the man to come all that way. But it had produced results. Tom would sleep well, knowing they’d gotten somewhere.

He’d just climbed into bed and closed his eyes when he heard banging on his motel door. And he knew why. He groaned. There hadn’t been a parking space in the motel’s lot and he was so tired. He’d parked in the driveway again. Surely it wasn’t going on eleven o’clock ... ?

He looked at the clock. It was ten thirty.

He opened the door with a long sigh. “I’m sorry,” he told the silver-eyed, furious woman in front of the door. “It was late and there wasn’t a damned parking space and I was worn-out.”

“I’m sorry, too, but I have to get to work.” She was staring at him and became a little flushed with appreciation of that muscular physique, fascinating to her because she knew male bodies very well indeed. His was awesome. Almost perfect. She’d never seen a man so attractive in a pair of sweatpants.

“You could get a job pole dancing,” she said with twinkling eyes.

He chuckled. “Stop ogling me. You’re too young for me, kid. I’m older than dirt.”

She looked up at him with a big smile. “Not hardly.”

“Thirty-six,” he said.

“Not bad, for your age,” she said. “And I take back the bit about salads. There’s not an ounce of fat on you.”

“We’re required to keep fit. So we can chase bad guys.”

“I’ll bet not many escape from you.” She stared at him. “I’ll stop ogling if you’ll get your car keys and move your car.” She hesitated. “There’s a carport. It’s made for two cars, but I only have one. You can park your car there, if you like.”

“Well! That’s a nice gesture. Why?”

“You’re very good to look at. I haven’t had a reason to ogle anybody since my favorite TV show went off the air.”

“Which one?”

She cleared her throat.

“Well?” he prompted.

“*Game of Thrones*.”

“Wow.”

She cocked her head again. “Wow?”

“You don’t look the sort of person to like that show. There’s all sorts of naughty bits in every episode,” he added with a wicked smile.

“It was a great series.”

“It was, until the last season. I didn’t like the way it ended.”

“Me neither. They’re doing a prequel. I can’t wait!”

He laughed. “I read about that. I’ll be watching it, too.”

She glanced at her phone and grimaced. “I’ll be late to work.”

“Can’t have that.” He went inside, slipped on his shoes, grabbed his keys, and went out the door.

“You’re going to drive it looking like that?” she exclaimed.

He raised both eyebrows. She must mean the scar. He should have pulled on a shirt ...

“You’ll be mobbed by love-starved women!” she told him. “They’ll all swoon!”

“The scar will put them off.”

“What scar?” she asked.

He caught her arm and pulled her just a little closer. “This one.” He took her hand and traced it.

She frowned as she felt it and pursed her lips, trying not to let him see that her pulse rate doubled and her breath suspended somewhere halfway to her mouth from the contact with that gorgeous male body. “That must have taken a lot of stitches.”

“It did.”

“And you think it would put a woman off?” she asked, wide-eyed.

“Wouldn’t it?”

“It wouldn’t put me off. If I was in the market for a man, that is. I’m not,” she added quickly.

“That’s nice to know. I don’t have to worry about you jumping on me when I come to get my car in the morning.”

She grinned at him. “You’ll be perfectly safe.” As she turned, she made a growling noise.

His chest swelled. He chuckled. “Stop that. I’m impervious.”

She didn’t say another word, but she couldn’t stop smiling. And at least he hadn’t noticed her reaction to him. She hoped.

* * *

He went to bed, still wondering what sort of work she did that late at night. She was intelligent. But she might have been forced by circumstances into a cleaning job. That was sad. It was admirable work, but she deserved better. He recalled her face when she’d touched his chest. It had been very

expressive, like the sudden uptick in her heart rate and breathing, not signs an experienced law enforcement officer would fail to notice. Of course, he shouldn't have been noticing those things, either. She was far too young for him. Yet his own pulse had done some odd things when he felt her hand on his bare chest. He couldn't afford to get mixed up with a small-town girl who was too young for him. If only she wasn't so damned sexy! He fell asleep worrying it in his mind.

The next morning, he got up and showered and dressed. He really needed to find a laundromat. He had two suits and they were fine, but he had shirts and undershirts and underwear and socks that needed washing. He bundled it all into a zipper bag and started out the door and up the hill to his car.

She was just pulling into the driveway as he reached his vehicle.

“Going bowling?” she asked, noting the bag.

“Not hardly. To the laundromat, if you know where I can find one.”

“Bring your stuff inside,” she said. “I have some things to wash, too. We can put all of it in together.”

“That's above and beyond,” he pointed out.

She cocked her head and looked up at him. “I'm cultivating you,” she explained. “That way if I ever get stalked by monsters, you'll come save me.”

He chuckled. “I'd do that anyway.”

“So, come on in.”

She unlocked the door.

It was a small house, but neat as a pin, and she had some nice appliances.

“Have you had breakfast?” she called as she came back from the bedroom where she'd put her bag and kicked off her shoes. “I usually make something before I go to bed. There's no time to eat at work.”

“I'd love breakfast. Can I help?”

“You can make the toast. I’ll do the bacon and eggs.”

He grinned. “Butter?”

“Real butter,” she said, pulling it out of the fridge. “Fresh eggs from a lady down the road, and bacon from a man who makes his own and sells it to me.”

“I’ve never seen fresh eggs. Only what comes from the corner grocery back home.”

“In Chicago?” she asked as she pulled out a frying pan. “That’s a very big city.”

“Yeah, I guess it is.”

“Were you born there?”

“No. I’m from Delaware, originally.”

She broke eggs into a bowl. “Parents? Siblings?”

“Both my parents are dead. I had a sister, but she was in a bad wreck three years ago. They couldn’t save her. They really tried,” he added quietly.

“Most medical people do the best they can. But catastrophic injuries are almost impossible to heal.”

“Her organs were ... well, they were badly damaged,” he said, choosing softer words.

“You won’t shock me, by the way,” she said, glancing at him. “I’m no stranger to injuries.”

“Where do you work?”

“At the local hospital,” she replied. “I’m a nurse.”

“Damn.”

She stopped as the burner heated, and looked at him. “What?”

“Damn! I thought you were a pole dancer.” His dark eyes twinkled. “I was looking forward to seeing you on the job.”

She chuckled. “That’ll be the day. My grandfather was a Methodist minister. My grandmother had been a missionary. I

lived with them from time to time. I have very old-fashioned ideas.”

“No messing around, in other words,” he teased.

“Exactly.”

He glanced at her bare feet and laughed. “You don’t like shoes, do you?”

“No. I’m on my feet all night. When I get home, all I want to do is relax.”

“How long?”

“Have I been a nurse, you mean?” she asked. She frowned. “Let me see, I started training when I was in college, and then two years on the unit—five years, I guess.”

“How old did you say you were?” he asked.

“Twenty-six. Today,” she added, glancing at the calendar. She’d almost forgotten. She glanced at him, thinking he would have been a really nice birthday present. If she wasn’t off men, and he was available. “And you’re thirty-six.”

“Not for long,” he said on a sigh. “My birthday is next month. I’ll be thirty-seven.” He raised an eyebrow at the way she was looking at him. “Now, now, no ogling,” he chided.

She stared at him with twinkling eyes. “Don’t worry, you’re way over-the-hill for a young thing like me ...”

“Am I, now?” he interrupted. One big arm went out to whirl her to him as the other one caught her. She found herself held tightly against a suit that smelled of expensive cologne. Then a hard, faintly smiling mouth came down tenderly on hers and she stopped thinking altogether. He knew what he was doing, she thought dizzily, feeling her heartbeat race as that warm, possessive mouth became even more demanding, as if the touch of her had ignited him. It had ignited her, too. She stood on tiptoe, her arms going around his neck, as she coaxed him not to stop.

He lifted his head almost at once, watching her eyes open slowly, her face flushed with pleasure, her pretty mouth

slightly swollen. “Now,” he asked, faintly goaded, “still think I’m over-the-hill?”

She swallowed, hard, and moved back. “Not anymore,” she murmured, her cheeks becoming pink.

He chuckled. “It’s your own fault. You’re very pretty,” he added. “But I really am too old for you, kid. You don’t even know how to kiss.”

She glared at him. “They don’t teach it in nursing school.”

“No problem. I’m willing to do the honors, in between working this case.”

She glared more. “I am not a project!”

His eyebrows went up over twinkling dark eyes. “Now when did I say I thought of you as a project? No, no. I think of you as an objective.” His voice dropped, low, dark velvet. “Not a serious one, you understand. I don’t want to get involved with you.”

“Not that I want to get involved,” she lied, “but is there a reason?”

“Yeah.” He buttered the toast as it came out of the toaster. “I told you, remember? She fell in love with another guy and just left me.”

“I’m sorry. But people don’t really choose to fall in love, you know. It just happens.”

“I thought she was in love with me.” He went toward the door.

“You’re leaving? But I’m cooking,” she protested.

“I’m going to get my dirty laundry out of the car,” he said.

“Don’t get lost!” she called after him.

He threw up his hand and kept walking.

* * *

By the time he got back, she was finishing up the eggs and bacon and putting them on a platter. Her morning had gone from boring to exciting to disappointing all too quickly. She

put the food on the table, followed by plates and utensils and a big pot of coffee, along with mugs to drink it from.

“I made coffee. It’s pretty strong ...” she began worriedly.

“If a spoon doesn’t stand up in it, I don’t drink it,” he replied.

She laughed. “Okay, then.”

She finished her eggs and glanced at him. He looked gorgeous in that dark suit with a burgundy tie and a spotless white shirt. She remembered the cologne he used when she’d been held against it earlier. He smelled nice. “You even look pretty good dressed,” she teased.

He chuckled. “Give it up. I’m years too old to let you get under my skin.”

“We can agree to disagree,” she said pertly, and with a smile.

Breakfast was nice. They talked about commonplace things. Afterward, he insisted on helping with the dishes. She didn’t have a dishwasher.

“There’s only me here,” she explained. “The washer and dryer, I really need. But I don’t have that many dishes.”

“Never thought of getting married?”

She shook her head. “I’ve been asked a time or two, but my parents’ marriage was nothing to write home about. I think I’m better off on my own.”

“That’s what I thought until Angie came along and led me around by my libido.”

She laughed. “What a way to put it.”

“Nothing like the truth for getting through life.”

“Well said.”

“I can do the laundry.”

“No,” she said. “You’re dressed to go out, so I expect you’re investigating the kidnapping. All I have to do is put the clothes

in and go to bed. By the time I wake up, they can go into the dryer.”

“I appreciate that,” he said. “I spend part of my life in laundromats and dry cleaners. And the repair lady.”

“The repair lady?”

He opened his jacket to show the pistol on his belt. “Plays havoc with clothing, especially suit coats.”

“Wow. I never thought of that,” she said, eyeing the gun with no fear showing.

“Aren’t you afraid of guns?” he asked.

“Heavens, no! Remember I told you my dad was a cop, but he was also a triple-A skeet shooter. I have a twenty-eight-gauge shotgun and I know how to use it.”

He laughed. “I’ve very rarely seen a woman who’d pick up a shotgun, much less use it.” He grimaced. “Angie hated weapons. I tried to explain to her that it went with the badge, but she never got used to it.”

“Tools of the trade,” she said simply.

He eyed her clothes. She was wearing a colorful paisley shirt with plain cotton trousers and a lanyard with a nurses’ badge around her neck.

“Where’s the white cap?” he asked.

“We haven’t worn uniforms in years,” she pointed out. “Scrubs are much more comfortable and easier to keep clean.”

“I guess so.” He studied her. “You look nice in that.”

She flushed. “Thanks.”

“Thanks for breakfast. And the laundry,” he added.

“No problem at all. I’m Annalisa Davis, by the way,” she said, extending a hand.

He took it in his big one. “I’m Tom. Tom Jones.”

She looked at him, raised an eyebrow over twinkling silver eyes, and began to sing the Tom Jones song, ‘What’s New, Pussycat.’”

“I will tell everybody in town that you’re a pole dancer,” he cautioned.

She grinned and started to pull her hand away, but he kept it, smiling down at her. She made him feel warm inside, bubbly. He was a man who smiled very rarely. She was getting to him.

“Don’t oversleep,” he teased softly, and bent and brushed his mouth tenderly against hers. “And don’t get attached to me,” he added when he lifted his head. His expression was solemn. “I’m only a passing ship in the night. When I finish this case, I go home,” he added.

“I know all that,” she said. “I promise not to follow you, wailing all the while, on your way to Chicago.”

He grinned. “Fair enough. Just so you know. I like you. But I’m not marriage material.”

“Don’t sweat it. Neither am I.”

He let her hand go. “See you later.”

“Don’t speed, Chicago,” she teased. “The cops here are on the ball.”

“I did notice. And I never speed.”

“Ha!”

She went toward the back of the house. “Lock the door when you leave, please.”

“Will do.”

He watched her every step of the way until she was out of sight before he let himself out, locking the door as he went.

* * *

There was a lot more investigation that he had to do before he could home in on a suspect, even though he was fairly certain where the trail was going to lead. First thing, he went back to see Jeff Ralston.

“Of all the people we might expect to get kidnapped, she was the very last one,” Jeff told him. “Hell of a case. Very

sad.”

“I went to see Mr. Downing last night with another agent,” Tom said.

“He’s not quite what he seems,” Jeff replied. “He took wonderful care of his late wife. He even tried to take care of Julie, despite her antagonism. His nurse May, however, would be number one on my list of suspects. Means, opportunity, and motive, all at once.”

“Exactly.” Tom sighed. “It’s going to be a tricky case. We need hard evidence. Last night when we paid a call on Downing, the nurse was with him. Our being there didn’t shake him, but the nurse looked as if she’d like to go out through a wall.”

“May? No doubt,” Jeff said. “She was supposedly working at a nursing home that nobody ever heard of. She stayed at the house while his wife was dying of lung cancer, playing up to him at every opportunity and mostly ignoring poor Mrs. Downing. Sweet woman,” Jeff added sarcastically.

“Life pays us out in our own coin, you know,” Tom replied. “What goes around, comes around.”

“You can say that again,” the sheriff agreed.

* * *

The news the next morning set a lot of people back on their heels. Granger Downing’s friend, the nurse May Strickland, had put around some gossip that Downing was going to marry her.

Annalisa told Tom about it when he came to get his laundry late that afternoon.

“Hey, you didn’t have to go to all this trouble,” he said gently, smiling at the neat piles of clothing and his slacks and button-up shirts on hangers.

“It was no trouble at all,” she replied with a smile.

“Do you know how long the Strickland woman’s been associated with Downing?” he asked.

“Months,” came the short reply. “She moved in when his wife was diagnosed with lung cancer, supposedly to nurse her. But Julie said all May did was try to seduce the boss. The nursing was done by Julie alone.”

“What a lovely woman,” he replied. “Does she by any chance keep poisonous spiders and vipers in her room?”

“No. Lucky them. If one ever bit her, it would die horribly.”

He chuckled. He cocked his head, noting that her long blond hair came almost to her waist in back. Her silver eyes were unusually soft. She was wearing jeans and a pink tee shirt, and she looked good enough to eat.

“Stop that,” she muttered. “You won’t let me ogle you, so the reverse is also true.”

“I’m not ogling,” he said defensively. He smiled very slowly. “I’m trying to decide between the sofa or the big cushy easy chair in front of the fireplace.”

She blinked and gave him a blank look. “You’re after my furniture?”

“No, tidbit. I’m after you.” He picked her up and carried her into the living room, where he dropped into the armchair.

“Why did you say it was a choice between my chair and my sofa?”

“The sofa is just a little more dangerous,” he murmured as he stared into her eyes for so long that she felt hot all over.

“Dangerous ... how?” she asked huskily because the feel of all that warm strength and the closeness of that wide, chiseled mouth to her own was giving her some problems.

“Well, honey, I can’t very well lay you down in the chair, now can I?” he whispered against her mouth.

The endearment and the kiss melted her. She knew without asking that he rarely if ever used endearments, and she was grateful that he hadn’t chosen the sofa, because she wasn’t sure if she could survive the temptation he would present, stretched out on her couch.

“Deep thoughts?” he mused as his mouth teased her lips in the silence of the living room, unbroken except for the crackling sound that came from burning wood in the fireplace, and the hard, heavy beat of her own heart.

“I’m not ... like this,” she tried to get enough breath to explain.

He just smiled. “You don’t encourage men to do what I’m doing,” he translated.

“Well, yes,” she replied huskily.

“It’s okay. You’re just overwhelmed by an unexpected attraction,” he whispered.

She nodded. “Yes.”

His teeth nipped her lower lip. His tongue slid sensuously under her top lip and his own lips caught it and caressed it slowly. “And now you aren’t sure if you should stay here with me or lock yourself in the bedroom.”

She laughed. “Yes.”

His nose nuzzled hers. “You’re only twenty-six,” he whispered into her mouth. “I’ll be thirty-seven soon. And this is just an interlude. I’m not a marrying man. But you’re a marrying woman, and you’re too honorable to cheat your husband by sleeping around.”

Her breath caught. She drew back so that she could see his eyes. “How do you know that about me?”

He traced her mouth with a big finger. “Making quick assessments about people is part of my job,” he said simply. “I’ve learned how to do it fairly well over the years.” He studied her. “You’d race after somebody who dropped a dollar bill so that you could give it back,” he said gently. “You’d stop and help an injured animal on the side of the road. You’d put yourself in danger to save someone you cared about.” He smiled at her surprise. “I told you. I can read people.”

She let out a breath. “Well, you’ve got me pegged pretty good.”

He drew her close, so that her cheek was resting on his broad chest. Under her ear she could hear his heartbeat, hard and heavy.

“This is nice,” she whispered, closing her eyes.

“It is nice,” he replied, surprised. He laid his cheek on top of her blond hair. She smelled of roses.

“People don’t hug anymore,” she mused sleepily. “They even stay away from people they love and they’d rather text than talk.”

“I text, but it goes with my job,” he said.

“I sort of figured that. And this is Friday night, so the hospital is going to be full of people with injuries.” She shook her head. “Snow is in the forecast, which guarantees that a handful of idiots will drive and run into other idiots, all of whom should have stayed home.”

“I guess you stay busy.”

“I’ll bet you do, too.”

“Pretty much. Crime is crime. We have shootings with injuries every weekend.”

“But you stay and do the job,” she remarked.

“Somebody has to,” he said simply. “If we don’t do our jobs, people die. It’s a hell of a responsibility.”

“One that I know something about,” she said, and smiled. She yawned and curled her hands into the soft fabric of his shirt. “If I stay here much longer, I’ll fall asleep.”

He chuckled. “And if I stay here much longer, we’ll be tastier gossip than the local news.”

“Think so?” she teased.

“You’ll see. But I really do have to go. I have a couple of serious interviews to do at the Downing place tomorrow and I’ll need to do some research first in our violent-crime database.”

She lifted her head and stared up at him with soft silver eyes. “Don’t get shot,” she said.

He grinned. “I’ve only been shot twice, and that was overseas, before I went with the Bureau.”

“Twice?!” she exclaimed.

He liked the concern in her voice, in her face. “Just in the shoulder and in a leg,” he said. “Nothing serious.”

She was lost for words. She grimaced. Her fingers went automatically to the deep scar across his chest. “You do dangerous work,” she said softly.

He shrugged. “Any work is dangerous if you don’t plan ahead,” he said. “And since Angie walked out on me, I haven’t minded the danger so much.” His face was harder than stone as he spoke.

“Would she want you to take dangerous jobs if she knew?”

“It wouldn’t matter to her,” he said simply. “She never actually cared enough to worry about what I did, or if I was in danger.”

She smoothed her fingers over his hard, beautiful mouth. “I’d care,” she said, a little belligerently. “She couldn’t have been much of a girlfriend.”

His eyebrows went up. He didn’t say a word, but his world turned upside down. He looked at her as if he’d never seen a woman before. His fingers went to her faintly flushed face and traced down her cheek to her mouth. “If you were involved with me, you’d care,” he said abruptly.

“Yes.” She cleared her throat. “But I’m not involved with you.”

He smiled gently. “No, you’re not. And you aren’t going to be,” he added softly. “I live in Chicago. I’d never adjust to life in the wilds of Colorado.”

She sighed. “I guess not.”

He bent and kissed her tenderly. “And on that note, I’d better go back to my motel.”

“Not just yet,” she whispered, her silver eyes searching his dark ones. “You could pretend you cared, just for a couple of minutes, couldn’t you?”

One dark eyebrow went up. “Pretend?”

“I know, you hotshot FBI guys don’t deal in fantasy,” she said. “And I know you’ll never want to settle down in Raven Springs, Colorado. But you could kiss me just once like you meant it, couldn’t you?”

“Why?” he asked, his eyes piercing as they stared straight into hers.

She swallowed, hard. “Because I’ve never been kissed like that in my whole life, and I’m curious.”

“You’re a pretty girl,” he said. “I can’t believe that.”

“I’m shy with most people,” she confessed, studying his mouth. “I don’t mix well. My father drove off any guys who weren’t brave enough to deal with him, and nobody at work wants anything that isn’t casual.”

“Casual.” He cocked his head. “You don’t go in for one-night stands,” he translated.

“Or any other kind,” she agreed. Her eyes searched his. “But just one time, just to see what it would feel like. You know, if we were, well, involved.”

His big thumb rubbed over her lower lip. He could feel her tremble. “You couldn’t handle being involved with me, little violet under the stair,” he scoffed tenderly.

“Are you sure?”

He nodded. “And I can prove it, too,” he murmured as he bent his head and his warm, firm mouth came down on her lips

...

Chapter Three

A few seconds after Tom curled her against his broad chest, she realized what he'd meant when he said she couldn't handle an interlude with him. All those years of practice that he'd had made her feel like a teen girl on her first real date. She had no idea that a kiss had so many emotions, or that it could make her want to do shocking things.

His big hand was just under her firm little breast, feeling the increasing acceleration of her heartbeat. He felt her fingers tangling in his thick hair. He'd never thought that his hair was sensitive to touch, but pleasure pulsed through him like a shot of rum when she did that. His breath caught and he lifted his head.

She looked into his dark, curious eyes, trying to make her mind work. "French fries," she murmured as her eyes lowered to his firm, chiseled mouth.

"French fries?"

She nodded. "You can't eat just one."

He chuckled softly. "When you get my age, you can," he teased.

She made a face. "Spoilsport."

He shifted her a little closer and bent to her mouth again. He loved the way she curled into him, the uninhibited way she responded to him. She wasn't coy or teasing. She loved what he was doing to her, and it showed.

"Sometimes honesty can cause problems," he murmured against her soft mouth.

"Excuse me?" she asked.

He studied her face. Flushed cheeks, swollen mouth, sleepy, hungry eyes. "Everything you feel is right there on your face, honey. You couldn't hide it if you tried."

She laughed softly and sighed. "Why bother?" she wanted to know. "You told me you had to study body language. Was it

when you went through the Academy?”

“I studied a lot of things,” he agreed. He smoothed back her disheveled blond hair. “But I learned body language doing interrogation.”

“Can you really tell if somebody’s thinking about committing a crime by the way they sit or stand?”

His dark eyes twinkled. “Depends.”

“Depends on what?”

“If they’re holding a gun at the time.”

She laughed. Her eyes sparkled. “I like to watch TV shows about real police work.”

He traced her straight little nose. “They can’t show you most of real police work,” he murmured. “It’s not clean enough for family viewing.”

“I worked in the emergency room for six months while I was training,” she said. “It was pretty rough.”

He nodded. “Pretty messy, too. I’ve been in firefights.” He chuckled. “When I was a rookie cop, we had a call about a gang shooting. Two cars of us went screeching up to the scene of the crime. No people around anywhere, and one of the others heard a noise that he thought was an automatic being cocked. He started shooting.”

“Was it a gun?”

“It was a washing machine switching cycles in a nearby apartment with the window open,” he continued. “He killed the car that belonged to the family with the washing machine.”

“Ouch!” she said.

“The department had to buy the family a new car. And theirs was a really new car that the rookie killed. Expensively new.”

“What did they do to the policeman?”

“He went back to his former profession.”

“Which was ... ?”

“Selling car insurance.”

She almost doubled up laughing. “We get all kinds who think they’re perfect for police work, but it takes a special mindset.”

“And guts,” she added quietly. She studied his face. There were lines there that a man of thirty-six shouldn’t have. She drew her fingers down his hard cheek. “We had a policeman from Catelow shot late one afternoon. He stopped a speeding car, and it was driven by a man who was running from a murder charge. He shot the officer through the stomach.” She curled closer to him and rested her cheek against his chest. “It took him several days to die. His wife said she’d lived with the fear of his being killed their whole married lives. She was in her sixties, and they’d been married for thirty-five years. He was about to retire, but he never made it.” She drew in a long breath, inhaling a spicy, sexy cologne that clung to his warm skin. “She said a lot of women couldn’t live with that day-to-day fear, which was why the divorce rate was so high in her husband’s department. She was a sweet lady. I felt so sorry for her.”

“The risk goes with any job that requires guns,” he said simply.

She looked up at him. “I guess if a woman married a man who did that sort of work, she’d have to be willing to accept the fear. It’s something I could never do,” she added quietly. “I’d go crazy.”

His thumb rubbed gently along her lower lip. “I knew a woman who didn’t care if I died when I went out on a call,” he said, and he looked haunted for a minute. “Angie never worried about me at all.”

She winced.

He saw that, and it made him feel hot all over. It was unexpected, that they’d become so close in such a short period of time. He felt comfortable with her, safe with her. It was as if he’d known her his whole life, and it disturbed him. His headlong, growing passion for her wasn’t helping the situation, either.

“You’re brooding,” she accused quietly.

His dark eyes met her light ones. “I don’t mix well with people,” he said, searching for the right words. “I’m out of step with the world at large. I keep to myself mostly, except when I socialize with the guys in my office. Only a handful of them are still married. It’s a hard life for people who want families. You get moved around a lot. Or, if you are single, you get sent all over the country.”

“Like you are, right now,” she replied.

He nodded. “It depends on the openings and who’s the best person to fill them,” he said. “If you specialize in crimes against children, and there’s a vacancy in a department halfway across the country, you can be transferred there.” He pursed his lips and his dark eyes twinkled. “Or if you really tick off your SAC, you can get sent to a little town nobody ever heard of in Alaska, permanently.”

She laughed. “Do you tick off your SAC?” she wondered.

“I never see him,” he replied. “I get sent out on cases a lot. I don’t have a family.”

She drew in a soft breath. “Me neither.”

He scowled, because it bothered him to be so comfortable with a woman he’d only just met.

“You’ll hurt your brain if you keep straining it like that,” she said with a smile. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know you,” he said slowly. “But I know you. Right down to your bones.”

“I was just thinking that, about you,” she replied. “I don’t get close to people. I really don’t.” Her gaze went over him—soft, searching. “But this feels ...”

“It feels familiar,” he said curtly. “As if we’ve been together forever.”

She nodded.

He sighed. “This was a very bad idea.”

She nodded again, and laid her cheek against his chest with a soft sigh.

His arms contracted. He sat, just holding her in the silence of the room. She was soft and warm and he loved the way it felt to cuddle her. His life had been littered with women like Angie, who weren't affectionate or nurturing. They were sexy and aggressive and they liked him in bed. That was what made this little violet so rare, he considered. She was sexy, but she wasn't cold or aggressive. And she'd feel it if he got hurt on the job.

He'd never had much nurturing. His parents had worked two jobs to keep food on the table for themselves and Tom and his late sister. There hadn't been any cuddling or bedtime stories. The kids had been raised mostly by the television set and whoever had time to babysit them. It had been a fraught childhood.

"What are you thinking about?" she murmured.

"Violets," he replied and a short laugh escaped him.

Her chest rose and fell against his. "I like violets." She curled closer. "Why is life so hard?"

"Ask a philosopher. I just go after the people who try to make it harder."

"I meant to ask if you heard about what happened at the Downing place today."

His heart skipped. "Another murder?"

"Not at all. But that ex-boyfriend of May's was over there to clean out gutters for Mr. Downing and he fell off the ladder, right onto the concrete. Some people should never climb ladders in the first place."

"Why would May's ex-boyfriend be working for Downing?" he asked. He'd known about the boyfriend, but he wanted to hear what she thought.

"It's not as if Mr. Downing cares about May, regardless of what people think. Alice, who works for him, is a friend of mine. She says that May runs off any good workers so she can

get her friends hired. That man, Billy Turner, is one of them. She was having an affair with Billy until Mr. Downing advertised for someone to help nurse his wife.” She made a face. “Word is that Billy was furious at being jilted. But I guess he forgave her if he’s working where she does.”

His eyes narrowed. “Is May really a nurse?”

“She’s a practical nurse,” she replied. “It’s a fairly highly skilled position, and there are some very good practical nurses. May isn’t one. I had a friend check her grades. She almost failed every subject.”

“You’re a gold mine of information,” he said with admiration, smiling down at her.

“I like people, mostly,” she said. “But I don’t like people who take advantage of sick folks.”

“That makes two of us.”

He tilted her face up to his and searched her eyes for so long that her heartbeat went crazy. Her lips parted as she tried to breathe normally. He saw that. It lifted his chin and made him feel vaguely arrogant. She was special. In a life filled with women who were mostly as hard as the men, she was like the violet he’d called her, growing wild deep in the forest. He felt at peace with her. His turbulent life had given him little of that pleasure.

“You really shouldn’t encourage me,” she said in a husky little voice.

“Encourage you to do what?” he asked.

“Go nuts over you,” she said. She bit her lower lip. “You said it yourself. We’re ships passing in the night. You’ll walk away and never look back.” She grimaced. “I’ll sit here with an empty house, and maybe later on, a cat or two, mourning you.”

“You’ll be over me and after some other man in three weeks.” He laughed with cynicism.

“Do you really think so?” she asked softly, searching his eyes.

“I have to think so,” he said, forcing coldness into his tone. “I mean it. I have no desire whatsoever to spend the rest of my life with a woman, married or not.”

She studied him. “Because if you get close to somebody, really close, you couldn’t bear to lose them. Have you lost somebody along the way, besides the woman you wanted to marry?”

He averted his eyes.

Her small hand flattened over his shirt, under the suit jacket. “I never gossip,” she said.

“Bull,” he shot right back, and his eyes were accusing. “You’ve been telling me all about the people in the Downing household.”

“Yes, because that’s your business and you needed to know. I don’t gossip about people’s private lives, though. Not ever.”

His broad, muscular chest rose and fell. His thumb went to her lower lip and rubbed softly against it. “It isn’t so much what I lost, as what I never had.” He drew in a breath. “My parents never touched each other, much less my late sister and me. I grew up in a household without human contact, without love. We were dependents on the tax returns when we were small. Later, we were free labor.”

“It would have been that way for me, except for my mother,” she said quietly. She shook her head. “People shouldn’t have kids unless both parents want them. It’s unfair to everybody.”

The mention of children made him uncomfortable, and he didn’t know why. Children had never been part of his life. His colleagues had kids, of course, and they brought them to the few social events sponsored by his office. But he avoided them mostly.

“I’m not good with kids,” he said. “I haven’t been around many, except casually.”

Her face grew soft with emotion. “I adore them,” she said. “I spent six of the happiest months of my life working on the children’s medical ward at my hospital. I like working

emergency,” she added, “but if I had a choice, it wouldn’t be the emergency room.”

“Can’t you choose?” he asked.

She shook her head. “No openings on the children’s ward. People who work there stay forever.” She laughed. “I guess I would, too. It’s the next best thing to having a baby of my own.”

“No woman I ever dated wanted one,” he pointed out.

“Let me guess,” she said amusedly. “They wanted dining and dancing and hot sex.”

“Please!” he muttered.

“I’m a nurse. We’ve seen everything.”

“I’m in law enforcement. So have I,” he shot back.

“If you wanted to marry your girlfriend, you must have had feelings for her.”

He averted his eyes. “I wanted her. We spent most of our time apart, and that suited us. She had a high-powered sales job and was mostly on the road.”

What an empty life, she was thinking. He was a man who wanted love, needed a family, but he’d convinced himself that it was impossible.

“That’s not why you didn’t want kids,” she said, as if she knew.

His big, warm hand came down over her small one where it was resting on his chest. “My father used a leather strap on me when I misbehaved,” he said curtly. “He laughed while he did it. He used it on my sister, too. The books all say that abused children grow up to be abusers.”

She let her head fall back against his shoulder and looked up at him. “I can name you four kids in this very community who had similar childhoods and grew up to be exceptionally kind people. One of them is our own sheriff,” she added with a smile.

“Ralston,” he recalled. “I met him. He’s a nice guy.”

“His father drank and beat him and his mother. He said it was why he went into law enforcement.”

He smiled. “That happened to a friend of mine when I was living in Delaware. It’s why I went into it, too,” he confessed.

She touched his hard, chiseled mouth. “I wonder if anybody has that sweet, wholesome upbringing they write fairy tales about.”

“I seriously doubt it.” He drew in a long breath and his eyes sketched her face. “I have to go.”

“Are you sure? Couldn’t you take a personal day and we could go fishing?”

He burst out laughing. “Now how did you know that I fish?”

“Because you probably get enough shooting on the job that you don’t want to consider it for recreation.”

“And you like to fish, do you?” he teased.

She nodded. “But with a cane pole.” She made a face. “I don’t do well with more technical things.”

He smoothed back her soft hair. It was coming loose from its scrunchy. “I love your hair.”

“It’s just ordinary,” she said.

“No, it’s sexy.” His dark eyes narrowed. They ran down her body to her breasts, which had little hard peaks on them.

He stared at them long enough that they began to feel uncomfortable. She swallowed, hard.

“You know why they get like that, don’t you?” he asked gently, indicating her breasts.

“I’m a nurse.”

The smile grew. “I noticed. Pity about the pole dancing.”

“Now, look here, just because I work nights ... !”

His mouth eased down over hers in a slow, sweet pressure that very quickly made all the throbbing and breathlessness much worse. Her nails caught at his shoulders as the pleasure

worked its way down from her mouth, making her moan softly.

He turned her in his arms and his mouth grew insistent, slow and ardent. She held on for dear life. This was the stuff of dreams, this gorgeous man holding her and kissing her as if he wanted her.

He lifted his mouth away a breath. His dark eyes glittered with desire and frustration. "I'm not living in the wilds of Colorado."

"And I'm not living in the wilds of Chicago," she managed.

"So it's a good thing that we're not getting involved," he continued. While he was saying it, his big hand was working its way under her blouse and up to the frilly, brief little bra she was wearing.

She caught his wrist halfheartedly.

"Coward," he drawled, but with pure affection. "Don't you want to know how it feels?"

"Of course I want to know," she returned sharply. "But the less we do together, the easier it will be to forget when you leave."

"I'm not leaving yet," he murmured, and his mouth closed her eyes and moved tenderly all over her flushed face. While he was doing that, his hand was under her arm, not in any intimate way, but in such a way that she wanted it to be. She shivered and twisted involuntarily toward him.

"It's like shooting fish in a barrel," he murmured as his mouth found hers. "I should be ashamed of myself."

Her arms slid up around his neck and she lifted herself, just enough that his hand smoothed up over her firm breast.

"Oh ... glory," she ground out.

"And that was your first mistake," he whispered roughly. "Come here!"

The kiss was no longer teasing. It was hungry and hard and full of frustrated passion that made her sob.

His hand was at the base of her spine now, turning her hips into his so that she felt immediately what was happening to him.

He groaned. It had been such a long time since he'd felt passion. Angie didn't really inspire it. She liked it hot and fast and over, so he got used to it that way. But this woman was delicate and fragile, and he wanted to treat her like porcelain. She invited tenderness. She invited a hunger that was unlike anything he'd ever felt in his life.

She knew she couldn't save herself by protesting physically. He was getting in over his head. So she looked into his eyes, with her face flushed and her breath coming in gasps.

"I hope you want a baby right away," she stammered, "because I don't have anything to take and it would embarrass me to tears to go to my elderly doctor and ask him for birth control."

He stopped at once, half shocked, half amused at the desperation in her voice.

He looked down at her with affection, despite the ache she'd given him. "I could go with you and explain why we want it," he offered.

She hit his chest with a little fist. "That wasn't nice."

He wrinkled his nose and grinned at her. "We'd be good together."

She drew in a shaky breath. "I know."

"But a child shouldn't be born because two people lost their heads."

She nodded.

"Or because one of them was too shy to ask for a prescription."

She nodded again. It was easier than trying to think up something witty to say.

He smiled tenderly and bent to brush a shivery soft kiss against her warm, swollen lips.

“There’s also the excuse that I’m too tired. And it isn’t really an excuse. I didn’t sleep last night,” he murmured.

“Why?” she asked curiously.

“I tend to dwell on things when I lie down and cut off the lights. Things ... bother me.”

She cocked her head. “Things that happened to you, or things you did?”

“Both.” And he was suddenly businesslike and abrupt. He got up, bringing her with him. He stood up. “Thanks for folding my clothes,” he said, and he couldn’t keep the affection out of his deep voice as he looked at her, seeing the visible evidence of his passion. She looked good with her hair disheveled by his fingers, her mouth swollen from his kisses.

“You’re welcome.” She smiled up at him. “It’s very ... unusual, isn’t it?” she added and became somber. “I mean, someone seeming so familiar, someone you’ve never met before.”

He nodded. “Very unusual. That’s why we both have to do our best to ignore it.”

“Because you won’t live in the wilds of Colorado,” she agreed, and her pale eyes twinkled.

He chuckled. “Something like that. And I’ve got a murder to solve. Stay out of trouble with the law,” he added as he headed for the door.

“You’re the law.”

“Exactly.” He stopped, turned, and bent to kiss the tip of her nose. “Sleep well.”

She laughed, full of joy and not really understanding why. “Don’t get shot.”

“First lesson I learned on the firing range in the Army. How to duck.” He gave her a grin as he picked up his clean shirts, pants, and the rest of his stuff in the bag, and closed the door behind him.

She went to bed, certain that she'd never be able to sleep after their heated interlude. To her amazement, she fell asleep the minute her head hit the pillow.

* * *

Tom forced Annalisa to the back of his mind as he started conducting interviews with people who'd seen the victim hours before her death. He had May Strickland and Billy Turner squarely in his sights, but the sheriff mentioned that a local beautician had seen Julie on the day she'd vanished. So he went to the beauty parlor in town first.

The hairdresser who'd given Julie a permanent the morning of the day that she vanished was named Hazel. She was friendly and cooperative.

"I always liked Julie," she recalled. "She had her moods, but she was usually happy when she came in for me to do her hair. She loved trying new hairstyles and buying pretty things to go in her hair."

"Did she seem disturbed the last time she came here?" Tom asked.

"Yes. She was really upset," Hazel replied. "She said that her mother's new caregiver was paying far more attention to her stepfather than she was to her mother. Mrs. Downing would be wet all over, and May wouldn't even bother to clean her up. Julie had all the work."

"Didn't she tell her stepfather?"

"Well, that's the thing," Hazel replied. "She said that her father, rather her stepfather, didn't want to put that burden of all nursing on Julie. May had convinced him that she knew how to take care of sickly people. When he was around, she made sure that Mrs. Downing was cleaned up and had everything she needed. Julie said he'd been away on business a lot just lately," she added. "Not that he wanted to be. He loved his wife, but she owned a lot of real estate and a business and he had to keep an eye on those. He told Julie it was like pulling teeth to have to leave his wife at all. But that's why he didn't know what May was really doing."

“Couldn’t Mrs. Downing tell him what was going on?”

Hazel shook her head. “She was very weak. Julie wanted to call in hospice. They have specially trained nurses, you know, but May said it would just be a big hassle with half a dozen strange people in the house all the time, and Mr. Downing likes his privacy. She convinced him that it would be a mistake. Mrs. Downing was on heavy sedation because May told the doctor that Mrs. Downing was complaining about the pain. She didn’t really know what was going on around her.”

Tom was taking notes. “They said Julie didn’t like her stepfather.”

“She didn’t like most people,” Hazel said. “She was very jealous of her stepfather and afraid of losing her mother. They were very close. She was an only child and her mother had always taken care of her. She’d have resented anybody who came between them. But she did say that last afternoon that she guessed her stepfather wasn’t so bad after all.”

Tom let out a breath. “Too little, too late, I guess,” Hazel said. “I don’t think he killed Julie, but a lot of people do. Granger Downing’s not a nice person, on the surface. But underneath all those stinging nettles is a man who’d give the last crumb he had to a starving man.”

“I’ve heard that from other people,” Tom told her. “In fact, I met him myself. He isn’t so bad.”

“He can be. Some man was making lewd comments around his wife when they first got married, and Granger slugged him.” Hazel chuckled. “Almost ended up in jail, but Mrs. Downing stepped in and smoothed over things.”

Tom was reflecting that a man who was that protective of his wife was unlikely to want her dead.

“But that May Strickland,” Hazel continued, shaking her head. “She’s bad news, any way you look at it. She isn’t from here, you know. She came from Denver. She’s only been in Raven Springs for a short time.”

“How about her ex-boyfriend?”

“Billy Turner,” Hazel replied, shaking her head. “He’s local. He was accused of assault last year, but his dad managed to talk the victim out of prosecuting him.”

“Do you know the reason for the assault?”

“Well, it was old man Riley Barnes,” she told him. “He’d just come from the bank with a pocketful of cash that he was going to spend at the cattle auction. Billy swore the old man had said something that made him angry enough to swing on him. I never believed that. I think Billy had robbery in mind and got cold feet when the victim yelled for help and the police came.” She laughed. “He got a good lecture from Sheriff Ralston and a warning. Jeff didn’t want to let him off, but Mr. Barnes refused to prosecute.”

“People who assault senior citizens should be prosecuted,” Tom said icily.

“That’s exactly what I think,” Hazel said, and her expression was as hard as Tom’s. “It started local folks thinking. There was a murder here about two years ago that was never solved. It involved another old man, a rich one, who lived alone. He was found on the floor of his office, stone-cold dead with the door to his office locked, from the inside.”

“I’m sure they checked the windows.”

“No windows,” she said, surprising him. “French doors. And they were locked from the inside, too. Sheriff Ralston has been working that cold case every spare minute he has. The victim was his godfather.”

“Tough,” Tom said. “Can you think of anything else that might be helpful?” he added.

Hazel studied him for a minute. “Emus kick forward, not backwards.”

He stared at her without blinking.

“Oh, you mean helpful about the case,” she replied, with a grin. “Sorry. We have an emu farm outside town. One of the emus got loose once and our former local vet went to try and catch him. He walked up to the emu and got kicked in a very

bad place because he didn't realize their legs work the opposite of ours."

He grimaced. "A lesson he didn't forget, I imagine."

"He packed his bags and went back to Los Angeles the very next day." Hazel chuckled. "He said he wasn't suited to the outback."

Tom chuckled. "It certainly sounds like it. I've never seen a live emu; only on nature programs on TV. Not much of that, either. I work long hours."

"I imagine you do. I hope you catch whoever killed Julie," she added with narrow eyes. "She was a sweet, kind girl, despite her mood swings. Nobody should be left to freeze to death, not even a rabid animal!"

"We'll find out who did it," Tom assured her. "The investigator was very thorough. We need enough evidence to convict, if we can connect it to anyone local."

"Really hurts to think our community could harbor somebody like that," she said sadly. "We're kind people for the most part. We may gossip about our citizens, but it's not malicious. It's because we care."

"I live in Chicago," he replied, "where it's a good idea to mind your own business and not have much to do with your neighbors."

She frowned. "That's a sad way to live. Do you have family there, at least?"

He shook his head. "My whole family is dead."

"But who takes care of you, if you get sick?" she wanted to know.

That question was so disturbing that he pretended not to hear it. He stood up, smiling politely. "Thank you very much for your time. If I have any follow-up questions, I'll be in touch, if that's okay."

"It certainly is," Hazel assured him. "I want that person caught, too. It gives our town a bad name to have an unsolved murder in it."

He nodded.

* * *

He went out for a late lunch, stopping by the local café. Jeff Ralston was there having lunch alone. He motioned for Tom, who had a hamburger and fries and coffee on a tray, to join him.

“Do you always eat alone?” he asked Jeff as he put his plate and mug on the table and slid the tray onto Jeff’s empty one before he sat down.

Jeff sighed. “Story of my life. I was involved with an ex-girlfriend, but she went back to Denver and got married. So, yes, I eat alone, unless one of my deputies is free at the same time I am. Not likely this time of year, with snow and ice alternating weeks, and wrecks by the half dozen.”

Tom chuckled as he started on his hamburger. “Sounds like Chicago in winter. We always get a few people from warmer climates who move in and don’t know how to drive in ice and snow. Sometimes that ends tragically.”

“Tell me about it,” Jeff said with a grimace. “So, how’s the investigation going?”

“I’m learning a lot about Raven Springs,” Tom said. “And about the murder victim.”

Jeff sipped coffee. “Learning a lot about Annalisa Davis, too, we hear,” Jeff added abruptly, and with a broad smile.

Chapter Four

Tom's hamburger was suspended in midair as he stared at Jeff, surprised by the unexpected comment.

"Don't worry, it's not malicious gossip," Jeff assured him. "We take an interest in anybody who lives or works here. Annalisa is special," he added quietly and with a smile. "She had a bad time with her dad. A lot of cops drink, you know, but he was usually over the limit. Everybody protected him."

"Why?"

"He had to kill his best friend."

Tom's breath caught. "Excuse me?"

"There was a shooting downtown, the first one we ever had in Raven Springs. Two men got into an argument and one of them pulled a gun. Sam Davis was police chief here, and he was closer than any of his men to the scene of the disturbance. He got out of his squad car and only saw the back of the man with the gun. He yelled for the man to put the gun down and put his hands over his head. Except the man, who was on drugs, whirled and started to fire at Sam. He returned fire and he was an expert shot." He grimaced. "The man turned out to be his best friend. Sam knew that he smoked an occasional joint, but he didn't realize that his friend had gone on to hard drugs. Never used them around Sam, so Sam didn't know. They had to tranquillize Sam afterwards, and he stayed drunk for a week. He never got over it. He started drinking and then he couldn't stop."

"Well, it doesn't excuse him, but it does explain him," Tom had to admit. "I've seen guys like that on the job in law enforcement. Some get into situations where they're forced to kill friends or even family. Some become suicidal, some drink."

"Most professions that require guns sometimes require you to use them," Tom finished quietly.

"I've been lucky," Ralston said. "I wounded a man once or twice. Never had to kill one. Although my deputy did. Perp had me by the throat after I pumped a nine-millimeter pistol

into him. My deputy came along with his .45 just in the nick of time. Saved my life.” He sighed. “Then he got drunk for a week, but I went out to see him, and the Methodist minister and I talked him down. He’s sober as a judge these days and a hell of an investigator.”

Tom didn’t reply. He’d killed men in combat. It wasn’t something he liked to remember. And then there was the one man he’d shot in Chicago, who later died. That one had soured him on life. He was still trying to get past the memory. It had been a homeless man, a Vietnam veteran, trying to hold up a convenience store with a toy gun—but it hadn’t looked like a toy gun. He’d turned and pointed it at Tom and Tom had fired. The man, when Tom got to him and realized what he’d done, was forgiving even then. He was tired of living, he managed to say as they waited for the ambulance. He had no family, nobody who cared about him, no money, no job, no nothing. Dying wasn’t the horror people thought it was. His whole squad had died in Vietnam except for him. He drank to forget. He couldn’t stop. He told Tom not to be sorry, it was an honest mistake. He told the investigating officers the same thing. Tom stayed with him in the hospital until he died. It had torn him up. He considered how Annalisa would have behaved had she been there. She’d have crawled into his lap and kissed him and cuddled him and tried to remind him that life had a purpose and a plan, and some things that happened were not under anyone’s control.

“Those are real homemade french fries,” Ralston said, breaking into Tom’s thoughts and indicating the untouched portion of his companion’s plate. “Nothing frozen or fast food about them.”

“Really?” Tom picked one up and bit into it. “Oh, my,” he said and sighed.

“Great, aren’t they? It’s why we eat here. Oh, and there’s fresh catfish on Friday, grilled or fried.”

“That’s about my favorite food,” he replied. “I like catfish. I used to go out on the river late in the afternoon when I was a kid. Best time to catch them is late in the day,” he recalled with a smile.

“In Chicago?”

He shook his head. “I moved there when I went with the Bureau. I was born in a little town just south of Wilmington, Delaware,” he recalled. “Good fishing in the state park nearby, and plenty of tourist attractions, including the largest formal French gardens in North America at the Nemours Estate.”

“Did you live there a long time?” Ralston asked conversationally.

“Until I was twelve,” he replied. “Then our parents moved to a town outside Chicago.”

“You have siblings?”

“I had a sister but she was killed in a car wreck,” Tom told him. He studied Ralston. “Have you traveled much?”

“Just to Denver on cases,” was the bland reply. “I’ve never been out of my state since I was born.” He chuckled.

“Good Lord,” Tom said, shocked.

“I guess you FBI guys travel a lot.”

“Yes,” Tom replied. “Maybe too much. I didn’t worry about it when I was younger, but you don’t put down roots when you’re on the road all the time.” He studied the dregs of his coffee. “It’s a lonely life.”

“I know that feeling,” the other man said with a sigh. “I always thought I’d marry a hometown girl and settle down, but most of the women around here are married or involved or too young or too old.” He chuckled.

Tom just smiled.

* * *

He stopped by Downing’s house after phoning first. He wanted to talk to May Strickland. She was about to leave the house when he got there, and she looked flushed and guilty when he asked to speak with her.

“But I don’t know anything about how Julie died,” she blurted out.

“That’s not why I want to speak to you,” he said pleasantly. “I want to know about the late Mrs. Downing. You nursed her until her death, I believe?”

“Oh!” She calmed down. “Well, yes, I did. I’m a practical nurse.”

“Is there someplace we can sit?” he asked.

“Certainly. Mr. Downing went to Denver today to talk to some people about a new investment. We can speak in the living room.” She led him into the house. “Alice, the FBI man is here, could we have coffee, please?” she asked the maid as they passed.

Alice gave her a nasty look that she didn’t see, but she smiled at Tom. “Of course. Coming right up,” she said cheerfully.

Tom followed May into the living room and sat in one of the cushy armchairs beside the marble coffee table. May lounged on the sofa. She wasn’t bad looking for a woman her age, he considered, but she had eyes like a shark. Dark and cold and predatory.

“Are you married, Agent Jones?” she asked with a coy glance.

“Married to my job,” he replied. “What can you tell me about Mrs. Downing?”

She blinked, as if she hadn’t expected the sudden change of subject. “Well, she was dying of lung cancer when I was hired to look after her. Poor little thing,” she said with unconvincing sympathy. “I did everything possible to make her comfortable.”

“Odd. I was told that Julie did most of the cleaning up,” he said suddenly, and pinned her with his dark eyes.

“Well, Julie did help,” she conceded, and her face flushed. She looked like a trapped animal.

“Have you been in the employ of any local citizens, before you came here?” he asked.

“No. Not here.”

“You worked someplace else?” His voice was deep and slow and precise. But the cold stare that went with the words backed down anything May might have said in defense of her own position here.

“I, uh, I worked farther north,” she said.

“Where?”

“I ... c-can't remember at the moment,” she stammered.

Alice came in with coffee, giving May time to get herself back in order. She didn't bother to thank Alice. Tom did.

He picked up the cup of black coffee May poured for him, declining any condiments. “This is good,” he remarked.

“Mr. Downing only has the best,” May said. “He prefers Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee. It's one of the most expensive coffees in the world,” she added.

And she'd know, he said to himself. “How was Mr. Downing around his wife?” Tom asked after a minute.

“Well, he was sad, of course. We all knew she was dying and that nothing could be done for her. The doctor came out twice a day, just at the last.”

“Don't they have hospice here?” he asked.

She hesitated. “Of course they do. It's just that Mr. Downing values his privacy. He doesn't like strangers around.”

His dark eyes were steady on her face. She actually squirmed in her chair.

His gaze went back to his smartphone and the notes application he'd pulled up. “Julie was found in the evening, but preliminary reports from the crime lab put the time of death anywhere from six to eight hours before the ransom was paid.” He looked up at her. “In other words, Julie was dead before the ransom was ready to be delivered.”

She cleared her throat. “I guess the kidnapper wanted a long head start, don't you think?”

“That would be my guess. Although it would take a hardhearted criminal to leave a young woman out in the cold

to freeze to death. It's a particularly unpleasant way to die."

"I imagine so." She smiled at him.

He thought how inappropriate that smile was, and that he needed to do a lot of digging into May Strickland's background before he asked her any more questions.

He put away the smartphone, finished his coffee, and got to his feet. He glanced at May. "Thanks for your cooperation," he said. "I may have a question or two later, but I think that's all for now."

She stood up, relaxed now. "No problem," she said. "Any time."

He nodded and went out of the room and into the kitchen, where Alice was working on a cake.

She turned as he entered and smiled. "Did you find the barbeque place all right?" she asked brightly, just as May came to the door.

"I'm going out, just for a few minutes, Alice," May said, and nodded toward the two people in the kitchen as she went quickly out the front door.

"I'll bet she fed you a lot of bull," Alice scoffed.

"Enough. What's she still doing here, now that Mrs. Downing is deceased?" He knew the answer, but wanted to have Alice corroborate it.

"She's convinced Mr. Downing that he needs someone to keep a watch on his blood pressure." She rolled her eyes. "As if he couldn't drive to the doctor's office every day if he needed to. She's like a tick. She's attached herself to him, and he's having trouble getting her loose."

He chuckled in spite of himself. "Does he find her attractive?"

"Well, I heard him tell an old friend that if he had to choose between May and a mule, he'd take the mule!"

He had to stifle a laugh. "She seems to think she's irresistible."

“She’s the only one. Maybe that ex-boyfriend thought she was,” she added. “She was holding the ladder for him when he fell.” She glanced his way while she worked. “Anybody can stand on a ladder, unless they’re pushed.”

“You think she pushed him?”

“He’s been conspicuous around here since Julie died, and he makes May very nervous. If anybody was involved in that, it’s those two. Wouldn’t surprise me if he knew something he shouldn’t and May’s afraid he might talk.”

“Hence the falling ladder,” he mused.

“Exactly. And here’s a piece of free advice. If you ever get on a ladder at this house, make sure May isn’t holding it for you!”

“That’s one promise I can make and keep,” he assured her. He asked several other questions, mostly about Downing’s daily habits and May’s background, but Alice was stumped when it came to the nurse.

“Nobody knows anything much about her locally,” Alice told him. “She came here from Denver.” She shook her head. “I heard that Annalisa checked out her grades and they were almost all just shy of failing.”

His eyebrows went up. “Do you know everything about other people here?”

She laughed. “It’s a small-town thing. You get used to it.”

“I’m afraid I never would,” he replied.

Alice just smiled at him.

* * *

He went back to the motel much later, dragging himself out of the car with a long sigh. He noticed that Annalisa’s car was also under the carport.

The porch light came on as he closed and locked the car door.

“Hungry?” Annalisa asked from the doorway.

“I had a hamburger about”—he checked his watch—“ten hours ago.”

“I made meat loaf and mashed potatoes,” she said. “And apple pie.”

He drew in a breath. “If that’s an invitation, I’ll accept it. I’m too tired to go out and try to find food at this hour.”

She grinned. “I’ve got an hour before I have to be at work. I can’t bear to go on the job with an empty stomach.”

He laughed softly. “I would have imagined the opposite.”

She held the door open for him. “It depends on what we get and how bad it is,” she said. “I threw up one time, when I’d just started training.” She made a face. “I never did it again. The orderlies ran me ragged about it. And everybody knew. I guess it’s sort of an initiation.”

“We have them in law enforcement as well. You never show weakness in front of your unit. It’s always a mistake.”

“I can imagine. Sit down. Want coffee?”

“Oh, yes,” he said, leaning back in the chair with a sigh.

“Long day?”

“Very long. Murder investigations are the worst. I’ve got a prime suspect, but I can’t make an arrest without concrete proof. It’s frustrating.”

She put a dish of meat loaf and one of mashed potatoes and one of steamed cabbage on the table, which was already set with thin porcelain plates that had a floral pattern. The silverware all matched, too.

“You look surprised,” she commented.

“Yes. Your silverware matches,” he added, picking up a fork and studying it. “No two of mine back in my apartment are alike, and most of my plates are chipped,” he added.

“Poor man,” she teased.

He laughed. “Well, what I have is functional, at least.”

“I like pretty things,” she said, offering him the plate of meat loaf.

“So do I,” he said, but he was looking at her with blatant affection.

She flushed. He put meat loaf on his plate and then mashed potatoes.

She hesitated with the bowl of steamed cabbage. “Don’t feel you have to eat this just because I cooked it,” she said. “My father loathed steamed cabbage.”

“It’s one of my favorite dishes,” he replied softly.

She brightened. “Oh.” And she handed him the bowl.

They ate in a comfortable silence. It didn’t take long to get to the pie. He was hungry.

“You’re a wonderful cook,” he remarked.

“Only to a starving man,” she teased. “Didn’t anybody offer to feed you?”

He shook his head. “I had a hamburger with your sheriff at lunch, but he didn’t buy it for me. No worries,” he said, when she looked disturbed. “The Bureau gives us a meal allowance.”

“Thank goodness. You have to have regular meals or your health suffers, especially in a stressful line of work.”

“I usually grab a candy bar or a protein bar when I’m working. I don’t have time to cook at home and I get tired of takeout.”

She glanced at him. “That’s why I cook. I don’t like takeout.”

“The pie is awesome.”

She grinned. “It won a prize at the county fair last summer,” she said proudly.

“County fair? People still have those?” he exclaimed.

“It’s a small community,” she reminded him. “You might have noticed all the different Christmas decorations and the

displays in the windows? Everything in cities these days is generic. Not in Raven Springs. We're traditional. We even have Christmas carolers who go door to door and get invited inside to drink hot chocolate!"

"Oh, good Lord, it's like stepping back into a 1950s holiday black-and-white movie," he groaned.

"Go ahead and say it," she chided. "Come on. 'Bah, humbug!'"

He laughed deeply as he finished his pie. "I'm not much on holidays."

"You get off from work for holidays, don't you?" she asked.

"I usually volunteer to work on them, so the men and women who have kids can stay home on Christmas, especially."

"I knew you were a nice man," she said demurely.

He cocked his head and studied her. She wore on his heart day by day. He'd never felt such an attraction to anyone. He felt safe when he was with her, as if he belonged. It had been a very long time since he'd wanted to belong anywhere. This lovely little violet worried about him, loved to cuddle with him, but she was fiery and she had a temper as well. He laughed inwardly remembering their introduction when she'd demanded that he move his car out of her driveway.

"Why are you grinning like that?" she wanted to know.

And she never missed the changing expressions on his face, he mused to himself. "I was remembering the night I met you," he explained.

She laughed. "I guess I was pretty over-the-top."

"I noticed."

"It's just that people at this motel have been using my private driveway for years."

"Pity the motel doesn't have enough parking spots for its visitors," he pointed out.

“I’ve told them that often enough. The manager says he’s sorry, but nothing ever gets done. In fact, you were the first person who ever apologized about parking there. The others, mostly men, got belligerent because I insist that they move their cars so I can get out.”

“I imagine that’s frustrating,” he agreed, surprised that he was angry about it. She was a sweet woman. Stupid men, to rage at a kindhearted woman when they themselves were in the wrong.

“You look really tired, Tom,” she said quietly.

His heart jumped at the sound of his name on her lips. He glanced at her and smiled. “I am. A lot of my job is verbal, but it’s still wearing.”

She nodded. “I understand.”

“How did you know about May Strickland’s grades?” he asked suddenly. “And if you searched them out, then you must know where she went to school also, right?”

She grinned. “You’re sharp!”

He chuckled. “Goes with the badge. Tell me.”

“I have a friend who works in Denver,” she confided. “She has access to information that I’d have to pay for. She found out for me, and told me what May’s grades were like. She went to a nursing school in Aspen Lodge, just outside Denver. My friend said May worked for a nursing home there just briefly.”

He was taking notes. He looked up. “Did she quit or was she fired?” he asked.

“Make that *very* sharp,” she mused, studying him with warm affection. “She was invited to leave. They hesitated to fire a young nurse at her first assignment. She was messing around with an intern while an old lady she was supposed to be bathing had a stroke.”

His dark eyes flickered. “She should have been fired, and that information should have gone on her permanent record.”

“According to my friend, there were extenuating circumstances.”

Both heavy eyebrows lifted, and he waited.

“May has mental issues,” she replied. “We don’t like to label them these days. Politically incorrect. But she’s bipolar. She’s normal on some days, and about twenty degrees off-center on others.”

“She has no damned business working around sick people,” he said flatly.

“Well, she was diagnosed and medicated. The problem is that she won’t take her medication. She did take it at her next job, probably because she realized that some employers would press the issue.”

“Where was the next job?”

She sipped coffee. “At a private nursing home, La Chalet,” she said, “also in Aspen Lodge. I believe she and the owner had a, well, relationship. He was an older man and May was supposedly very pretty when she was younger.”

“Do you know anything at all about what went on while she was there?”

“Besides sleeping with the owner until his wife caught them, you mean?” she asked whimsically.

He chuckled. “Yeah. Besides that.”

“Not really. My friend left nursing to become a skip tracer in Denver. Her husband has a detective agency that’s affiliated with a big detective agency in Houston, Texas. She’s very good at what she does.”

“I’ve worked with detective agencies in Texas,” he remarked, still putting notes into his smartphone. “Sorry I can’t tell you more.”

He looked up, affection and soft wonder in his expression. “Honey, I work for the best law enforcement agency in the world. I can take it from here. I need to make use of my very expensive training.”

She grinned. "I guess so."

He smiled at her. "What is there to do in this town at night?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Not much. We don't have pole dancing or amusement parks," she teased. "There's a movie theater and an ice-skating rink. That's about all, unless someone wants to drive all the way to Denver."

He pursed his sensual lips. "There's a lot to do in Denver," he said.

She sighed. "I know. But it's a very long drive. My car wouldn't make it halfway."

"My car would."

Her heart jumped. Was he suggesting ... ?

"I'll have to go to Denver to check this out. I can't do this much detective work online. So when's your next day off?"

The world became a wonderland, just that quickly. Her silver eyes brightened with joy. "I'm off tomorrow and the next two days," she said. "We work four days on, fifteen hours a day, and then we get three days off."

He grimaced. "You're on your feet a lot."

"You get used to it." She smiled. "What do you have in mind?"

"Just a day trip, but I'd enjoy the company."

Her face lit up. "Me, too," she said softly.

His chest expanded with pure delight. "Okay, then. You'll have to get up early."

"I'll just stay up, when I get off my shift," she said simply. "I can sleep when we get back."

He frowned, hesitating.

"I've done it before," she told him, and smiled. "I have sleep issues. Every few nights, I can't sleep at all."

He sighed. "I have those, too."

“Mine are from stress on the job,” she said. She studied his face. “I expect yours are from more than stress.”

He didn't speak at all.

One of her small hands slid over his that was resting on the table. “I'm not going to propose marriage,” she said drolly. “I was just making a comment.”

He laughed. “Is that how I looked?”

She nodded. “Pretty much.” Her eyes slid over him. “I know you aren't going to settle down in the wilds of Colorado, if that helps.”

His hand turned over and his fingers curled into hers. “Life is different since I met you,” he said after a minute, making her heart jump. “I'm not used to women who nurture. If you want the truth, I only seem to attract the sort that step over you on the way to another man.”

Now it was her turn not to speak. She was thinking that she could never do that, not for any reason. In a very short space of time, he'd become part of her day-to-day life. She frowned a little, because she didn't understand why.

“Have you ever been in love?” he wanted to know.

She laughed. “I don't think so,” she confessed. “I've had crushes on doctors and once, even, on another nurse—a male one,” she clarified. “But the sort of love they describe in novels, no, I don't think so.” She looked up. “You?”

He made a face and drew in a long breath. “I had a crush on my next-door neighbor when I was ten. She moved away. There were a few casual things after I grew up. Angie was the closest I came to love. But that was a physical thing.”

“My grandparents were best friends,” she said after a minute. “They went everywhere together. They liked the same sort of things, kept to themselves, played video games together,” she added, laughing softly in memory. “When he died of a heart attack, she didn't last six months. She said it was like her soul went with him, and her body just felt empty. They were married almost fifty years.”

“I don’t know that I want to feel anything like that,” he mused.

“Me either,” she confessed.

He played with her fingers idly while he thought. “There’s a big ice rink in Denver,” he said. “It’s open late.” He looked up. “I’m not much on movies out. I like to watch them in my living room, so I can get up and grab a sandwich or a beer if I want to.”

She burst out laughing. “That’s me,” she replied. “I hate crowded places, especially now.”

“So, we could go skating. If you don’t know how, I’ll teach you.”

“I’ve been skating since I was five,” she told him. “I love the ice. I even have my own skates.”

“I’ll have to rent some, but it might be fun. And there’s a place near the rink that serves some of the best sushi ...”

“I love sushi!” she exclaimed. “We had a nurse who worked with us who lived in Denver. One day when she was on day shift, she brought in a cooler full of it for us to have for lunch. I thought I’d died and gone to heaven!”

His hand contracted. “I got hooked on it in Chicago,” he said. “One of the guys was crazy about it. He took me with him to this little Japanese place on a back street. I was sure I wouldn’t like what I called ‘fish bait,’ but after the first bite, I was truly hooked. I have it every week back home.”

Her eyes were full of delight. He studied her, feeling his heart lift. So many things in common, he thought, and his hand became caressing. Then, suddenly, his face went taut and he let go of her hand.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Years,” he replied somberly, his eyes searching hers.

It took her a minute to understand what he was referring to. “Oh.”

“When you were born, I was eleven,” he pointed out.

“Well, it isn’t as if you’re exactly over-the-hill,” she replied. “And it wouldn’t matter if you were. I don’t mind polishing wheelchairs.”

That took a minute. He chuckled. “I’ll get shot before I end up like that,” he said with some conviction.

She made a face and now she was looking overly thoughtful.

“What?” he asked.

“Dangerous professions,” she replied. He just nodded. “Age and job.”

“Exactly.”

“But we’re going to be just friends, so none of that matters,” he replied coolly. “We can have a day out together while I investigate a suspect. We’ll have fun. And besides, there will be sushi.”

That brought the smile back. He loved the way she looked when she smiled. It made her pretty face even prettier.

“If we leave early, we can get back home before you get sleepy,” he said. “What time do you get off?”

“Seven, but I have to give the report to the day nurses first, and it takes a few minutes to drive home.”

He was thinking. “We could leave at eight. That would give us plenty of time.”

She nodded.

“Wear something warm,” he added. “They’re predicting snow tomorrow.”

She looked crestfallen. “We might not be able to go,” she said.

“Woman, I can drive in three feet of ‘snow and ice,’” he pointed out. “I live in Chicago.”

Her eyes twinkled. “Why, so you do! Okay. I’m game if you are!”

“I’m game, all right.” He checked his watch. “I’m going over to the hospital to see that ex-boyfriend of May Strickland’s. He might give me some answers.”

“He’s on the second floor,” she told him, standing up when he did. “My friend Mary is the charge nurse. I’ll phone and tell her you’re coming.” She sized him up with her eyes. “I’ll make sure she knows you’re off-limits, too.”

His eyebrows lifted. “Look here, kid, I’m not property.”

“Oh, yes, you are,” she teased. She went close, reached up with her arms, and tugged his face down. “Private property, no trespassing ...”

The last word went into his hard mouth as it came down over her lips. She caught her breath at the raw passion in the kiss. He lifted her against him, holding her close, feeling her warm body cling to his. He was sure that he didn’t want to get seriously involved with her. His body had other ideas.

He groaned. “Hospital. Suspect. Interrogation,” he managed.

She didn’t say a word. Her arms tightened around his neck.

It was a long, sweet time before he finally set her back on her feet. He was breathing heavily and his heartbeat had been almost shaking her.

He was irritated, because he thought she was being coy, playing with him. But when he looked down at her, he saw the helpless hunger there, the warm affection that she couldn’t hide. No, he told himself. She wasn’t playing. She was as incapable of stopping what was happening as he was.

“Skates. Denver. Sushi,” he said after a minute. “First thing tomorrow morning.”

She nodded, her heart in her eyes. “I’ll be ready.”

He bent and kissed just the tip of her nose. “Sleep tight.”

She smiled. “You, too,” she whispered.

He turned at the door. “I knew you were trouble the minute I saw you.”

She laughed.

He shook his head and closed the door behind him.

Chapter Five

Billy Turner wasn't happy to have the FBI in his hospital room at all. "I don't have to talk to you without an attorney," he said belligerently.

Tom sat down in the chair beside his bed. "You won't like the way that plays out," he said easily. "I'm interrogating you in reference to a murder investigation. If you need an attorney, I'll begin to see you as a suspect." He smiled.

Billy averted his eyes. "I never killed nobody," he said curtly.

"Then you shouldn't mind answering some questions about your girlfriend."

The man's eyes popped. "About May?" he exclaimed.

Tom nodded. He pulled out the notes application on his cell phone.

"Surely you don't think she killed the girl?" Billy asked shortly.

"I don't know who killed Julie," he said. "But I'm going to find out," he added, and he didn't blink. His dark eyes could look intimidating. They did now. "Whatever it takes."

Billy shifted in the bed and winced. Tom had had a talk with his doctor, who was making rounds on the floor when he came in. Billy had two broken ribs and a crack in his pelvis that would probably require orthopedic surgery. "You were lucky your injuries weren't worse," Tom said. "From all accounts it was a bad fall." He sat back in the chair. "Hasn't your girlfriend been to see you?"

"She's not my girlfriend. Not anymore, anyway," he said, and sounded torn. "She's after bigger game than me. Old Downing's rich, you know, and she thinks if she swans around him he'll marry her. But he won't," he added shortly.

"Are you sure about that?"

Billy looked smug all of a sudden. "I'm real sure."

“How long have you known her?”

“I grew up here in Raven Springs. I met May in a diner in Denver. My dad was well-to-do,” he added. “He had investments and things. When he died, I took May out and bought her some really pretty clothes and a car and some diamonds. She moved down here to be near me, or so she said. I used up all the money,” he said irritably. “So then I had to get odd jobs, just to keep up my dad’s house. May got me on with Mr. Downing, after she went to work for him. I did yard work and such. He didn’t know about May and me, but it didn’t matter. He was crazy over his wife. I felt sorry for him when she died. He lost it. May was going to make a play for him then, but he left to go to his sister’s house and stayed for a month. So much for that great plan of hers,” he muttered.

“She sounds mercenary,” Tom said deliberately.

“She’s worse than that. She’ll do anything for money.” His eyes were haunted for a minute. “My mama raised me to be kind to other people. But I fell hard for May and I forgot my upbringing. Women can make you crazy for them,” he said almost to himself.

“I guess so,” Tom replied.

“So when Mr. Downing came back, I was still doing work for him and May stayed on because she convinced him that he needed a nurse to watch over his blood pressure. I didn’t have any money. May dropped me like a hot rock. But Mr. Downing was rich and she started thinking up ways of getting him to marry her.” He glanced at Tom. “He lives high, and he’s used to being around people with money. May lived in a small town outside Denver in a shack with a father who deserted her and a mother who was always one jump ahead of the law. She doesn’t know how to behave in high society. It’s a way of life. Not something you can just pick up. I tried to tell her that. She won’t listen. She’s off her meds and sure that she can get Mr. Downing to the altar.” His jaw tightened. “She can’t. And if she doesn’t straighten up, she’s going to have more problems than she can deal with.” He glanced at Tom. “I know things about her. Things she doesn’t want other people to know.”

Tom was making notes. He was certain that the man had something on May. He might be blackmailing her. It was even more important now to find out about May's background. He was going to have to do a lot of digging in a short time.

"Was that an accident?" Tom asked abruptly, indicating the young man's leg in traction.

Billy shifted restlessly in the bed. "Sure it was," he said, but he'd hesitated and he wouldn't look Tom in the eye when he said it. "I just fell."

"Well, I hope you get better soon. I may have a follow-up question or two, but that's about all." He even smiled. "Thanks for your help."

"Sure," Billy said, looking relieved. "No problem."

Tom went out into the hall. On his way to the front door, he ran into Annalisa's friend, Mary. She was a tall brunette with black eyes and a pretty face. "If you're not doing anything later, when I get off, I make really good coffee," she said in a coaxing tone.

Tom smiled. "Sorry." And he kept walking. Maybe, he told himself, he was property after all!

* * *

He and Annalisa made an early start. She didn't seem sleep-starved at all. She was bright and happy.

"You're cheerful this morning," he remarked.

She grinned at him. "Mary said you walked right past her out the door last night," she replied.

He chuckled. "I did. She's very pretty," he remarked.

She made a face at him. "Thanks for noticing!"

"Now, now, if I'd been interested, I'd have taken her up on the offer of coffee." He reached for her hand and tangled his fingers with hers. "I thought you said she was your friend."

"Oh, yes. That's why I asked her to flirt with you."

His lips pursed.

She thought about what she'd blurted out and flushed to the roots of her hair.

He started laughing and almost had to pull the car to the side of the road. "Women!" he said.

She was still too embarrassed to say anything.

He pressed her fingers with his. "In all my life, I've never met anyone quite like you."

"That could be a compliment, you know," she said.

"It is a compliment," he replied, his voice deep and soft.

She sighed, smiling now.

She was possessive of him. She'd wanted to know if he was the sort of man who'd pretend interest in one woman and fall into the arms of the next one he met. Which meant, he considered, that she was very interested in him. It was mutual. He thought about going back to Chicago without her and it disturbed him. Amazing that a woman he barely knew could get such a hold on him. He wasn't sure he liked it.

"I'm sorry," she said after they passed through the intersection of a small town along the way where a snowplow was working. "It was a rotten thing to do."

He shrugged. "Pretty flattering, though," he replied, and his dark eyes twinkled as they met hers briefly.

"Really?"

He sighed. "Really. Angie wouldn't have cared if I'd flirted with other women. I found out that she'd been two-timing me with the man she ran off with to New York and married."

"That must have hurt."

"Hurt my pride," he confessed. "Not much else." He watched the road ahead. "I don't think I know much about real relationships."

"And I don't know anything about them."

"So I suppose we're learning together," he commented.

She smiled. “Except that you think you’re too old for me, and I’m worried that you might get shot doing your job.”

He whistled. “We’d better let that lie for a while,” he commented with a glance. “That’s serious business.”

“It is?”

He nodded. “That’s the sort of discussion you have when you can’t bear to think of leaving the other person behind.”

Her heart was doing the hula in her chest. She didn’t dare look at him. She didn’t speak either because she knew her voice would sound choked.

His fingers contracted. “So, for the meantime, you’re a nurse in a local hospital and I’m over here investigating a murder.”

She nodded. “Okay.” Her voice sounded strangled. He was thinking ahead. She wanted nothing more than to consider him part of her future. But he was right. They had to take it slow. For now, at least.

“And there’s Denver,” he said, nodding toward the horizon.

* * *

He settled her in a coffee shop next to a building where he had an appointment with another agent.

“I’d take you with me, but I have to have a clear mind and you’re distracting.”

“I am?” she asked, surprised.

He smiled down at her. “Very. And no flirting with other men,” he added under his breath.

“I heard that,” she said.

He just chuckled.

* * *

By the time he was through speaking to Dan Parsons, the other agent, he had more than enough information on May Strickland. She really did have issues. She’d been under the care of a clinical psychologist her first weeks as a nursing

student because of inappropriate behavior. The file was sealed, and he could have made an issue of it and gotten a warrant, but the information wasn't going anywhere. He could get access to it later if it was needed. What he was interested in was May's inclination to go after rich men when she worked in the nursing home. Dan had been out to do an interview with the owner's wife, Jean, who gave him a lot of information about May's tactics. Jean didn't like May at all. She said May had tried to tell tales, to break up Jean's marriage, to get her husband to divorce Jean and marry her. At least, until May understood, finally, that Jean had all the money and property. Her husband ran the nursing home, but only had a salary from the profits. May had stopped flirting with him that very day.

But there had been a very rich old man whose indifferent children had placed him in the nursing home. By promising to get him out, and playing up to him, May had managed to get some very nice gifts. When she was discovered badgering him for a check, she was invited to ply her trade somewhere else. The old man wouldn't press charges, his children didn't care, so May got away with it. About that time, she met Billy Turner, who was in Denver on an errand for his father. They met at a diner, and they hit it off at once. Billy had money at the time, and his father was very ill, so May followed him back to Raven Springs.

"I can't remember a case like this in recent times," Tom told Dan. "This woman is truly messed up."

"Greedy," came the quiet reply. "Very greedy. And there was some discussion that the old man she was trying to pump money out of had some sudden health issues. There was a suspicion by at least one coworker that May was trying to get him to sign over his estate to her and then she planned an accident. Food poisoning? Something similar?"

"Not playing with a full deck," Tom mused.

"Luckily for us. You'd better have a talk with your Mr. Downing. If he gets involved with her, he may be looking at a similar fate."

"I'll make sure he knows. Thanks for the legwork."

“Any time. But you owe me.” The other man chuckled as they rose to shake hands.

“I won’t forget. See you.”

* * *

Tom picked Annalisa up at the coffee shop and drove to the skating rink. It was in a huge building, with seats for people who just wanted to drink coffee and watch the skaters, and a DJ to call out couple dances and free dances and the like.

“You look very smug,” she told Tom.

He nodded. “I’m armed with some pertinent information.” He smiled at her. “Let’s get our skates on. I could use the exercise. I miss my gym.”

His gym in Chicago, he meant. She smiled and sat down to pull her skates out of her bag and put them on. She’d thought he might reconsider living in a small town. But that was unrealistic, like the hope that he might give up a profession he loved for her. However, she thought, she had today. She was going to live every second of it. It would be something to carry her through lonely cold winter nights for the rest of her life.

They skated, lazily circling the rink, holding hands. It was cold, but they were laughing as they went around and around the huge oval. It was tiring exercise. Annalisa had forgotten how much work it was to skate. By the time she took off her skates and packed them up, and he returned his rentals, they were both rosy cheeked and laughing.

“That was so much fun,” she told him. “I haven’t skated for a long time.”

“It was fun. And now,” he said with twinkling eyes, “for sushi!”

He took her to the little Japanese restaurant he’d found and they ate sushi and drank hot jasmine tea while he talked to her about his life in Chicago.

“It sounds lonely,” she said involuntarily, when he got to the part about what he did on Sundays, which was to lie around

and read the Sunday paper and watch movies on Amazon Prime.

“It is lonely,” he confessed after a minute. His dark eyes lifted to her light ones. “I have no one to talk to. I’m pretty much a loner, even when I’m with the guys at work. They’re talking about kids and baseball games and amusement parks with their families. I’m talking about a case I’m working on.”

“It’s that way with me, too,” she confessed. “I don’t get out much. I like to watch movies or the Weather Channel or the History Channel.”

He smiled. “Another weather geek,” he teased.

“Hey, weather is interesting,” she protested.

He pulled out his smartphone, turned it on, and handed it to her. He had about a dozen weather apps. She laughed with pure delight as she handed it back.

“I should show you mine, I guess. Turnabout’s fair play.” She handed it over. Along with the half dozen weather apps, she had language apps, including Chinese.

“Chinese?” he exclaimed, returning the phone to her.

“It’s a beautiful language,” she protested. “I found this app by accident and then I just sort of fell into doing it every day. I’ve been at it for two years. I don’t think I’ll ever get the tones just right because there are four and they’re very specific, but I can read some of it.”

He laughed. “I speak Russian and German,” he replied.

“Isn’t it a small world?” she asked.

“Small, indeed.” He glanced at his watch and grimaced. “We’d better get back before you fall down and go to sleep,” he said. “You’ve been up all night.”

“I wouldn’t have missed it for the world,” she said, her face coloring faintly.

He drew in a breath. “Honey, neither would I,” he said, his deep voice soft with feeling.

They stared at each other for a long moment. He managed to pull his eyes away. "We'd better get going," he said.

* * *

It was dark when they got back to Raven Springs.

"It was one of the best days of my life," she said when he left her at her door under the carport, leaving his car there as well.

"One of mine, too," he replied. He hesitated. It was uncharacteristic. "I have to go back and talk to Billy Turner tomorrow. But what are you doing after lunch?"

"Not much," she began.

"Do you like to walk?"

She nodded.

"Me, too. Is there a park?"

She laughed. "A nice one, with footpaths. Lots of people walk there, even in snowy weather. And it will have lighted decorations everywhere, for Christmas. I'm going to put my tree up tomorrow night."

"Do you cut one?" he asked.

She grimaced. "I'm allergic to fir. I have an artificial one. It's too big, really, but I get one of the orderlies to come help me set it up ..."

"I'll do that."

She smiled. "Okay." She searched his eyes. "Going to help me decorate it? You're tall enough to put the star on top."

"I guess it won't kill me," he said. He smiled back. "Okay. I'll see you in the morning."

"Have a good night," she said.

"You, too."

She turned to go in.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

She turned back. "Inside ... ?"

“I took you all the way to Denver, took you skating, bought you sushi, and you’re just going to walk away and close the door, shutting me out all by myself alone in the dark? I could get eaten by a bear or something.”

She laughed delightedly. She walked back to him. “What would you like, then?”

“Funny, you should ask ...”

He pulled her close and kissed her. It wasn’t like the hungry, passionate kisses that had come before. It was slow and sweet and tender. The sort of kiss you’d give someone you really cared about. He moved back, and he didn’t smile. He looked down at her quietly. He touched her cheek, then smiled briefly, and walked away.

She watched him all the way to the motel before she turned and went inside.

* * *

He had a list of questions to ask Billy Turner when he stopped by the hospital early the next morning. But he didn’t get to ask a single one.

“He died in the early hours of the morning,” one of the doctors told him.

“Died? But he didn’t have internal injuries, did he?” Tom asked, stunned.

“Not at all. We’re not sure what caused it. Maybe there was something that the surgeon missed.”

“Did he have any visitors after I was here?” Tom persisted.

“Just one. A girlfriend. She brought him some food and tea she said he liked. He seemed really happy to see her, according to the nurse on duty,” the doctor added.

Tea. Tea. He reached back into his mind for a reference and found it. May Strickland had taken Mrs. Downing a cup of ginger tea just before she died, unexpectedly according to Alice. “Do something for me,” Tom replied. “Run a drug panel for poison.”

“Poison?” The doctor was shocked.

Tom nodded. “I’m here investigating a murder. She’s a person of interest. I won’t go into my suspicions, but I think there’s probable cause. I can get a warrant if I need it.”

“That won’t be necessary, Agent Jones,” the doctor said. “We all know what goes on in our community. I’ll get an order to the lab right away.”

“And I’ll go talk to the sheriff,” Tom replied.

“Good idea. Jeff’s a fine man.”

Tom smiled. “Yes, he is. And a good investigator. I’ll be back in touch.”

* * *

Sheriff Ralston invited him into a chair on the other side of his desk. “They’re running a drug panel for poison?” he asked when Tom explained what was going on.

Tom nodded. “May Strickland went to see him last night with food and tea,” he explained. “I’d spoken to Billy shortly before. He was smug about May. He said that he knew things about her that could cause her some problems. If he told me, I’m sure he told her as well. And I remembered something else—Alice, who works for the Downings, told me that May had given a cup of ginger tea to Mrs. Downing just before she died.”

“Poison. Well, frankly, it wouldn’t be much of a surprise. May doesn’t hit on all six cylinders, if you know what I mean, and it’s no secret that she wants Downing to marry her. Lots of local people wondered why Mrs. Downing went downhill so fast. Lung cancer can be treated, even brought under control when it’s in the early stages, as hers was.” He grimaced. “If May poisoned Mrs. Downing, it will take ten men guarding the detention center to keep Downing from going over there and strangling the life out of her.”

“Billy said that she’d hoped to get Mr. Downing to a minister just after his wife died. She planned on comforting him, he said, but Downing went to stay with his sister for a month and ruined all her plans.”

“So then Downing’s wife died, rather advantageously for May, and his stepdaughter was apparently looking for ways to get May fired. That was about the time Julie went missing, right?” Ralston asked.

“Just about. But from what I learned from the crime lab, Julie was a hefty young woman and May is smaller and older.” Tom’s eyes narrowed. “It would take a big man to lift someone that size, if she’d been incapacitated before she was abducted. Remember, there was a report by a man who lived near the deserted cabin where she was found that he saw a man carrying a big rug over his shoulder. What if it wasn’t a rug at all?”

Ralston nodded slowly. “And if it was Julie, what if Billy did the dirty work? May spent all his money. He was jobless and without funds. What if May saw a way to marry Downing and set them both up in style, but Julie was in the way?”

“That’s a lot of supposition,” Tom remarked.

“Yes, but it makes sense. Billy was crazy about May. He’d have done anything she asked him to. He didn’t really have much of a conscience and he’d been in trouble with the law before on an assault charge.”

“I need to talk to May. But I want to wait on Billy’s autopsy first. And I need to call Alice at Downing’s house.”

* * *

Alice was whispering. Apparently May was home and spying on her.

“Yes, I can do that. No, I haven’t done anything with it. She’s too lazy to do it herself. Yes, I’ll do that right now. Of course.”

“Alice, who’s that on the phone?” May called from the next room.

“It’s the dry cleaners, about one of Mr. Downing’s suits,” Alice called back. “Do you know anything about a tear in one of his jackets?”

“Yes, he caught it on a nail outside.”

“Okay, I’ll tell them to go ahead and fix it,” Alice called back.

“That’s fine,” May responded in a bored tone.

“A good story, Alice, but is it true? We don’t want May to get suspicious,” Tom said.

“Yes,” Alice whispered, “I spoke to them half an hour ago, but she won’t know. I’ll keep it for you. Sure thing.” She hung up, excited to be part of an investigation.

* * *

They held hands while they walked. Tom had to slow his pace a little for Annalisa, who only came up to his chin.

“Shrimp,” he teased, but affectionately.

“You’re very tall,” she remarked.

“I’m not. You’re very short,” he replied.

She moved closer to him. “This is nice. I haven’t gone walking in a long time.”

“Neither have I.”

“How’s your investigation coming?” she asked.

“Well. In fact, I may wrap it up in the next few days.”

There was a long silence on her part. She was thinking that he’d solve his case, go back to Chicago, and she’d never see him again. It would be the worst day of her life. The very worst. She hadn’t realized until that moment that she was in love with him.

He stopped walking and turned to her. His dark eyes were puzzled as he looked down into her drawn, pale face. “You don’t want me to go,” he said very quietly.

She took a deep breath. “No. I don’t. But you have a life in Chicago and a job you do that gives you purpose,” she said, her pale eyes meeting his reluctantly. “It’s like my job. We’re both involved in careers that help other people.” She forced a smile. “But I’ll never forget you,” she added with a forced smile.

“I’ll never forget you, either,” he replied. His fingers tangled with hers. “I’m too old for you, and I do a job that requires a gun.” He smiled sadly. “Two different worlds, Annalisa.”

It was the first time he’d spoken her name. She loved the way it sounded in his deep, soft voice. She flushed.

He drew in a long breath of his own and his fingers tightened on hers. “Maybe we should keep walking,” he suggested, when it was the last thing he wanted to do. He wanted to take her back to her house and spend an hour just holding her. Odd, he thought to himself as they walked. All his life it had been a strictly physical thing, with women. But this woman made him hungry for more than just physical contact. Sex with her would be all fireworks, he knew that already. And it would be a commitment that he couldn’t push to one side and forget about. He thought about Annalisa with a baby in her arms, and he went hot all over. He wondered which one of them it would look like. His dark eyes glanced to one side and studied her unobtrusively. She was pretty. Her child might be blond, like her, with his dark eyes. Or dark-headed, like him, with her pale silver eyes.

He recalled that she loved children. He smiled to himself. Maybe a family wouldn’t be the terror he’d once thought.

* * *

They went back to her house after the brisk walk and after answering a phone call, which he did by going outside when he saw the caller ID, he helped her assemble the tall artificial tree. He set it up in the living room while she turned on the gas logs in the fireplace and put on Christmas music on one of the satellite stations on her television.

“Just to help get you in the Christmas spirit,” she teased, smiling up at him. She was wearing a cream-colored turtleneck sweater with her jeans, and her feet were clad only in fuzzy blue socks. He was wearing a sweater, too, a V-necked red one with a white shirt under it and brown slacks.

“You look nice,” he commented to her as he placed the angel ornament on the very top of the tree.

She laughed. "So do you." She glanced at him. "But you're ... I don't know. Subdued?"

"They found Billy Turner dead in his hospital bed this morning."

"Billy? How? Were his injuries that bad?" she wanted to know.

He smiled. "They'll all know at the hospital, so it's no secret. I think he was poisoned. They're running a panel to ..."

His cell phone rang. He'd given the number to the doctor who was on Billy's case. "Jones," he said. He nodded. "Yes, that's what I suspected. I'll pick it up myself and notify the appropriate people. Thanks." He hung up, smiling. "Poison. Just what I suspected."

"Poison? In a hospital?" Annalisa exclaimed. "In my hospital?"

He nodded. "And that takes a disturbed person, let me tell you. I think Billy knew something that another person was afraid he might spill to someone."

"Like, for instance, who killed Julie?" she asked.

"Exactly."

"You think May did it," she murmured.

"I think May was the mastermind behind the kidnapping," he replied. "And that's privileged communication."

She just smiled. "You know me," she said simply.

He paused with an ornament in his big hand and stood just staring at her until she flushed under the intensity of his gaze. "I do know you," he said, very softly. He put the ornament on a tree branch, turned and picked her up in his arms. "I know you to your very bones. And it's going to be like pulling teeth to go home."

Her arms slid around his neck and she forced a smile. "But you can't live in the wilds of Colorado," she said on a sigh. "I remember."

“I might get eaten by bears,” he murmured as he bent to her mouth. He smiled as it met his halfway. She clung to him, drowning in a kiss that seemed to go on forever. She kissed him back, her fingers tangling in his thick, black hair.

A romantic Christmas song was playing on the radio. It suited his mood. He wondered how he was going to do his job with her on his mind all the time, because there was no way he'd ever be able to forget her.

He groaned against her soft lips and raised his head. “No,” he said huskily, and put her down. “We have to stop doing that.”

“Because you don't like it?” she asked sadly.

“Because I like it too much,” he bit off. His eyes swept over her trim figure as the music played on, and he could almost picture her with a big swollen stomach, craving ice cream and pickles. He thought of a child. He hadn't ever wanted one before. He wanted one now.

But she was eleven years younger than he was, and he lived in Chicago and he carried a gun.

His heavy brows drew together as he looked at her, his brain whirling with impossibilities.

“What are you thinking?” she asked.

“How you'd look pregnant,” he said, and then scowled fiercely at his lapse of common sense. “It was just a stray thought,” he added curtly.

But it wasn't. She could see it in his face. He wasn't thinking about a one-night stand. He was thinking about forever.

She could have danced, she was so happy. But she couldn't let it show. He was already regretting the unexpected honesty. Better to pretend it didn't matter.

“All of us have those,” she said, and she smiled. “Now, how about let's finish this up. I made potato soup and fresh bread for supper.”

“I haven’t had potato soup in years,” he said, and he smiled. “It’s a favorite of mine.”

“I make it with real butter. It was my mother’s recipe.” She studied him hungrily. He was so handsome. She could hardly drag her eyes away. “Here. This is the last of them,” she said as she brought out three Star Trek ornaments. One had the sound and light of the transporter from the old series, and the other had the *Enterprise* complete with Kirk’s voice with the monologue that began every episode. The last one was the instrument that Dr. McCoy used when examining a patient—the same one Spock used when he surveyed a new organism. It had their voices on it.

“That’s amazing,” Tom said with a laugh. “It’s one of my favorite retro shows.”

“Mine, too. I love ornaments with light and sound. Oh, and then there’s this one. It’s not Star Trek, but it is outer-spacy.”

“Outer-spacy,” he repeated, chuckling, as she handed him Robbie the Robot and pressed the button on its side. Robbie’s voice came from it, loud and clear.

“I love this one,” he said, hanging it. “I’ve got the DVD somewhere. *Forbidden Planet*.”

“I have it on Amazon Prime,” she said.

“Damn!” he said, looking at his watch. “Honey, I’ve got to go pick up something. I’ve only got a small window of time to do it. I’ll be back as soon as I can. Will the soup keep?”

Her heart lifted at the endearment. It sounded so natural. “Of course it will,” she said softly. “Be careful.”

He bent and kissed her gently. “I’m always careful.”

He grabbed his jacket and went out the door. She turned back to the ornaments and pressed the Star Trek transporter one. It made her feel better.

Chapter Six

Tom had asked Alice to phone him when Downing and May were both out of the house. This was ideal, as she had something for him.

She handed him a paper sack at the front door. "If they ever find out ..." she began worriedly.

He just smiled. "You're a princess, Alice. What would I do without you?" he asked gently.

She laughed. "Well, if I'm out of a job, it's going to be your task to find me a new one," she teased.

"I'll take that under advisement. You're certain that nobody's touched this except you and May?"

She nodded. "Positive." She sighed. "Is it evidence? I mean, is it going to be tainted because you don't have a search warrant?" she worried.

He pulled a paper out of his pocket and handed it to her. It was a search warrant for a brown-and-white thermos known to belong to May Strickland. "Wow," she said, looking up admiringly as she handed it back.

He chuckled. "I try to cover all my bases. If this pans out the way I expect, I'll be back with a search warrant covering a lot more territory."

"You might want to check May's closet," she mused. "She never washes anything, and she never brought me any laundry. See, she went out the day Julie disappeared." Her face set into hard lines. "I loved Julie."

"I'll catch her killer," he told her, and his expression emphasized it. "Thanks."

"Glad to be of help. Should I tell Mr. Downing and May about the thermos ... ?"

"Oh, please do," he replied. "But not until tomorrow. Do something that keeps you busy enough that you won't think of it."

“I’ll do that, too.” She smiled at him. “I’ll bet crooks run from you.”

“Some have,” he confessed. “Good night.”

She nodded and went quickly back inside. Tom took the thermos by the sheriff’s office to enter it into evidence, and asked the sheriff to relay it to the lab and then meet him at the county line to take it to the crime lab in Denver. He put as much a rush on it as he could. The culprit, he explained to Jeff Ralston, might decide to take a powder.

It was very late by the time he got through with his duties. He stopped by Annalisa’s house on the off chance that she might still be up, and saw that the porch light was on and the Christmas tree he’d helped decorate was in the picture window facing the road.

He tapped on the door. She came running in her sock feet and opened it at once. “You’re all right,” she said, breathless and relieved and unable to hide it.

He felt his heart jolt in his chest. “You were worried about me,” he said, as if he could barely believe it.

“Of course I was worried,” she said, fighting tears. “You said you’d be right back!”

He pulled her against him and held her tight, rocking her, his face buried in the thick, soft blond hair curling around her shoulders.

“My God,” he whispered reverently, and with feeling. “Nobody ever worried about me. My parents never expressed any emotion at all toward me and my sister. We were just responsibilities and tax deductions. It didn’t matter to Angie if I came home, because she was either away on business or, and I didn’t know it at the time, out with another man.”

“Well, I care,” she muttered against his sweater, and he felt the moisture of tears. “You could have phoned,” she added, hitting his broad chest with a small fist.

He drew back enough to see her face. Her eyes were red and swollen, her lips trembling. He wiped away the tears. He

kissed her eyes shut and hugged her close. "I'm sorry. It just never occurred to me."

"Was it the case you're working on?"

"It was. Crucial evidence. I had to pick it up and then I had to have it relayed to Denver, to the crime lab. Unusual circumstances, but I don't want my suspect to go missing."

She smiled through the tears. "I'm sorry ..."

"Sorry for caring about me?" he chided. "Shame on you." He smiled. "I like it. Although I don't like upsetting you." He bent and kissed her soft mouth with breathless tenderness. "Am I too late for soup? I'm starving."

Her heart lifted. She laughed. "No. I'll heat it up."

He followed her into the kitchen with its cheerful yellow curtains and red Christmas accents. "The tree looks good."

"Yes, it does. I love Christmas. It's how I get through hard times. I think ahead to holly and bows and lanterns and trees lit up like jewels in the night."

She was like a jewel herself, he thought. Bright and lovely and sparkling. He thought about leaving her as the case wound up, and it was actually painful. He couldn't get past the obstacles: his age and her distaste for his job. They seemed insurmountable. But they had these few days, he thought with quiet joy. They'd have to last him the rest of his life, so he wasn't leaving any tarnished ones behind. He wanted her passionately. But he wasn't going to compromise her. No protection was foolproof. Hell, he didn't want any protection. He wanted babies, and logs burning in the fireplace, and Annalisa waiting for him when he came in the door at night, running to him because she ...

He stopped in his tracks, staring at her back as she stirred the soup in its red boiler. She loved him. Why else would she be in tears at the thought that something had happened to him? Then he realized something else. He was feeling the same thing. He was protective of her. How had this happened, in just a space of days, when he'd almost had to be dragged to Raven Springs to work the case? And now he didn't want to leave,

because of Annalisa. Because she loved him, and he wanted to be loved.

“It’s ready,” she said, smiling over one shoulder as she poured the soup into a bowl, produced crackers on a saucer, and put it on the table. “Coffee, or something stronger?” she asked.

He chuckled. “I don’t drink very often. Mostly a glass of white wine, if I have to go to some social venue. I like coffee, even this late.”

“I made some, just in case,” she said.

He sat down, caught her hand, and pulled her down into his lap. He studied her for so long and so intently that she flushed.

“I have to leave when I finish this case,” he said through his teeth.

Her eyes were full of the sadness she felt. “Yes. I know.”

“I’m too old for you, honey. And I don’t think I could give up the work I do.”

“I know all that,” she replied. She touched his wide, chiseled mouth with her fingertips. “I’m making memories to live on. That’s all.” She had to stop, because she choked up.

He drew her face into his neck and hugged her close. “Yeah. Me, too,” he whispered at her ear. “Sweet memories. And that’s how they’re going to stay.” He pulled back and met her watery eyes with his dark ones. “Innocent. Like you.”

She forced a smile. “Sorry.”

“What for?” he teased, and he kissed her nose.

“I don’t want to embarrass you or anything.”

“I’m never embarrassed. I’ll miss you,” he added quietly. “It will be hard, for both of us, for a few weeks. But we’ll adjust.”

“We will,” she said. “We both have important jobs.” She got up reluctantly. “Your soup will get cold.”

He smiled. “Okay.” He tasted it. “Wow,” he said, glancing at her. “It’s awesome.”

She smiled back, from ear to ear. “Mama’s recipe. She was a wonderful cook.”

“So are you, baby,” he said softly.

She flushed again, at the endearment. “I’ll just get the coffee,” she blurted out, anxious to find something to do that wouldn’t call attention to her embarrassment. She didn’t want him to feel sorry for her because he was leaving. But it broke her heart. He might get over it in a few weeks. She knew that she never would.

He finished his soup, kissed her gently, and forced himself to go back to the motel. He really wanted to stay. He was being woven into the fabric of her life and he loved it. But there were just too many obstacles.

* * *

The next morning, thanks to a phone call from an acquaintance of his who was high up in politics, and who had pulled a few strings for him, Tom had the results of the thermos test. There was, indeed, poison in the tea May had taken to Billy Turner. He had concrete evidence that she’d killed the man, and he called in Jeff Ralston and a deputy to accompany him to the Downing home.

Alice opened the door, smiled, and ushered them in.

“I need to see May,” Tom told her.

“She’s in the living room trying to talk Mr. Downing into buying her a new couture dress,” she said, tongue-in-cheek.

“Oh, I’m going to make sure she has a nice new orange jumpsuit, the latest in fashion,” he returned. He walked on into the living room.

Downing was glaring at May. “... not about to spend that amount of money on—” he was saying. He stopped when he saw the delegation enter the room. “Hello,” he said, rising. “Can I help you?”

“We’re here for Miss Strickland,” Tom said. “She’s a material witness in a murder and kidnapping investigation.”

The deputy turned May around, handcuffed her neatly, and turned her back again.

“I didn’t kill Julie!” she exclaimed red-faced. “It was Billy Turner!”

Tom glanced around. Plenty of witnesses to that statement, including Alice. “But you helped him, Miss Strickland,” he replied, holding back his ace card.

“I just ... just ...” She stopped. She looked at Tom with cold eyes. “That’s not what you’re arresting me for,” she said suddenly.

“No, it isn’t,” Tom replied. “I’m arresting you for the murder of Billy Turner.”

She started to speak and then just slumped. “He ran out of money, and then he tried to blackmail me about Julie. We never meant to kill her,” she added curtly. “We left her in that cabin with the heat on. We couldn’t know there would be a power failure when we tied her up. She was supposed to be alive. We wore disguises. She didn’t even recognize us!”

That did make the case a little less brutal. Intent was everything. “Your guilt or innocence is something for a jury to decide. You were party to a kidnapping and murder, and you poisoned your ex-boyfriend,” Tom added. “I’m sorry to tell you that you’re under arrest. The deputy will read you your rights.”

While the deputy did that, Tom spoke to a distraught Downing. He didn’t mention his suspicion that she might have poisoned his wife as well. That would be another case if and when the district attorney decided to prosecute it.

“It helps a little that they didn’t mean to kill Julie,” Downing said curtly, “but I can’t forget the way she looked. Frozen to death. Poor thing. It was heartless.”

Tom nodded.

“I never liked May. She convinced me that Julie wasn’t doing what was needed for my wife. I loved my wife,” he added with grief in his very posture. “After she ... passed, nothing much mattered anymore. I should have paid more

attention to what was going on. I knew Julie didn't like May and that it was mutual. May said my blood pressure was very high and needed careful monitoring." He grimaced. "Maybe I just liked being fussed over. I missed my wife. She was always watching out for me, taking care of me until, at the end, I took care of her. Now Julie's gone, too." He sighed and looked at Tom. "Sometimes, life is so damned unbearable."

Tom was thinking that, too. He'd be leaving soon, but his heart would live on in Raven Springs, in Annalisa Davis's house.

* * *

May was taken to the detention center, unprotestingly and morose, then booked. Tom contacted his superiors to let them know what was going on. He left the sheriff's office, and drove back to the motel and parked his car under Annalisa's carport and tapped on the door.

She came running, her face brilliant with delight. His heart felt lighter than air. That expression on her face made him feel like a giant. He smiled and held out his arms. She ran into them. He hugged her close for a minute, then he tightened his grip, as if to prepare her for what was coming.

"I solved the case and made an arrest," he told her.

He felt her whole body stiffen, as if she'd taken a blow. "Oh," she said, putting all her misery into the one word.

He drew back and winced when he saw her eyes.

"Who did it?" she wanted to know.

"Billy Turner, with some help from May. She poisoned him, right in his bed in the hospital, with some tea in a thermos."

"Gosh! Didn't she have sense enough to clean it up?"

"Not really."

"But if you got it from the house ..."

"I took a search warrant with me, and Alice handed it to me in a paper sack. Criminals always make one stupid decision. Her own laziness was her downfall. She didn't like to get her

hands dirty, which is why Julie was doing most of the nursing while her mother was alive. It's also why the thermos wasn't washed, which gave us a great case. That's where I was when I came over here late, after we decorated the tree," he explained. "I had to take the thermos to Sheriff Ralston and he had it relayed to Denver. We had the results from the crime lab very promptly."

"How did you manage that?" she wanted to know.

"Somebody pulled a few political strings," he said with a grin.

"Want some coffee?" she asked.

He drew in a long breath and put his big, warm hands on her shoulders. "I do. But I won't stay. I'm leaving town in the morning, Annalisa. I have to get back to work."

She stood very still and schooled her face to lie for her, to look placid. "I knew you would," was all she said. She searched his dark eyes. "You really are gorgeous, you know," she said, trying to make a joke of it.

"And you really could be a pole dancer," he teased. "But I'm very glad you aren't. I'm happy that I got to meet you."

"Oh, I could say the same thing."

He traced a path down her cheek and his dark eyes were sad. He sighed.

"If only," she said, trying not to choke on her grief.

He nodded. "If only, honey."

He bent and kissed her, just once, barely touching her lips with his. "We have memories," he whispered.

She laughed, but it sounded more like a sob. "Sweet ones."

"See you around, Nurse Davis."

"See you around, Chicago," she replied pertly. She smiled as he went out the door and closed it behind him. She locked it and turned off the porch light and went to bed. She cried for the better part of an hour. Life was never going to be the same again.

* * *

The next morning, Tom paid the motel bill and went out to put his bag in his car, still parked under Annalisa's carport.

She saw him and came to the door. "You leaving?" she asked quietly.

"Yeah." He put the bag in the car and came around it to her back door. He studied her sad face. "Why don't you come and see me off?" he asked, hating the words even as they came out of his throat. It would be agony for both of them, but leaving her at her own door was even worse.

"I'll drive my car."

"Cabs run out there." He tucked a twenty dollar bill in her coat pocket. "Get a cab home."

She bit her lower lip. "Tom, I'm not sure ..."

He caught her hand and led her to the car, opening the door and helping her into the front seat. She didn't even argue. She just fastened her seat belt.

* * *

The airport was crowded. It was almost Christmas. So many people traveling to see families, to spend holidays abroad, to visit loved ones. The airport at Raven Springs was decorated in red and green and gold, with holly and wreaths everywhere and a huge Christmas tree in the center of the lobby.

"It looks like Christmas," he remarked to Annalisa after he checked his bag and the clerk gave him a paper ticket to replace the e-ticket he'd gotten online.

"Yes. Christmas." She looked up at him with grief. "You be careful," she said huskily. "Chicago has a lot of crime."

"I noticed." He bent and brushed his mouth against hers. But it wasn't enough. He knew in his heart that once would never be enough.

He pulled her against him and kissed her as if he was going to war and was uncertain that he would ever return. He kissed her like a starving man. She kissed him back, her eyes pouring

tears, her body straining to hold the contact even when he drew slowly away and looked at her as if she was the world, the whole world.

The loudspeaker was announcing the Chicago flight. He grimaced. "I have to go, honey," he said gruffly.

"You could call me sometimes," she said. "Send me messages and stuff."

"It would be like rubbing salt in a wound."

She acknowledged that with a tiny shrug.

He took a deep breath. "So long."

Her heart was in her eyes. But she wasn't going to make it harder for him. She forced a smile. "So long, Tom."

He turned and walked away. She watched his broad back with eyes that loved him, hungered for him, would have died for him. Her life would never be the same. She'd come home every day of her life from work and expect to see his car sitting in the carport. Except that it never would be. Never!

* * *

Tom was halfway down his way to the concourse. He could do this, he told himself. He could walk away. He'd go back to his job. Nothing would change. She was a sweet interlude. Nothing more. He'd forget her.

He remembered that first meeting, when he'd told her she worked as a pole dancer. He remembered their first kiss, the way she cuddled with him, accepted anything he wanted to do to her, nurtured him. Hot soup at midnight. No real recriminations, except that she'd been afraid for him when he said he'd be right back, and he wasn't, and she was frightened something had happened to him. She'd run to him, her face covered in tears, the fear tangible as she held him to her and shivered with feeling.

She loved him. Nobody in his whole damned life had ever loved him. He was walking away from a home and a family and a wife who'd be waiting for him, forever if she needed to.

He was walking away from children playing around the Christmas tree every year. He was walking away from love.

He stopped dead. His feet felt as if he were wearing steel boots. He couldn't force himself to take one more step. This was insane. It would never work. There were too many years between them. He couldn't stop being a cop. He couldn't give up the risk, the excitement.

He turned and looked back. She was still standing there, her long blond hair falling around her hunched shoulders, her face as tragic as if she'd just seen an accident with fatalities.

She looked up then, and saw him just standing there, just looking at her.

All at once, he knew he couldn't do it. No power on earth could get him on the plane. His heart was here. His life was here. He ... loved her.

His face mirrored his own misery. He looked at her for a long moment and then he opened his arms.

Oblivious to other passengers, to amused glances, to anything else, she ran right into those open arms and was lifted up and kissed and kissed and kissed until her mouth was sore, and then she was kissed some more.

"I love you," she sobbed against his demanding lips.

"I know," he ground out. "I love you, too."

The tears flowed down around their locked mouths as he rocked her in his arms. After a few feverish minutes, he managed to let go enough to step back from her. The joy he saw in her face made the years go away, made the threat of his job go away, made everything right.

They gave the last call for Chicago. "You'll miss your flight," she said huskily and tried to smile.

"I'm not leaving," he replied, and he wasn't smiling. "I'm never leaving. I want Christmas around the fireplace, with our kids opening presents under it."

"Kids?" she whispered.

He grinned. “Kids.”

“I love kids,” she confessed.

He drew in a long breath and smiled down at her with a light in his dark eyes that had never been there before. “How long does it take to get married in the wilds of Colorado?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Not long.”

“I’ll move back into the motel for the time being. Do you want to be married in church?”

She nodded. She hesitated. “I’m Methodist.”

His eyes widened and he laughed. “So am I.”

“Well!”

“Talk about being evenly matched,” he murmured.

She glanced toward the window. “There goes your plane,” she observed. “And your suitcase.”

“So I’ll buy new clothes. I need to, anyway. I need a spiffy suit to get married in. And you have to have something with a veil.”

“There won’t be time to organize something big ...”

“A white suit and a hat with a veil. I’ll go shopping with you. We’ll find something.”

She beamed. “Okay.”

He rubbed his nose against hers. “What’s for lunch?” he asked.

“Cold cuts.” She grimaced at his expression. “Well, I thought you were leaving!”

“Well, I’m back now, and I’ll help you cook.”

She doubted that. The look in his eyes promised a lot of interruptions in the kitchen. But she didn’t mind at all. “That sounds nice,” she said.

“We can buy each other matching cane fishing poles for a Christmas present,” he suggested on the way out to the parking

lot. "But we may have to wait for the spring thaw to use them."

"By then, I might not be able to sit on a creek bank for long," she said with demurely downcast eyes.

"Why not?"

She sighed, smiling up at him. "I'd be willing to bet that by our nice spring thaw, I'm going to look like a basketball in front."

"Oooh," he remarked dryly. "I love women who look like basketballs in front!"

She stopped by his car and kissed him softly. "I'll do my best to cooperate."

He gave her a wicked grin. "I'm counting on it. After the ceremony," he added with a chuckle.

"Really?"

"Really. We're going to go the conventional route."

"But we haven't. You didn't propose ..."

He was down on one knee in the snow, holding her hand to his lips. "Please say you'll marry me so I won't be frozen to the ground here."

She burst out laughing. He was going to be so much fun to be married to! "I will, I will!" she promised. "Please get up before you catch a cold!"

"You wanted conventional, honey."

"So I did." She beamed up at him.

* * *

They were married and they returned to her house, in a wild and feverish sprawl that almost landed them on the floor and did result in a slight tear in Annalisa's nice wedding suit as they struggled out of too-tight clothing in her bedroom.

"I was worried, that it might hurt," she tried to explain, but she was in such a rage of hunger that she didn't think she

could even feel pain as his mouth went all over her, tracing and touching and nibbling.

“Oh, it won’t hurt,” he promised huskily. “And even if it did, you wouldn’t notice or care by the time we get that far!”

He touched her in places and ways that she’d never dreamed of being touched, and his mouth followed his hands. But by the time he eased over her, and into her, she was pulling at him with both hands and almost begging for more than hot kisses and even more intimate ways of touching.

“Impatient, that’s what you are,” he accused, chuckling, but he was shivering with his own need. He went into her with one stark push and she gasped and looked into his eyes as she shuddered with pleasure. Her eyes were blank with it, her breathing quick and rough. Sounds came out of her throat that didn’t sound human as he took her quickly up the ladder of pleasure right into the highest clouds. It was so intense that she wept, sobbing against his mouth as she shivered and shivered in completion. His pleasure came more slowly, but he grasped the pillow on both sides of her head and groaned harshly as it lifted him over her in an agonized arch. He opened his eyes and saw her watching him and his teeth clenched as the desire ratcheted up another whole degree and he actually cried out as he convulsed with the most intense physical fulfillment he’d ever had in his life.

She lay under him afterwards, holding him, feeling the weight of his heavy, damp body.

“No,” she protested when he started to lift away. “Please don’t. I like to feel your weight on me. I like to feel you ... in me,” she whispered huskily.

He shuddered and she felt him swell. He lifted his head and looked down into her surprised face. He moved, very slowly, and she gasped. She was so sensitized that it only took three lazy thrusts to put her right back up where she’d been, shuddering with delight as her own body convulsed.

He brushed his mouth over hers and suddenly brought it down hard as he pushed and pushed, swelling even more in the soft silkiness of her, his big body shivering, as hers had, when

he let go and felt the ecstasy take him. He groaned as if he were being tortured. The pleasure was so intense that it was almost pain. He groaned again as he reached a new high and finally collapsed again on her sated body.

She wrapped herself around him, kissing his throat, his cheek, his jaw. "I love you so much," she choked. "I thought I'd die when you walked away, at the airport."

"I thought I would, too," he confessed. He rolled over, taking her with him. They were both covered in cold sweat, faintly shivering together in the aftermath.

"I've never felt anything like this, ever," he managed.

"Neither have I," she murmured, her face nuzzling his.

"Yes, but you were a virgin." He chuckled.

She hit him.

"It was before I met you," he reminded her. "There hasn't been anybody in a long time. And there will never be anybody again."

"Women talk, you know," she mused. "Most of them said it hurt, the first time."

He laughed softly. "You were so hungry for me that you didn't notice it, you mean," he replied. "I never dreamed that two people could give each other so much pleasure."

She sighed and smiled. "Neither did I."

"Women are supposed to know," he said after a minute, and one big, warm hand covered her belly. "Are you, do you think? Because a loving that beautiful should produce a child, if there's any justice in the world."

She sighed. "I wish I did know," she replied. "But if we keep doing this, eventually we'll both know. So," she added, lifting up to look down at his handsome face, "we should do it a lot."

He chuckled. "I'm not protesting."

"Still think I'm too young?" she asked smugly.

“Not me, baby,” he replied and let out a sigh of pure contentment. He smiled. “You’re just right.”

She snuggled closer and closed her eyes.

* * *

It was snowing, three Christmases later. Tom was holding their three-year old son, Matt, while Annalisa cuddled the baby, Tessa, only two months old. They were sitting around the brilliantly lit Christmas tree with its ornaments, two of which said Baby’s First Christmas. The artificial gas logs in the fireplace were ablaze behind the iron fire screen, and there was Christmas music playing softly in the background.

Annalisa was still holding down her nursing job, and Tom was in his third year as a bank security officer. The bank president had welcomed him with open arms as chief of security for the bank. His background in law enforcement had made him the perfect choice, and coincidentally the former security chief had just quit to take a job in another city. Tom turned out to be great at cyber crime and even catching people who planned to cheat the bank. He was responsible for the firing of one loan officer who’d embezzled thousands of dollars without raising a grain of suspicion. The bank president gave him a raise that very day.

It was a long way from the hectic life Tom had lived in the FBI. But the new job was satisfying. He was still catching crooks; just in a different way. He missed the Bureau once in a while but not enough to want to go back and join up. He was forty years old and it was time for a less dangerous job. Especially now that they had kids.

“My daddy was in the FBI,” Matt said importantly, having found a picture of Tom showing off his badge when he’d resigned.

The child was fascinated with the picture. He looked up at his father, whose lap he was occupying. “Daddy, can you tell me a story about the FBI?” he asked, looking up at Tom with his own dark eyes. Matt favored his dad. The second son, Garrett, who was asleep in his playpen, favored them both. The new baby girl favored Annalisa. Tom loved it that his

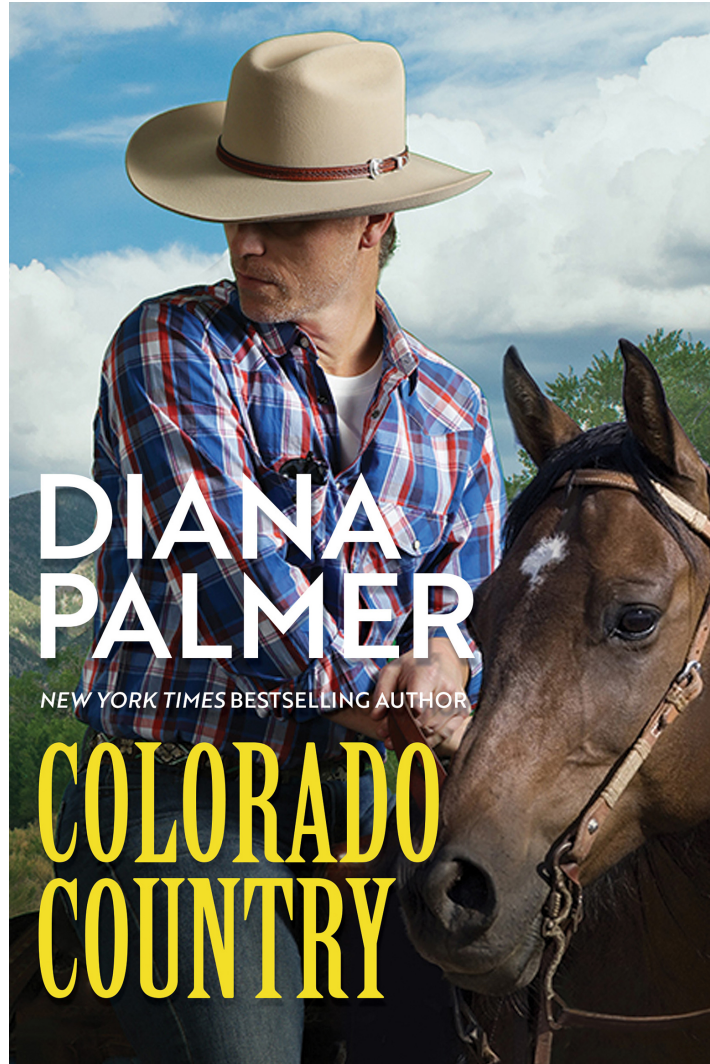
eldest son looked just like him. But it was a delight to him that they not only had two sons, but that they'd lucked out finally and had a girl who looked like his precious wife.

"Can I tell you a story about the FBI? Hmmm." He shifted the child, gave his wife a slow smile with eyes that showed that he loved her. "Yes, I can." He looked down at the child. "There once was a lawman ..."

Annalisa listened to his deep, soft voice as he told the little boy the story of how he'd come from Chicago to live in Raven Springs. After five years, he was still amazed at how well he fit in here, and how happy he was.

Annalisa studied him with eyes that adored him. Not so long ago, she'd watched him start to get on an airplane and felt that her life was over. Now, here he was, in her house, with their children, content to be a husband and a father and not minding a job at the local bank. It seemed like a miracle. Well, she told herself, Christmas was the time for miracles.

Her eyes went from the beautiful tree with its decorations, to her husband with his son on his lap and then to the little girl suckling at her breast in the easy chair. She sighed with happiness. Her gaze went back to Tom, who was looking at her with that warm, tender smile that still made her insides dance. And they said dreams didn't come true. She smiled back at Tom with her whole heart. There was her dream, big and tall and gorgeous, telling their son a story. Tom glanced at her from across the room. She had the oddest feeling that he knew exactly what she was thinking. Because he looked at her and smiled and winked. And she laughed, with pure, sweet, joy.



Turn the page for a sneak peek at *Colorado Country* by
Diana Palmer!

Chapter 1

Meadow Dawson just stared at the slim, older cowboy who was standing on her front porch with his hat held against his chest. His name was Ted. He was her father's ranch foreman. And he was speaking Greek, she decided, or perhaps some form of archaic language that she couldn't understand.

"The culls," he persisted. "Mr. Jake wanted us to go ahead and ship them out to that rancher we bought the replacement heifers from."

She blinked. She knew three stances that she could use to shoot a .40 caliber Glock from. She was experienced in interrogation techniques. She'd once participated in a drug raid with other agents from the St. Louis, Missouri, office where she'd been stationed during her brief tenure with the FBI as a special agent.

Sadly, none of those experiences had taught her what a cull was, or what to do with it. She pushed back her long, golden blond hair, and her pale green eyes narrowed on his elderly face.

She blinked. "Are culls some form of wildlife?" she asked blankly.

The cowboy doubled up laughing.

She grimaced. Her father and mother had divorced when she was six. She'd gone to live with her mother in Greenwood, Mississippi, while her father stayed here on this enormous Colorado ranch, just outside Glenwood Springs. Later, she'd spent some holidays with her dad, but only after she was in her senior year of high school and she could out-argue her bitter mother, who hated her ex-husband. What she remembered about cattle was that they were loud and dusty. She really hadn't paid much attention to the cattle on the ranch or her father's infrequent references to ranching problems. She hadn't been there often enough to learn the ropes.

"I worked for the FBI," she said with faint belligerence. "I don't know anything about cattle."

He straightened up. “Sorry, ma’am,” he said, still fighting laughter. “Culls are cows that didn’t drop calves this spring. Nonproductive cattle are removed from the herd, or culled. We sell them either as beef or surrogate mothers for purebred cattle.”

She nodded and tried to look intelligent. “I see.” She hesitated. “So we’re punishing poor female cattle for not being able to have calves repeatedly over a period of years.”

The cowboy’s face hardened. “Ma’am, can I give you some friendly advice about ranch management?”

She shrugged. “Okay.”

“I think you’d be doing yourself a favor if you sold this ranch,” he said bluntly. “It’s hard to make a living at ranching, even if you’ve done it for years. It would be a sin and a shame to let all your father’s hard work go to pot. Begging your pardon, ma’am,” he added respectfully. “Dal Blake was friends with your father, and he owns the biggest ranch around Raven Springs. Might be worthwhile to talk to him.”

Meadow managed a smile through homicidal rage. “Dariell Blake and I don’t speak,” she informed him.

“Ma’am?” The cowboy sounded surprised.

“He told my father that I’d turned into a manly woman who probably didn’t even have ...” She bit down hard on the word she couldn’t bring herself to voice. “Anyway,” she added tersely, “he can keep his outdated opinions to himself.”

The cowboy grimaced. “Sorry.”

“Not your fault,” she said, and managed a smile. “Thanks for the advice, though. I think I’ll go online and watch a few YouTube videos on cattle management. I might call one of those men, or women, for advice.”

The cowboy opened his mouth to speak, thought about how scarce jobs were, and closed it again. “Whatever you say, ma’am.” He put his hat back on. “I’ll just get back to work. It’s, uh, okay to ship out the culls?”

“Of course it’s all right,” she said, frowning. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

“You said it oppressed the cows ...”

She rolled her eyes. “I was kidding!”

“Oh.” Ted brightened a little. He tilted his hat respectfully and went away.

Meadow went back into the house and felt empty. She and her father had been close. He loved his ranch and his daughter. Getting to know her as an adult had been great fun for both of them. Her mother had kept the tension going as long as she lived. She never would believe that Meadow could love her and her ex-husband equally. But Meadow did. They were both wonderful people. They just couldn’t live together without arguing.

She ran her fingers over the back of the cane-bottomed rocking chair where her father always sat, near the big stone fireplace. It was November, and Colorado was cold. Heavy snow was already falling. Meadow remembered Colorado winters from her childhood, before her parents divorced. It was going to be difficult to manage payroll, much less all the little added extras she’d need, like food and electricity ...

She shook herself mentally. She’d manage, somehow. And she’d do it without Dariell Blake’s help. She could only imagine the smug, self-righteous expression that would come into those chiseled features if she asked him to teach her cattle ranching. She’d rather starve. Well, not really.

She considered her options, and there weren’t many. Her father owned this ranch outright. He owed for farm equipment, like combines to harvest grain crops and tractors to help with planting. He owed for feed and branding supplies and things like that. But the land was hers now, free and clear. There was a lot of land. It was worth millions.

She could have sold it and started over. But he’d made her promise not to. He’d known her very well by then. She never made a promise she didn’t keep. Her own sense of ethics

locked her into a position she hated. She didn't know anything about ranching!

Her father mentioned Dariell, whom everyone locally called Dal, all the time. Fine young man, he commented. Full of pepper, good disposition, loves animals.

The loving animals part was becoming a problem. She had a beautiful white Siberian husky, a rescue, with just a hint of red-tipped fur in her ears and tail. She was named Snow, and Meadow had fought the authorities to keep her in her small apartment. She was immaculate, and Meadow brushed her and bathed her faithfully. Finally the apartment manager had given in, reluctantly, after Meadow offered a sizeable deposit for the apartment, which was close to her work. She made friends with a lab tech in the next-door apartment, who kept Snow when Meadow had to travel for work. It was a nice arrangement, except that the lab tech really liked Meadow, who didn't return the admiration. While kind and sweet, the tech did absolutely nothing for Meadow physically or emotionally.

She wondered sometimes if she was really cold. Men were nice. She dated. She'd even indulged in light petting with one of them. But she didn't feel the sense of need that made women marry and settle and have kids with a man. Most of the ones she'd dated were career oriented and didn't want marriage in the first place. Meadow's mother had been devout. Meadow grew up with deep religious beliefs that were in constant conflict with society's norms.

She kept to herself mostly. She'd loved her job when she started as an investigator for the Bureau. But there had been a minor slipup.

Meadow was clumsy. There was no other way to put it. She had two left feet, and she was always falling down or doing things the wrong way. It was a curse. Her mother had named her Meadow because she was reading a novel at the time and the heroine had that name. The heroine had been gentle and sweet and a credit to the community where she lived, in 1900s Fort Worth, Texas. Meadow, sadly, was nothing like her namesake.

There had been a stakeout. Meadow had been assigned, with another special agent, to keep tabs on a criminal who'd shot a police officer. The officer lived, but the man responsible was facing felony charges, and he ran.

A CI, or Confidential Informant, had told them where the man was likely to be on a Friday night. It was a local club, frequented by people who were out of the mainstream of society.

Meadow had been assigned to watch the back door while the other special agent went through the front of the club and tried to spot him.

Sure enough, the man was there. The other agent was recognized by a patron, who warned the perpetrator. The criminal took off out the back door.

While Meadow was trying to get her gun out of the holster, the fugitive ran into her and they both tumbled onto the ground.

"Clumsy cow!" he exclaimed. He turned her over and pushed her face hard into the asphalt of the parking lot, and then jumped up and ran.

Bruised and bleeding, Meadow managed to get to her feet and pull her service revolver. "FBI! Stop or I'll shoot!"

"You couldn't hit a barn from the inside!" came the sarcastic reply from the running man.

"I'll show ... you!" As she spoke, she stepped back onto a big rock, her feet went out from under her, and the gun discharged right into the windshield of the SUV she and the special agent arrived in.

The criminal was long gone by the time Meadow was recovering from the fall.

"Did you get him?" the other agent panted as he joined her. He frowned. "What the hell happened to you?"

"He fell over me and pushed my face into the asphalt," she muttered, feeling the blood on her nose. "I ordered him to halt and tried to fire when I tripped over a rock ..."

The other agent's face told a story that he was too kind to voice.

She swallowed, hard. "Sorry about the windshield," she added.

He glanced at the Bureau SUV and shook his head. "Maybe we could tell them it was a vulture. You know, they sometimes fly into car windshields."

"No," she replied grimly. "It's always better to tell them the truth. Even when it's painful."

"Guess you're right." He grimaced. "Sorry."

"Hey. We all have talents. I think mine is to trip over my own feet at any given dangerous moment."

"The SAC is going to be upset," he remarked.

"I don't doubt it," she replied.

* * *

In fact, the Special Agent in Charge was eloquent about her failure to secure the fugitive. He also wondered aloud, rhetorically, how any firearms instructor ever got drunk enough to pass her in the academy. She kept quiet, figuring that anything she said would only make matters worse.

He didn't take her badge. He did, however, assign her as an aide to another agent who was redoing files in the basement of the building. It was clerical work, for which she wasn't even trained. And from that point, her career as an FBI agent started going drastically downhill.

She'd always had problems with balance. She thought that her training would help her compensate for it, but she'd been wrong. She seemed to be a complete failure as an FBI agent. Her superior obviously thought so.

He did give her a second chance, months later. He sent her to interrogate a man who'd confessed to kidnapping an underage girl for immoral purposes. Meadow's questions, which she'd formulated beforehand, irritated him to the point of physical violence. He'd attacked Meadow, who was totally unprepared for what amounted to a beating. She'd fought, and

screamed, to no avail. It had taken a jailer to extricate the man's hands from her throat. Of course, that added another charge to the bevy he was already facing: assault on a federal officer.

But Meadow reacted very badly to the incident. It had never occurred to her that a perpetrator might attack her physically. She'd learned to shoot a gun, she'd learned self-defense, hand-to-hand, all the ways in the world to protect herself. But when she'd come up against an unarmed but violent criminal, she'd almost been killed. Her training wasn't enough. She'd felt such fear that she couldn't function. That had been the beginning of the end. Both she and the Bureau had decided that she was in the wrong profession. They'd been very nice about it, but she'd lost her job.

And Dal Blake thought she was a manly woman, a real hell-raiser. It was funny. She was the exact opposite. Half the time she couldn't even remember to do up the buttons on her coat right.

She sighed as she thought about Dal. She'd had a crush on him in high school. He was almost ten years older than she was and considered her a child. Her one attempt to catch his eye had ended in disaster ...

* * *

She'd come to visit her father during Christmas holidays—much against her mother's wishes. It was her senior year of high school. She'd graduate in the spring. She knew that she was too young to appeal to a man Dal's age, but she was infatuated with him, fascinated by him.

He came by to see her father often because they were both active members in the local cattlemen's association. So one night when she knew he was coming over, Meadow dressed to the hilt in her Sunday best. It was a low-cut red sheath dress, very Christmassy and festive. It had long sleeves and side slits. It was much too old for Meadow, but her father loved her, so he let her pick it out and he paid for it.

Meadow walked into the room while Dal and her father were talking and sat down in a chair nearby, with a book in her

hands. She tried to look sexy and appealing. She had on too much makeup, but she hadn't noticed that. The magazines all said that makeup emphasized your best features. Meadow didn't have many best features. Her straight nose and bow mouth were sort of appealing, and she had pretty light green eyes. She used masses of eyeliner and mascara and way too much rouge. Her best feature was her long, thick, beautiful blond hair. She wore it down that night.

Her father gave her a pleading look, which she ignored. She smiled at Dal with what she hoped was sophistication.

He gave her a dark-eyed glare.

The expression on his face washed away all her self-confidence. She flushed and pretended to read her book, but she was shaky inside. He didn't look interested. In fact, he looked very repulsed.

When her father went out of the room to get some paperwork he wanted to show to Dal, Meadow forced herself to look at him and smile.

"It's almost Christmas," she began, trying to find a subject for conversation.

He didn't reply. He did get to his feet and come toward her. That flustered her even more. She fumbled with the book and dropped it on the floor.

Dal pulled her up out of the chair and took her by the shoulders firmly. "I'm ten years older than you," he said bluntly. "You're a high school kid. I don't rob cradles and I don't appreciate attempts to seduce me in your father's living room. Got that?"

Her breath caught. "I never ... !" she stammered.

His chiseled mouth curled expressively as he looked down into her shocked face. "You're painted up like a carnival fortune-teller. Too much makeup entirely. Does your mother know you wear clothes like that and come on to men?" he added icily. "I thought she was religious."

"She ... is," Meadow stammered, and felt her age. Too young. She was too young. Her eyes fell away from his. "So

am I. I'm sorry.”

“You should be,” he returned. His strong fingers contracted on her shoulders. “When do you leave for home?”

“Next Friday,” she managed to say. She was dying inside. She'd never been so embarrassed in her life.

“Good. You get on the plane and don't come back. Your father has enough problems without trying to keep you out of trouble. And next time I come over here, I don't want to find you setting up shop in the living room, like a spider hunting flies.”

“You're a very big fly,” she blurted out, and flushed some more.

His lip curled. “You're out of your league, kid.” He let go of her shoulders and moved her away from him, as if she had something contagious. His eyes went to the low-cut neckline. “If you went out on the street like that, in Raven Springs, you'd get offers.”

She frowned. “Offers?”

“Prostitutes mostly do get offers,” he said with distaste.

Tears threatened, but she pulled herself up to her maximum height, far short of his, and glared up at him. “I am not a prostitute!”

“Sorry. Prostitute in training?” he added thoughtfully.

She wanted to hit him. She'd never wanted anything so much. In fact, she raised her hand to slap that arrogant look off his face.

He caught her arm and pushed her hand away.

Even then, at that young age, her balance hadn't been what it should be. Her father had a big, elegant stove in the living room to heat the house. It used coal instead of wood, and it was very efficient behind its tight glass casing. There was a coal bin right next to it.

Meadow lost her balance and went down right into the coal bin. Coal spilled out onto the wood floor and all over her. Now

there were black splotches all over her pretty red dress, not to mention her face and hair and hands.

She sat up in the middle of the mess, and angry tears ran down her soot-covered cheeks as she glared at Dal.

He was laughing so hard that he was almost doubled over.

“That’s right, laugh,” she muttered. “Santa’s going to stop by here on his way to your house to get enough coal to fill up your stocking, Darriell Blake!”

He laughed even harder.

Her father came back into the room with a file folder in one hand, stopped, did a double take, and stared at his daughter, sitting on the floor in a pile of coal.

“What the hell happened to you?” he burst out.

“He happened to me!” she cried, pointing at Dal Blake. “He said I looked like a streetwalker!”

“You’re the one in the tight red dress, honey.” Dal chuckled. “I just made an observation.”

“Your mother would have a fit if she saw you in that dress,” her father said heavily. “I should never have let you talk me into buying it.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter anymore, it’s ruined!” She got to her feet, swiping at tears in her eyes. “I’m going to bed!”

“Might as well,” Dal remarked, shoving his hands into his jeans pockets and looking at her with an arrogant smile. “Go flirt with men your own age, kid.”

She looked to her father for aid, but he just stared at her and sighed.

She scrambled to her feet, displacing more coal. “I’ll get this swept up before I go to bed,” she said.

“I’ll do that. Get yourself cleaned up, Meda,” her father said gently, using his pet name for her. “Go on.”

She left the room muttering. She didn’t even look at Dal Blake.

* * *

That had been several years ago, before she worked in law enforcement in Missouri and finally hooked up with the FBI. Now she was without a job, running a ranch about which she knew absolutely nothing, and whole families who depended on the ranch for a living were depending on her. The responsibility was tremendous.

She honestly didn't know what she was going to do. She did watch a couple of YouTube videos, but they were less than helpful. Most of them were self-portraits of small ranchers and their methods of dealing with livestock. It was interesting, but they assumed that their audience knew something about ranching. Meadow didn't.

She started to call the local cattlemen's association for help, until someone told her who the president of the chapter was. Dal Blake. Why hadn't she guessed?

While she was drowning in self-doubt, there was a knock on the front door. She opened it to find a handsome man, dark-eyed, with thick blond hair, standing on her porch. He was wearing a sheriff's uniform, complete with badge.

"Miss Dawson?" he said politely.

She smiled. "Yes?"

"I'm Sheriff Jeff Ralston."

"Nice to meet you," she said. She shook hands with him. She liked his handshake. It was firm without being aggressive.

"Nice to meet you, too," he replied. He shifted his weight.

She realized that it was snowing again and he must be freezing. "Won't you come in?" she said as an afterthought, moving back.

"Thanks," he replied. He smiled. "Getting colder out here."

She laughed. "I don't mind snow."

"You will when you're losing cattle to it," he said with a sigh as he followed her into the small kitchen, where she motioned him into a chair.

“I don’t know much about cattle,” she confessed. “Coffee?”

“I’d love a cup,” he said heavily. “I had to get out of bed before daylight and check out a robbery at a local home. Someone came in through the window and took off with a valuable antique lamp.”

She frowned. “Just the lamp?”

He nodded. “Odd robbery, that. Usually the perps carry off anything they can get their hands on.”

“I know.” She smiled sheepishly. “I was with the FBI for two years.”

“I heard about that. In fact,” he added while she started coffee brewing, “that’s why I’m here.”

“You need help with the robbery investigation?” she asked, pulling two mugs out of the cabinet.

“I need help, period,” he replied. “My investigator just quit to go live in California with his new wife. She’s from there. Left me shorthanded. We’re on a tight budget, like most small law enforcement agencies. I only have the one investigator. Had, that is.” He eyed her. “I thought you might be interested in the job,” he added with a warm smile.

She almost dropped the mugs. “Me?”

“Yes. Your father said you had experience in law enforcement before you went with the Bureau and that you were noted for your investigative abilities.”

“Noted wasn’t quite the word they used,” she said, remembering the rage her boss had unleashed when she blew the interrogation of a witness. That also brought back memories of the brutality the man had used against her in the physical attack. To be fair to her boss, he didn’t know the prisoner had attacked her until after he’d read her the riot act. He’d apologized handsomely, but the damage was already done.

“Well, the FBI has its own way of doing things. So do I.” He accepted the hot mug of coffee with a smile. “Thanks. I live on black coffee.”

“So do I.” She laughed, sitting down at the table with him to put cream and sugar in her own. She noticed that he took his straight up. He had nice hands. Very masculine and strong-looking. No wedding band. No telltale ring where one had been, either. She guessed that he’d never been married, but it was too personal a question to ask a relative stranger.

“I need an investigator and you’re out of work. What do you say?”

She thought about the possibilities. She smiled. Here it was, like fate, a chance to prove to the world that she could be a good investigator. It was like the answer to a prayer.

She grinned. “I’ll take it, and thank you.”

He let out the breath he’d been holding. “No. Thank *you*. I can’t handle the load alone. When can you start?”

“It’s Friday. How about first thing Monday morning?” she asked.

“That would be fine. I’ll put you on the day shift to begin. You’ll need to report to my office by seven a.m. Too early?”

“Oh, no. I’m usually in bed by eight and up by five in the morning.”

His eyebrows raised.

“It’s my dog,” she sighed. “She sleeps on the bed with me, and she wakes up at five. She wants to eat and play. So I can’t go back to sleep or she’ll eat the carpet.”

He laughed. “What breed is she?”

“She’s a white Siberian husky with red highlights. Beautiful.”

“Where is she?”

She caught her breath as she realized that she’d let Snow out to go to the bathroom an hour earlier, and she hadn’t scratched at the door. “Oh, dear,” she muttered as she realized where the dog was likely to be.

Along with that thought came a very angry knock at the back door, near where she was sitting with the sheriff.

Apprehensively, she got up and opened the door. And there he was. Dal Blake, with Snow on a makeshift lead. He wasn't smiling.

"Your dog invited herself to breakfast. Again. She came right into my damned house through the dog door!"

She knew that Dal didn't have a dog anymore. His old Labrador had died a few weeks ago, her foreman had told her, and the man had mourned the old dog. He'd had it for almost fourteen years, he'd added.

"I'm sorry," Meadow said with a grimace. "Snow. Bad girl!" she muttered.

The husky with her laughing blue eyes came bounding over to her mistress and started licking her.

"Stop that." Meadow laughed, fending her off. "How about a treat, Snow?"

She went to get one from the cupboard.

"Hey, Jeff," Dal greeted the other man, shaking hands as Jeff got to his feet.

"How's it going?" Jeff asked Dal.

"Slow," came the reply. "We're renovating the calving sheds. It's slow work in this weather."

"Tell me about it," Jeff said. "We had two fences go down. Cows broke through and started down the highway."

"Maybe there was a dress sale," Dal said, tongue-in-cheek as he watched a flustered Meadow give a chewy treat to her dog.

"I'd love to see a cow wearing a dress," she muttered.

"Would you?" Dal replied. "One of your men thinks that's your ultimate aim, to put cows in school and teach them to read."

"Which man?" she asked, her eyes flashing fire at him.

"Oh, no, I'm not telling," Dal returned. "You get on some boots and jeans and go find out for yourself. If you can ride a

horse, that is.”

That brought back another sad memory. She’d gone riding on one of her father’s feistier horses, confident that she could control it. She was in her second year of college, bristling with confidence as she breezed through her core curriculum.

She thought she could handle the horse. But it sensed her fear of heights and speed and took her on a racing tour up the side of a small mountain and down again so quickly that Meadow lost her balance and ended up face first in a snowbank.

To add to her humiliation—because the stupid horse went running back to the barn, probably laughing all the way—Dal Blake was helping move cattle on his own ranch, and he saw the whole thing.

He came trotting up just as she was wiping the last of the snow from her face and parka. “You know, Spirit isn’t a great choice of horses for an inexperienced rider.”

“My father told me that,” she muttered.

“Pity you didn’t listen. And lucky that you ended up in a snowbank instead of down a ravine,” he said solemnly. “If you can’t control a horse, don’t ride him.”

“Thanks for the helpful advice,” she returned icily.

“City tenderfoot,” he mused. “I’m amazed that you haven’t killed yourself already. I hear your father had to put a rail on the back steps after you fell down them.”

She flushed. “I tripped over his cat.”

“You could benefit from some martial arts training.”

“I’ve already had that,” she said. “I work for my local police department.”

“As what?” he asked politely.

“As a patrol officer!” she shot back.

“Well,” he remarked, turning his horse, “if you drive a car like you ride a horse, you’re going to end badly one day.”

“I can drive!” she shot after him. “I drive all the time!”

“God help other motorists.”

“You ... you ... you ... !” She gathered steam with each repetition of the word until she was almost screaming, and still she couldn’t think of an insult bad enough to throw at him. It wouldn’t have done any good. He kept riding. He didn’t even look back.

* * *

She snapped back to the present. “Yes, I can ride a horse!” she shot at Dal Blake. “Just because I fell off once ...”

“You fell off several times. This is mountainous country. If you go riding, carry a cell phone and make sure it’s charged,” he said seriously.

“I’d salaam, but I haven’t had my second cup of coffee yet,” she drawled, alluding to an old custom of subjects salaaming royalty.

“You heard me.”

“You don’t give orders to me in my own house,” she returned hotly.

Jeff cleared his throat.

They both looked at him.

“I have to get back to work,” he said as he pushed his chair back in. “Thanks for the coffee, Meadow. I’ll expect you early Monday morning.”

“Expect her?” Dal asked.

“She’s coming to work for me as my new investigator,” Jeff said with a bland smile.

Dal’s dark eyes narrowed. He saw through the man, whom he’d known since grammar school. Jeff was a good sheriff, but he wanted to add to his ranch. He owned property that adjoined Meadow’s. So did Dal. That acreage had abundant water, and right now water was the most important asset any rancher had. Meadow was obviously out of her depth trying to run a ranch. Her best bet was to sell it, so Jeff was getting in

on the ground floor by offering her a job that would keep her close to him.

He saw all that, but he just smiled. “Good luck,” he told Jeff, with a dry glance at a fuming Meadow. “You’ll need it.”

“She’ll do fine,” Jeff said confidently.

Dal just smiled.

Meadow remembered that smile from years past. She’d had so many accidents when she was visiting her father. Dal was always somewhere nearby when they happened.

He didn’t like Meadow. He’d made his distaste for her apparent on every possible occasion. There had been a Christmas party thrown by the local cattlemen’s association when Meadow first started college. She’d come to spend Christmas with her father, and when he asked her to go to the party with him, she agreed.

She knew Dal would be there. So she wore an outrageous dress, even more revealing than the one he’d been so disparaging about when she was a senior in high school.

Sadly, the dress caught the wrong pair of eyes. A local cattleman who’d had five drinks too many had propositioned Meadow by the punch bowl. His reaction to her dress had flustered her and she tripped over her high-heeled shoes and knocked the punch bowl over.

The linen tablecloth was soaked. So was poor Meadow, in her outrageous dress. Dal Blake had laughed until his face turned red. So had most other people. Meadow had asked her father to drive her home. It was the last Christmas party she ever attended in Raven Springs.

But just before the punch incident, there had been another. Dal had been caught with her under the mistletoe ...

She shook herself mentally and glared at Dal.



New York Times Bestselling Author

DIANA
PALMER



ONCE UPON A

ONCE THERE
WAS A LAWMAN