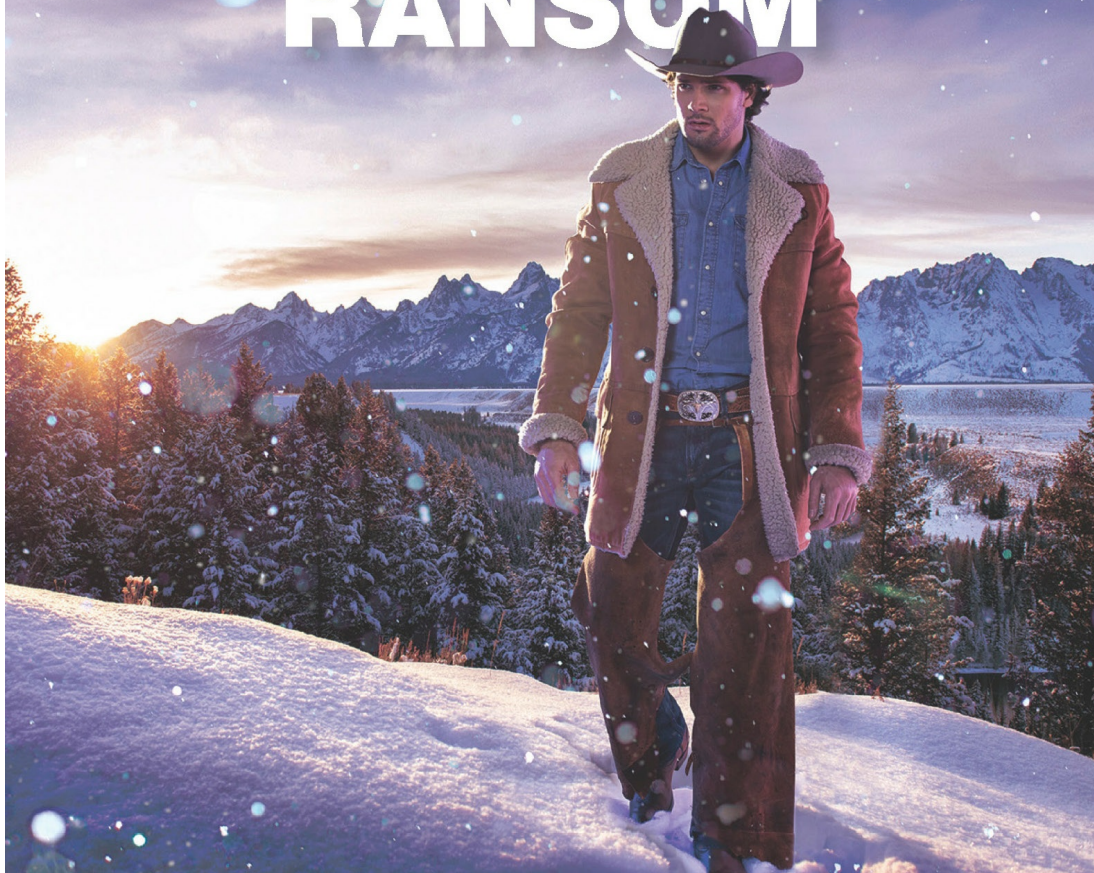


 HARLEQUIN
INTRIGUE

B.J.

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DANIELS
CHRISTMAS
RANSOM



Davy touched Carla's arm and indicated that he wanted to talk to her. She felt her heart drop. Hadn't they said enough earlier?

Not tonight. Not on Christmas Eve, she wanted to say. But could she even pretend for one night that there wasn't a killer after her?

Davy pointed upward. When she looked up, she blinked at the sight of mistletoe hanging from one of the log rafters above them. Her gaze dropped to his.

“Carla, it's Christmas. Could we just enjoy this time together?” he asked as he brushed a lock of her hair back from her eyes. “Can we put our differences aside? We used to be good friends before we became...” He seemed to hesitate. Lovers? “More,” he finished. His gaze met hers and practically burned her with its intensity.

Carla wanted that desperately—no matter how dangerous.

Davy Colt was a good loving man. He'd dropped everything to protect her. One night without the past pushing its way between them sounded like heaven. She nodded and he pulled her to him.

CHRISTMAS RANSOM

New York Times Bestselling Author

B.J. Daniels

 HARLEQUIN
INTRIGUE

B.J. Daniels is a *New York Times* and *USA TODAY* bestselling author. She wrote her first book after a career as an award-winning newspaper journalist and author of thirty-seven published short stories. She lives in Montana with her husband, Parker, and three springer spaniels. When not writing, she quilts, boats and plays tennis. Contact her at bjdaniels.com, on Facebook or on Twitter, [@bjdanielsauthor](https://twitter.com/bjdanielsauthor).

Books by B.J. Daniels

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[*Rugged Defender*](#)

HQN

Montana Justice

[*Restless Hearts*](#)
[*Heartbreaker*](#)
[*Heart of Gold*](#)

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

Davy Colt—The cowboy chose rodeo ten years ago over the woman he loved. Now she's in trouble. Is it too late for a do-over?

Carla Richmond—The bank loan officer has it all...except for Davy Colt, the love of her life. And now a killer has her in his crosshairs.

FBI Agent Robert Grover—The federal agent suspects the bank armed robbery was an inside job, and he's sure Carla is behind it.

Judson Bruckner—He believes he is a nice guy who just got pushed too far.

Jesse Watney—Boyfriend Judson has her on a pedestal. When it topples, they'll both be going down unless she starts calling the shots.

James and Tommy Colt—At Colt Brothers Investigation, the rodeo cowboys are ready to help their brother Davy any way they can.

Willie Colt—He quit rodeo to become a sheriff's deputy...with a hidden agenda.

This one is for my brother Charley, who knows what happens when you fall for the wrong woman.

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Chapter One

The whole desperate plan began simply as a last-ditch attempt to save his life. He never intended for anyone to get hurt. That day, not long after Thanksgiving, he walked into the bank full of hope. It was the first time he'd ever asked for a loan. It was also the first time he'd ever seen executive loan officer Carla Richmond.

When he tapped at her open doorway, she looked up from that big desk of hers. He thought she was too young and pretty with her big blue eyes and all that curly chestnut-brown hair to make the decision as to whether he lived or died.

She had a great smile as she got to her feet to offer him a seat.

He felt so out of place in her plush office that he stood in the doorway nervously kneading the brim of his worn baseball cap for a moment before stepping in. As he did, her blue-eyed gaze took in his ill-fitting clothing hanging on his rangy body, his bad haircut, his large, weathered hands.

He told himself that she'd already made up her mind before he even sat down. She didn't give men like him a second look—let alone money. Like his father always said, bankers never gave dough to poor people who actually needed it. They just helped their rich friends.

Right away Carla Richmond made him feel small with her questions about his employment record, what he had for collateral, why he needed the money and how he planned to repay it. He'd recently lost one crappy job and was in the process of starting another temporary one, and all he had to show for the years he'd worked hard labor since high school was an old pickup and a pile of bills.

He took the forms she handed him and thanked her, knowing he wasn't going to bother filling them in. On the way out of her office, he balled them up and dropped them in the trash. All the way to his pickup, he mentally kicked himself for being such a fool. What had he expected?

No one was going to give him money, even to save his life—especially some woman in a suit behind a big desk in an air-conditioned office. It didn't matter that she didn't have a clue how desperate he really was. All she'd seen when she'd looked at him was a loser. To think that he'd bought a new pair of jeans with the last of his cash and borrowed a too-large button-down shirt

from a former coworker for this meeting.

After climbing into his truck, he sat for a moment, too scared and sick at heart to start the engine. The worst part was the thought of going home and telling Jesse. The way his luck was going, she would walk out on him. Not that he could blame her, since his gambling had gotten them into this mess.

He thought about blowing off work since his new job was only temporary anyway and going straight to the bar. Then he reminded himself that he'd spent the last of his money on the jeans. He couldn't even afford a beer. His own fault, he reminded himself. He'd only made things worse when he'd gone to a loan shark for cash and then stupidly gambled the money, thinking he could make back what he owed and then some when he won. He'd been so sure his luck had changed for the better when he'd met Jesse.

Last time the two thugs had come to collect the interest on the loan, they'd left him bleeding in the dirt outside his rented house. They would be back any day.

With a curse, he started the pickup. A cloud of exhaust blew out the back as he headed home to face Jesse with the bad news. Asking for a loan had been a long shot, but still he couldn't help thinking about the disappointment he'd see in her eyes when he told her. They'd planned to go out tonight for an expensive dinner with the loan money to celebrate.

As he drove home, his humiliation began to fester like a sore that just wouldn't heal. Had he known even then how this was going to end? Or was he still telling himself he was just a nice guy who'd made some mistakes, had some bad luck and gotten involved with the wrong people?

Chapter Two

There was nothing worse than having to stop by work on her day off less than a week before Christmas. Or so Carla Richmond thought as she entered the bank to the sound of holiday tunes. She waved to her best friend, Amelia, then to one of the other tellers before she hurried into her office. She didn't bother closing the door since she wasn't staying long. They were having a true Montana winter, she thought as she shed her snow-covered coat, hat and gloves. She hoped she could purchase the rest of her Christmas gifts and make it home before the snowstorm got any worse.

That's why she hoped to make this quick. As executive loan officer, Carla took her job seriously, especially the privacy part. That's why she'd panicked this afternoon when she'd realized that she might not have secured a client file yesterday before leaving work. She was always so careful, but just before quitting time she'd been distracted.

Yesterday, she'd looked up to find Davy Colt leaning against her doorjamb wearing a sheepish grin and the latest rodeo belt buckle he'd won. It wasn't like she'd missed the way his Western shirt hugged those broad shoulders or the way his jeans ran the length of his muscled legs and cupped that perfect behind. He held his Stetson in the fingers of one hand. His blue gaze danced with mischief as he hid his other hand behind him.

She hadn't seen him in months, not even in passing, so being caught off guard like that had come as a shock, though a pleasant one. A while back, in a weak moment, she'd made the mistake of asking his brother Tommy about Davy. Was that why he was standing in her doorway? she'd wondered at the time.

Mentally kicking herself, Carla had wished she hadn't asked Tommy about his brother. Why hadn't she left well enough alone? She'd made a clean break from Davy and since nothing had changed...

"Hey," he'd said. "Bad time? I don't mean to bother you."

"You aren't bothering me." She'd closed the file she'd been working on and shoved it aside. "Is there something..." That's when he'd drawn his hand from behind him and she'd seen what he'd been hiding. "Is that—"

"Mistletoe," he'd said with a shy, almost nervous grin. He'd stepped into her office, bringing with him the scent of pine and the crisp Montana air.

She'd breathed it in as if she'd never had oxygen before. "I got to thinking about you on my way into town. I pinched the mistletoe from the doorway of a shop down the street." He'd glanced at his boots. "It reminded me of our first Christmas together." When he'd looked up, he'd shrugged as if embarrassed. "Guess I was feeling a little nostalgic, the holidays and all. You get off work soon?"

Was he asking her out? Heart bumping erratically against her ribs, she'd checked the time. "In twenty minutes." That's when she'd remembered that she'd promised to meet a friend for an early dinner. She'd groaned because she'd already canceled on this friend the last time they'd had plans. "But I'm meeting a friend."

Had he looked as disappointed as she'd felt? "No problem. I'm home for a few days over the holidays." His denim-blue gaze had locked with hers for several breath-stealing moments. "Tommy mentioned something about seeing you, and I thought..."

Carla had nodded, although she'd had no idea what he'd thought since he hadn't finished whatever he was going to say.

He'd set the mistletoe on the corner of her desk. "Maybe another time."

She'd tried to smile around her disappointment as he'd settled his Stetson back on his thick dark hair. Every one of those Colt brothers was handsome as sin, but Davy... Well, he had always been her favorite.

He'd met her gaze and she'd felt the heartache of the past settle over her. "Merry Christmas, Carla." And he'd been gone, leaving her with a familiar ache that had gotten worse since their breakup.

Belatedly she'd realized she should have told him that she had the next day off. Not that any good would come from getting involved with Davy again.

But just seeing him and hearing that he remembered the two of them together way back when had her heart floating. Her brain meanwhile was digging in its heels, arguing that picking up where the two of them had left off would be a huge mistake that she would regret.

She'd had a crush on Davy Colt from as far back as she could remember. When he'd finally asked her out in high school, she'd felt as if she had filled with helium. Her feet hadn't touched the ground for weeks.

Her mother hadn't been as thrilled. "I've heard stories about those Colt boys," she'd said, but Carla had assured her that Davy wasn't like that. She'd believed in her heart that Davy was The One. She'd imagined them married with kids. She'd pictured a perfect happy-ever-after—until he'd told her that

he wasn't going to college with her at Montana State University, even though he had a rodeo scholarship to attend. He was joining the rodeo circuit instead.

The romantic bubble had exploded with a loud *pop*. He'd rodeoed throughout high school, but she'd never imagined he planned to make it his occupation. Except she should have. Look at the rest of his family, all the way back to his great-grandfather who'd been a Hollywood Western movie star back in the 1940s and '50s. Ridin' and ropin' was in his blood, and being on the road following the rodeo circuit was the life all the Colt brothers had chosen as if it were their destiny as well as their legacy.

Carla, on the other hand, had been raised by a single mother who had barely finished high school. Because of that, Rosemary Richmond was determined Carla would get an education so she had options. Her mother hadn't wanted Carla to end up like her, in a low-paying job living from paycheck to paycheck. Rosemary had said from the time Carla could remember that her only daughter was going to college. Her mother had worked so hard to make that happen.

Carla had had no choice. While it had broken her heart, she'd ended the relationship with Davy and headed for college, where she'd majored in business and finance and graduated with honors. She'd had her pick of jobs.

But when her mother had gotten sick, Carla had taken a job at the local bank in Lonesome to help take care of her. And after she'd died from the cancer, the rest was history. She'd stayed in Lonesome, seeing Davy from time to time—but only in passing. She'd always wondered if she'd made a mistake choosing a career over the cowboy she'd loved. Still loved, if she was being honest.

That's why it had been such a shock when he'd come into the bank to see her. Was it possible he still felt the same way she did about him?

After he'd left, she'd sat at her desk fighting emotions until she'd grabbed her things and hurried to meet her friend. All the time, she'd kept reminding herself that Davy was only home for the holidays. His life was far from Lonesome. Who knew when he'd be back? She had to quit pining away for the rodeo cowboy.

Now as she looked around her desk, she realized that the file she'd thought she left there yesterday afternoon was nowhere to be seen. She took her key and unlocked the file drawer and was flipping through it when she saw that she *had* put the file away. But she had no memory of doing it. Her mind had been a million miles away—just like it was now. No, not quite a million

miles. More like the distance from the bank to the Colt Brothers Investigation building down the street.

Davy Colt would be staying there in the apartment over the business, at least for a few days. Then he'd be riding in Texas after the holidays and who knew where after that, since she tried not to keep track of the rodeo circuit schedule anymore.

Her brain and heart were still at war since his visit yesterday. She told herself he would be busy with family. She might not even see him again before the holiday was over. She figured that, after yesterday, maybe he'd changed his mind about whatever thought had prompted him to stop by her office.

She picked up the mistletoe on the corner of her desk, but couldn't force herself to throw it away. She put it back down. Maybe he'd stop by work tomorrow or the next day. If he came in looking for her, she was sure that the other loan officer, Amelia Curtis, or one of the tellers would let him know that she'd be working right up through Christmas Eve, in case Davy wanted to stop back by.

Even as she wanted desperately to see him again, she knew how dangerous that could be. Davy was serious about only one thing—rodeo—and spending time with him would only lead to another heartbreak.

As she started to reach for her things to leave, someone in the lobby screamed and then the whole place broke out in what sounded like panicked alarm. Carla looked up. Standing in her doorway was a masked man in a Santa suit holding a semiautomatic rifle. The Santa mask—complete with big white beard and red hat—covered his entire head. The only thing visible was the shine of his dark eyes through two small holes and the ugly slash at his mouth as he rushed toward her.

Chapter Three

The plan had come to him in the darkest, most desperate hours of night. He hadn't been able to sleep in the weeks since going to the bank for the loan and realizing that there would be no Christmas miracle. No Hail Mary pass. No one to bail him out. And if he didn't do something soon, Jesse was going to leave him.

As he lay awake, he kept replaying the day he'd gone to the bank for the loan with so much hope, misplaced or not. Before he'd left that afternoon, his girlfriend, Jesse, had told him how handsome he looked in his borrowed button-down shirt and new jeans. It had made him smile despite how scared he'd been to ask a bank for money.

But like Jesse had said, what did he have to lose? A lot, he'd discovered, because when he'd returned home empty-handed, Jesse had run out onto the porch. She'd been wearing a new dress for the celebratory dinner they had planned. She'd looked so happy, so hopeful.

"Did you get the loan?" Her expression drooped as she must have seen the answer written all over his face. His shoulders slumped as she let out a choked sob and turned away as if she didn't want him to see her cry.

He'd rushed up the steps and taken her in his arms, holding her as if she was all that was keeping him rooted to earth.

"They're going to kill us!" she said between sobs. "Look what happened the last time they came for a payment." She felt stiff in his arms. When she pulled back to look at him, he saw her disappointment in him like poison in her eyes. She pushed him, then balled her hands into fists and pounded against his chest until he pulled her to him so tightly that she finally slumped in his arms and sobbed.

"I bet you didn't even go to the bank and ask," she cried.

"I did. I talked to Carla Richmond, the executive loan officer." Jesse had stopped crying and was listening, but he had no more to say. He wasn't about to tell her that he'd thrown the forms away without even filling them out. He shook his head. "Don't worry. They won't kill us. I'll take care of it."

He could feel the distance growing between them in the quaking of her body. She'd trusted him and look what a mess he'd made of it. They hadn't been together long. He still couldn't believe that a woman who looked like

her had given him a second glance.

They'd met at a bar in another town. The next morning, in the light of day, he'd figured that would be the end of it. But when he'd asked her if she wanted to come home with him, she had. She'd only balked a little when he told her he lived in Lonesome. It had been her idea to move out of the trailer he was renting and into a house. She'd gotten a job right away. He'd really believed that Lady Luck was finally on his side.

That day after he'd been turned down at the bank, he'd held Jesse until she quit crying and he'd felt all the fight go out of her. His shirt had been wet with her tears. He'd wanted to be this woman's hero from the moment he'd met her and brought her back to Lonesome four months ago. He'd told himself he still could. He would think of something. He couldn't lose her.

"I need to go to work," she'd whispered, pulling back to look down in what could only be disgust at the new dress she'd bought.

"Call in sick," he'd said, afraid to let her go. All he had thought about was curling up naked in their bed, holding each other until they fell asleep.

Her job paid the rent and kept the lights on. His new temporary one would keep them fed and buy gas for their vehicles. With luck, they would have enough money at the end of the week to hold off the loan shark. Between the two of them they were slowly going broke because of the foolish mistakes he'd made. Worse, she was right. The last time the men had come for the money, they'd almost killed him and had threatened her. The next time they came would be worse.

Who was he kidding? There was no way he'd have enough money to hold them off. They would kill him, but his real terror was what they might do to Jesse if she were home. Probably the best thing she could do was leave him. He knew she'd thought about it. Maybe this would be the straw that broke the camel's back.

"I have to change," she'd said, pulling away. "I can't lose my job."

He'd watched her walk away, his gut cramping at the thought of her leaving him for good. He kept a pack of cigarettes that he'd swiped from one of the men he'd worked with. Jesse hated him smoking. But once she'd left...

She'd come out dressed for work. She'd fixed her face and pulled her long blond hair up into a ponytail. As with every time he'd looked at her, he was always stunned at how beautiful she was. How had he gotten so lucky? It still astounded him, and he knew he would do whatever it took to keep her.

"It's going to be all right, baby," he'd said as he'd quickly stepped to her

and leaned down to kiss her. He'd thought she'd pull away, but instead, she'd looped her arms around his neck and pulled him down to her. The kiss had started a fire in his belly that slid lower. He'd thought of their bed just inside, thought of her naked.

"I'm going to be late," she'd said as she drew back. Their gazes had met for a long moment.

"Don't lose faith in me." He hated that his voice had broken.

She'd shaken her head and given him a weak smile. "I know you will think of something. You working tonight?"

He'd nodded. A lie. He'd quit the night stocking job at the grocery store in town when he'd realized it wasn't enough to get him out of trouble—and that Jesse was right. Maybe the simplest answer had been to go to the bank for a loan. He'd picked up the temporary job through the rest of the holiday—one he had planned to quit once he'd gotten the bank loan.

The truth was that even the loan wouldn't have held off the goons for long. He was just as good as dead.

He'd been so down that day after going to the bank. He'd thought for sure that he'd lost Jesse. His words had felt like sawdust in his mouth. "I'd understand if you left me. I wouldn't blame you at all."

He couldn't have the men stopping by for the money and finding her home alone.

To his surprise, she'd said, "You aren't getting rid of me that easily. You'll think of something, Jud."

After she'd left, his throat parched from the cigarettes he'd smoked, he knew what he had to do. He'd been left no choice. But the plan hadn't come together until he'd talked it over with Jesse. It still amazed him how she'd known so much about robbing a bank. She'd been angrier with Carla Richmond than he'd been.

"She deserves this for not giving you the loan," Jesse had said. "She's probably had everything handed to her all of her life. How dare she. Someday she's going to get what's coming to her."

* * *

BEFORE CARLA COULD SCREAM, the Santa-suited robber rushed around her desk to grab a handful of her long hair and drag her toward the lobby. She saw others already on the floor and felt the panic that seemed to suck all the

air out of the room. Amelia was crying and so were the tellers. They all looked terrified where they lay.

“On the floor!” the man bellowed, using his hold on her hair to throw her down. Carla stumbled, landing hard on her side, pain shooting across her shoulder as the breath was knocked out of her. “Facedown!” he yelled and kicked her in the side.

She flattened herself facedown on the floor, fighting the pain as she gasped for breath. She tried to see if the others were all right. A teller was sobbing as she emptied out her till into a large bag, the kind Santa might carry toys in, and moved on to the next one. The bank had been about to close, so there were only a couple of customers on the floor, two older women frozen in fear. In all the racket, she could hear the bank manager trying to reason with one of the robbers.

There appeared to be three robbers, all in Santa suits and rubber masks. They wore white gloves on their hands and tall black boots, exposing no skin except for those holes where their eyes peered out—and that slit for their mouths.

One of the robbers had a gun to the bank manager’s head as he led him back toward the vault. The other robber finished loading the money from the tills, then ordered the teller onto the floor to lie down with the others as he followed the bank manager toward the vault. Carla saw that the robber had an extra bag with him along with the one full of money from the tellers’ tills.

She knew she must be in shock because her thoughts seemed to veer all over the place. Bank robberies were rare. The rule of thumb was that if a bank hadn’t been robbed in a hundred years, then it was due. This bank hadn’t been robbed in almost a hundred and twenty. She thought about how much money was in the vault and groaned inwardly. They had more money than usual because of the holidays. Had the robbers known that?

Stay calm, she chanted silently. *Stay calm*. She realized she was trembling. Her shoulder and side ached, and her scalp hurt from where he’d dragged her by her hair. She wanted to touch the spot on her head, to rub it, but was afraid to breathe, let alone move. Instead, she tried to concentrate on staying calm as she heard crying and praying, and the man yelling at everyone to stay down or die. No one wanted to die here today. Not right before Christmas.

Her gaze flicked up to the man who’d dragged her from her office. He’d moved off to the side, his semiautomatic rifle trained on those on the floor some distance away from her. He seemed nervous and kept shifting on his

feet and pulling at the back of the mask.

She watched as he reached up under his fake white beard and scratched hard at his neck. She caught sight of what appeared to be a red rash and realized he must be allergic to whatever material the mask was made of.

But the rash wasn't the only thing she'd seen when he'd raised the mask. He had a tattoo low on his neck. There were two *J*'s with an odd-shaped heart between them. *J loves J?*

Even though she was sure that she hadn't made a sound, he quickly adjusted his mask and spun in her direction, leading with the business end of the rifle in his hand. She saw from his expression that he'd realized his mistake in lifting the bottom of the mask. Carla had quickly looked away, but she could feel his gaze boring into her. Did he know what she'd seen? Her heart pounded harder, her breath more ragged. She feared he knew as she heard him advance on her. "I told you to keep your head down!"

Chapter Four

Jud couldn't believe what had just happened. But the moment he'd seen her expression, he'd realized that she'd seen something when he'd lifted the Santa beard to scratch his neck. His tattoo! The foolish woman. She'd tell the cops. He tried to tell himself that the law wouldn't be able to track him down by some silly tattoo, but even as he was arguing the point, he knew he couldn't take the chance.

Jesse wouldn't wait for him if he went to prison. Hell, she was barely hanging on as it was. If he could pull off this bank job, they'd leave the country. Maybe go to someplace warm, sit on a beach and watch the sunset. Jesse would like that. He could finally make her happy. Maybe they'd even get married.

He'd asked her to marry him, but she'd put him off. He was no fool. He knew that she was hoping for something better. With his share of the money, he could be better. He could give her more than some drunken sentimental gesture like a tattoo. He'd wanted her name embedded into his flesh, but hadn't had enough money according to the tattoo tech. Maybe if he hadn't spent so much on the booze before coming up with the idea...

Swearing under his breath, he tried not to scratch his neck again, but this mask and beard were making him hot and itchy. He wasn't sure how much longer he could stand having it on. He felt as if he couldn't breathe. All he wanted to do was rip it off and scratch his damned neck.

He glanced anxiously toward the short hallway to the vault. What was taking them so long? He quickly looked back at Carla Richmond. He thought about what Jesse had said about her. Worse, he figured Carla was smart. Too smart for her own good. But she'd made a mistake that was now going to cost her her life.

The thought made him a little sick. But how could he let her live now? Even if the cops couldn't track him down because of the tattoo, she might remember him from the day he'd come in for the loan. He swore under his breath again. If only he hadn't lifted his mask. If she'd done what he'd told her to do... It was her own fault. He hadn't wanted anyone to get hurt.

Glancing toward the vault again, he was about to yell back to see what was taking so long when two Santa-suited figures came out, pushing the bank

manager ahead of them and forcing him down on the floor near the tellers.

The larger of the two looked up, signaling that it had gone well. "Let's go!" Buddy called and started toward Jud, carrying a bulging bag filled with money. Eli was right behind with a tote that looked just as full.

For a moment, Jud felt a surge of joy and relief and pride. It had gone just as Jesse had said it would. His good mood didn't last though as he looked down at the executive loan officer at his feet. He couldn't leave her here alive.

Jud swung the end of the rifle at her head, his finger on the trigger. It wasn't like he had a choice. He hadn't had a choice his whole life.

* * *

OUT OF THE corner of her eye, Carla saw him standing over her with his weapon pointed at her head. She could hear him breathing hard under the mask and she knew. He was going to kill her. She'd seen his tattoo. She squeezed her eyes shut and held her breath, but all she could think about was Davy. Hadn't she been holding out hope for years that somehow they would find a way to be together? She felt scalding tears behind her lashes.

"I said let's go!" She opened her eyes and could see that the other two robbers had joined them. "Whatever it is you're thinking about doing, don't," one man said. He was taller and broader than the one with the tattoo. She could feel the tension between the two. "We need to get out of here."

"I can't leave her here," he said, his finger still on the trigger. "Not alive."

"We said no one gets hurt."

"Then I'm taking her hostage."

"No. You're not."

Her arm was suddenly grabbed, fingers digging deep into her flesh as she was jerked to standing. He spun her around and locked his arm around her throat. Nearly lifting her off her feet, he said, "She's coming with us."

Carla heard the screech of tires. She saw a van pull up out front. The driver honked the horn. Somewhere in the distance, she thought she heard sirens. The larger of the men swore and said that someone had pushed an alarm and they had to get out of there.

The robber holding her began to drag her toward the door. She'd watched enough crime television shows to know the last thing she could let this man do was take her out of the bank and into that van. She tried to fight him, but

his hold on her throat was cutting off her air supply.

The bank manager was yelling something at the men. One of the robbers was threatening him, telling him to stay down or he would shoot him. Someone on the floor was sobbing loudly now. Someone else began to scream. Then someone else screamed. She realized that the second scream was coming out of her mouth and her terror rose. The time for remaining calm was over.

Frantically she clawed at the arm clamped around her neck, but the Santa suit was thick and she found little purchase as the man dragged her toward the door and the waiting van.

Chapter Five

“Mistletoe?” James Colt laughed, and his brothers Tommy and Willie joined in.

“Hey, I was thinking fast on my feet, okay?” Davy said. He’d been taking a ribbing from his brothers for as long as he could remember. They’d always been close but had grown more so since their father’s death. They had the classically handsome Colt features, dark hair and blue eyes, and the reputations to go with them—the wild Colt brothers, as they were known in Lonesome, Montana.

Even if they hadn’t been rodeo cowboys like their father and grandfather, most mothers in town didn’t want them dating their daughters. Davy didn’t think it mattered that both James and Tommy had settled down recently, become private investigators and were now married.

“That is so cheesy,” Tommy said of the mistletoe. “So what happened?”

“I hope you got the kiss,” Willie said, eyeing him speculatively. “That was all you were after, right?”

His brothers knew how heartbroken he’d been when Carla had ended their relationship years ago. “Like I said, spur-of-the-moment. I’m not sure what I had in mind. Maybe to just say hello. Maybe I thought we could have a drink together, talk old times, I don’t know.”

They were all gathered in the Colt Brothers Investigation office. It had changed since his father, Del, had started the PI business almost ten years ago—before his death. James and Tommy had moved the office downstairs, keeping their father’s desk and large leather office chair.

There were two bedrooms now upstairs for when Davy and Willie were home. They would have been welcome to stay with James or Tommy at their homes, but they preferred the upstairs apartment on Main Street, Lonesome. They all had memories of spending time in the office with their father.

“So did you get around to asking her out?” James had been the first to leave the rodeo circuit. After getting involved in one of their father’s old cases, he’d decided he wanted to be in the PI business.

Davy looked down at his boots. “Just my luck she already had a date.”

Willie shook his head. “You sure you want to go down that path again?”

He wasn’t sure. That was the problem. It’s why he’d stayed away today.

“What’s this about you joining the sheriff’s department?” he asked, hoping to get the focus off him.

“Stop trying to change the subject,” Willie said.

All of them looked toward Willie. “Davy’s right,” James said. “I distinctly remember you saying you were never going to become a private eye. Too dangerous, you said.”

“You’d just spent a night in jail, as I remember,” Tommy interjected. “So yeah, what’s up with you joining the sheriff’s department?”

“I needed a change and we have enough PIs in the family,” Willie said with a laugh.

James narrowed his eyes at his brother. “This wouldn’t have anything to do with Dad’s death, would it?”

“Enough about me,” Willie said, standing to walk over to the window that faced Main Street. Davy looked past his brother. Lonesome looked so picturesque with its quaint old brick buildings, Christmas decorations and snowflakes falling to the distant sound of holiday music.

“Willie’s right,” James said, letting Willie off easy, Davy thought. “I’d think long and hard about revisiting that love affair. As Dad used to say, there are a lot of Buckle Bunnies out there. It isn’t like you have ever been short of female company.”

Davy sighed and shook his head. There were always cowgirls who followed the circuit. True enough, he had no problem getting a date. But none of them were Carla.

“Remember, she was the one who broke up with you because she didn’t want to be married to a rodeo cowboy,” Tommy reminded him, as if he could ever forget.

“Can’t blame her,” James said. “What woman in her right mind would?”

“Unless something has changed?” Tommy said.

Davy shook his head. “There are too many broncs waiting to be ridden.”

“Or bucked off of,” Tommy said with a laugh.

“Well, I have a few more years.” He was young, the youngest of the brood. He wasn’t ready to settle down, he kept telling himself. But he’d never gotten over Carla, and lately he’d been thinking about her more and more. When Tommy told him that she’d said to tell him hello, he’d gotten his hopes up that they might still have a chance.

“Did Carla at least seem glad to see you?” Tommy asked now.

Davy shrugged. “I was too nervous to notice.”

Willie had grown quiet, almost reflective, for a few minutes. “Davy, you’re ruining our bad reputations,” he joked. “I’m getting the feeling that you’re still hung up on this woman.”

Davy groaned and got to his feet. “Maybe I’ll go out for a while, do some Christmas shopping—”

“And maybe stop by the bank before it closes?” Tommy asked with a grin.

At the sound of distant sirens, Willie turned toward the front window again. “Speaking of the bank, it looks like something’s happening down there.”

Chapter Six

For a moment, Jud didn't know what hit him. He'd been dragging Carla Richmond toward the door, determined to take her hostage, when he heard the pop as one of his ribs cracked from the butt of Buddy's weapon. His own weapon was jerked from his free hand. Gasping for air, he was forced to loosen his leverage on the woman.

After that, everything went south. Carla, no doubt seeing her chance, elbowed him hard in the same spot Buddy had nailed him. The last of his air rushed from his lungs. He doubled over and the woman slipped from his hold to collapse on the floor.

He had only a few seconds as she hurried to scramble out of his reach. In that instant when she'd looked back from the floor, something had passed between them. She'd known he was going to kill her, and he'd known that she would tell the cops what she'd seen.

He kicked her, catching her temple with the toe of his boot. The blow flipped her from her hands and knees to her back. Her head struck the marble floor with a crack and she lay motionless. People began to scream and cry louder. There was shouting and he could hear some of the bank employees getting to their feet and scrambling for cover. If he'd still had his weapon, he would have turned it on all of them—starting with Carla Richmond.

But Buddy grabbed him, propelling him toward the front door of the bank before he could finish her off. The sound of sirens filled the air as the three of them stumbled across the snowy sidewalk to the diminishing sound of Christmas music and into the waiting van at the curb. Their getaway driver, Rick, sped off even before the van doors closed.

Jud looked back through the glass front of the bank. There were people kneeling next to Carla. From what he could tell, she still wasn't moving as the getaway vehicle roared down the road. All he could hope was that she never would again.

"You idiot," Buddy snapped as he pulled off his mask and threw it down on the floor of the van as they sped out of Lonesome—headed for the mountains. "What were you thinking?" he demanded as he struggled to shed his costume. Like the rest of them, he wore a T-shirt and jeans underneath. "The plan wasn't to take a hostage."

Jud glared at him, holding his side. He'd already ripped off his mask, each breath a torture as he scratched angrily at his neck. "Plans change."

Buddy swore, chucked his costume past Jud into the very back of the van and turned away to look out the side window. "I knew better than to get involved with this because you screw up everything you touch. You always have—ever since we were kids."

"We got the money, didn't we?" Jud insisted as he too shed his costume between fits of scratching at the rash breaking out everywhere the costume had touched bare skin.

"The money won't do us any good if we're locked up in prison, or worse, dead. You could have gotten us all killed back there," Buddy snapped.

"He still might," Eli said and pointed out the windshield.

Ahead of them, Jud could see the railroad crossing—and the approaching train. At their rates of speed, both the train and the van would reach the crossing at the same time. He swallowed back the bile that rose in his throat.

He and Jesse had researched their escape, knowing it was the only chance they had of getting out of Lonesome and evading the cops. They would hit the bank and head for the train crossing. He'd timed the robbery so they would get across the tracks before the train by a few minutes. Anyone following them would have to wait for the entire length of the train to pass before following them.

Because of that small window of time, he'd known how dangerous trying to beat the train was going to be. A thirty-car freight train hitting a vehicle would be the same force as a car crushing an aluminum soda can. It would take the train a mile before it came to a complete stop.

Add to that the fact that the train was about six feet wider than the rails. That meant an extra three feet on each side of the locomotive that could clip the van even after the back tires cleared the rails.

The timing had been crucial. Now he saw that trying to take Carla Richmond hostage had cost them critical time and might end up being the last reckless thing he'd ever do.

"Are we going to make it?" Eli asked, his voice breaking as Rick tried to get more speed out of the van as they raced toward the crossing. Lights were flashing, but there were no crossing barriers. The county had talked about adding them after Del Colt had been killed at this spot, but it hadn't happened.

The roar of the train and the locomotive horn was deafening in his ears. It

was so close that Jud could see the panicked look on the engineer's face. The man had already hit the brakes, but there was no stopping the train in time to miss the van.

Rick had the gas pedal pressed to the floor. As the van bounced over the first rail, all Jud could see out the side window next to him was the massive front of the train's engine. They were all going to die. After an initial spike of panic, he felt almost relieved that his life would be over. Except for Jesse. He'd let her down, the one good thing in his life.

The van felt as if it were flying as the back wheels bucked over the second rail. Jud thought for sure the engine would catch the rear panel of the van, ripping it off and sending them cartwheeling through the air.

The train roared by behind them as the van kept going and Rick fought to keep the vehicle on the road at this speed. Jud realized he'd been holding his breath. He let it out, feeling shaky and sick to his stomach. He'd never come that close to dying. He sat back in his seat and tried to breathe. The pain in his chest was excruciating, and now that he was going to live, he was furious with Buddy.

Eli swore next to him, looking as shaken as Jud felt. "You sorry son of a —" Eli looked like he wanted to punch him. "You almost got us killed. If we hadn't beaten that train across the tracks..."

"I didn't get us caught or killed. Instead, I made you money. You knew the risk." He could feel Buddy's gaze on him again.

"You're right. I don't know what we were thinking. We definitely should have known dealing with you was more than a risk," Buddy said. "I still can't believe you were going to take that woman as a hostage." His gaze narrowed. "What were you going to do with her?"

Jud said nothing. He'd had to make a decision. Kill her where she lay or take her hostage. "I didn't have a choice. My mask slipped. I think she saw my tattoo. Once I realized she could make me..."

Buddy swore. "This just keeps getting better."

"Don't worry. If she's still alive, I know who she is. I'll take care of it."

He saw Eli and Rick exchange a look with Buddy as if he was the one who'd planned this. Buddy said, "You'd better hope she's still alive. Otherwise, they'll never stop looking for us for murder on top of armed robbery." Buddy swore. "What were you thinking? She can't ID you from that crappy JJ tattoo. Unless you've had your name and phone number tattooed on you since we last saw you. Or maybe your Social Security

number.”

Jud gritted his teeth. In a few minutes, he would see the last of these guys and he'd be rich. “Maybe I overreacted,” he said sullenly, hating Buddy all the more for putting him in a position where he had to back down. “But Jesse watches this TV show where they find people with a whole lot less than an obvious tattoo.”

Buddy shook his head and turned away to stare at the road ahead. Jud saw that they were almost to the spot where they would divide the loot and part company after one final step. He couldn't wait. He could feel his skin burning from wearing the ridiculous costume. At least one of his ribs felt broken. And Carla Richmond might still be alive. The only good news was that, with luck, he'd never see these men again. He regretted bringing them in for this. Once he had his share of the money, he and Jesse would leave the country.

As he shifted in his seat, he felt the pain in his side from Buddy's gun butt. It made him all the more furious that Buddy seemed to think he could tell him what to do.

“You don't know that she made you,” Buddy was saying as the van came to a stop in the middle of the forest where an SUV and Rick's motorcycle waited for them. They would take the SUV to the spot where they'd left their vehicles. Except for Rick, who would stay behind and burn the van with the costumes and their weapons inside it. All the evidence would be gone, including any evidence on the unregistered weapons. While the rifles wouldn't burn, they couldn't be traced back to them.

If Carla Richmond hadn't seen his tattoo, the robbery would have gone off perfectly. Now he was going to have to deal with her. The thought made his stomach roil.

“Don't be a fool,” Buddy said as if he could read his thoughts. The man opened the passenger-side door to climb out but hesitated to look back at Jud. “The cops can't prove anything. Just forget about the woman, take your share of the money and make a new life for yourself. If you're smart, you'll leave Jesse behind. You wouldn't have gotten this deep in trouble if you weren't trying to keep her. Let her go. Women are a dime a dozen. Especially ones like Jesse.” As Buddy stepped out, Jud saw the bulge of a handgun stuffed in the back of his jeans.

The plan had been that no one would bring extra weapons. Were the others now carrying as well?

“Thanks for the advice,” Jud said between gritted teeth as everyone

climbed out of the van, taking the bags of money but leaving their weapons behind to go up in flames. He picked up his fully loaded semiautomatic rifle from the van floor where it had been dropped.

As his feet hit the dirt, he saw Buddy give a nod toward the others. They started to turn as Jud said, "Buddy, you should know that I've never been good at taking advice." As Buddy reached behind him for his weapon, Jud saw the others about to do the same thing.

He told himself that they'd given him no choice as he hit the trigger, opening fire on all of them before they could get off a shot.

Chapter Seven

Carla woke confused, head aching. She blinked. The room seemed too bright, the light like an ice pick jammed between her eyes. She closed them again. Shifting in the bed, she realized that it wasn't just her head that hurt. Her whole body hurt. She pried her eyes open to slits. Where was she?

"Carla."

In that one word she heard so much relief and concern that she felt her pulse jump, and yet the moment came with more confusion. "*Davy?*"

As she opened her eyes, she turned her head and winced in pain. Davy was sitting in a chair next to her bed. The sight of him was as incongruous as the realization that she was in the hospital. She closed her eyes again.

She heard him rise from the chair and come to her side. With her eyes still closed, she asked, "What happened?" Her voice came out a whisper and suddenly she was aware of how weak she felt as he took her free hand.

When she opened her eyes again, she saw that her other hand was hooked up to tubes and machines that beeped noisily.

"You're safe now," he said, gently squeezing her hand in his two large ones. *Safe?* His hands felt warm and calloused, hands she remembered. She tried to sit up, but he urged her back down. "Just stay still. The doctor is on his way."

She closed her eyes again, trying to make sense out of all of it. She was in the hospital, she'd been hurt, Davy was here. The last was the most confusing. It was as if she'd been teleported back in time and she and Davy were still together.

Opening her eyes, she heard someone come into the room and felt Davy release her hand and say, "She just came to."

"How are you feeling?" asked a male voice. She focused on the sixtysomething doctor. Dr. Hull had delivered her his first year in Lonesome. He'd met the love of his life, a local woman, and had ended up staying all these years in their tiny Western town.

"I have a terrible headache," she whispered, as if speaking loudly would make it worse.

"We'll see what we can do about that," the doctor said.

"I don't understand what happened."

“You have a concussion and some minor bruises and swelling.” He met her gaze. “You don’t remember?” She shook her head and then wished she hadn’t. “What’s the last thing you remember?”

Her gaze shifted to Davy’s concerned, handsome face. She remembered him coming into her office. Or had that been a dream? She couldn’t be sure.

“Do you remember me stopping by the bank to see you?” Davy asked. So it had been true. “Yes.”

Dr. Hull looked relieved, then nodded and smiled. “When was that?”

“Yesterday,” Davy said, making her start with surprise.

“How long have I been in here?” she asked, feeling her fear rise. What had happened? Why couldn’t she remember? Had there been a car accident? Had anyone else been hurt?

“Earlier today,” the doctor said.

“Tell me what happened.” She tried to sit up again, but the doctor placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Easy,” he said. “You don’t remember anything about the bank robbery?”

She lay back. *Bank robbery?* A flash of memory. Santa standing in her doorway. She frowned as the image blurred and disappeared. Her mind filled with questions that flew in and out like a flock of birds. She tried to grab hold of one, but it only made her headache worse. “Was anyone else hurt?”

“No,” the doctor said.

“Did they get away with the money?”

He nodded. “But the FBI is on the case, so you need not worry. You just concentrate on feeling better.”

“Why can’t I remember?”

“The blow to your head,” Dr. Hull said and patted her arm. “You just need rest so your brain can heal and your body as well.” He started to turn away but stopped. “An FBI agent is here, wanting to ask you questions about the robbery.” Of course. She knew the FBI investigated bank robberies and had since they became a federal crime in 1934 thanks to John Dillinger and his gang. “Don’t worry, I’ll send the agent away for now.”

For now? She looked to Davy. “I can’t help the FBI. I don’t know anything. I can’t remember any...” Her voice broke.

“Do what the doctor said. Get some rest. Your memory will come back. Or it won’t.” He must have seen her worried look. “Come on, I’ve landed on my head enough times that I know how this works. Worrying about it doesn’t help, trust me. Just close those beautiful blue eyes. I’ll be here if you need

me.”

She didn't want to close her eyes, but she could feel a strange kind of exhaustion trying to drag her under. “How...” She was going to ask how it was that he was here. But the thought whizzed past and was gone. “You're sure no one else was hurt?”

“Everyone is fine. You apparently got the worst of it.”

“What if I can't remember?” Her words sounded slurred and took all of her energy.

“The feds will find them probably before you wake up, so you have nothing to worry about.”

Nothing to worry about. Why didn't she believe that? A memory played at the edge of her consciousness. Dark eyes peering out at her from Santa's face. She shuddered as sleep dragged her under.

* * *

HIGH IN THE MOUNTAINS, Jud watched the van burn. There'd been several cans of gas in the back to use to start the blaze and make sure nothing was left but charred ashes. One can had been used inside the van. Another had been dumped on the three bodies. He'd been right. All of them had been carrying guns. All of them had been going for those guns when he stepped out of the van.

Was the plan to double-cross him? Or had they brought weapons because they didn't trust him?

Not that it mattered now. But it showed how little they thought of him. So much for former childhood friends. He kept thinking about the things Buddy had said about him. Worse, what he'd said about Jesse. The man couldn't have been more wrong. Jesse was the real deal. His stomach ached at the thought of how close he'd come to losing her. He'd known that he would do anything to keep that from happening. Look at what he'd already done. He and Buddy had known each other from the old neighborhood. It hurt that he'd been put in a position where he had to kill him. Sick at heart, his stomach roiling, his ribs making every move hurt, he pushed the thought away.

This hadn't been part of the plan, he thought as he watched the flames consume the bodies and the van and motorcycle. But now it was over. Time to move on. Any moment the gas tank on the van would blow. He feared that the smoke from the flames could be seen from miles away. He had to get

going. He'd already loaded the bags of money in the SUV.

After climbing behind the wheel, he started the vehicle and drove to where his pickup was waiting for him. As part of the adjusted plan, he left the SUV with the keys in the ignition. With luck, someone would steal it—just as they had done.

He checked the time. Jesse should be getting ready for her night shift. He'd hoped to be back to the house before she left for work. She would be worried since he hadn't taken her call earlier. She would have heard about the bank robbery. By now, everyone in the county would know. He thought about calling her to let her know that he was fine. But he feared she would hear the truth in his voice. Better to head home, get cleaned up, calm down and then call her.

When she got off her shift, he would be waiting for her with the money. All of the money. They could make love in the middle of it if she wanted. There was enough to last them a very long time if they were careful.

Not that he'd taken the time to count it, but he knew it was a whole lot more than he'd been planning on since there was no splitting it. Now he didn't want to part with any of it. Once he tied up the one loose end, they could get out of town before anyone was the wiser. They could start a new life together. Jesse would like that. Or maybe they would just leave right away and forget about Carla Richmond. With blood already on his hands, the idea more than appealed to him.

From now on, only happy thoughts. The money would make sure of that. No wonder rich people always looked so pleased with themselves. The first thing he was going to do was buy Jesse an engagement ring with a huge diamond on it.

He remembered Buddy's voice from the day they got together to plan the robbery. "Don't do anything foolish like flashing the money around when this is over. It would be just like you, Jud, to go buy a sports car that you'd never be able to afford on your income and get the feds onto us."

Another reminder that Buddy thought he was smarter than him. But then again, Jud was still alive and rich and Buddy was toast. He turned on the radio to drown out his former friend's voice in his head, anxious to get home.

He thought about Jesse's face when she saw all the money. He planned to make her smile for the rest of her life—even if he had to knock over another bank to do it.

Carla Richmond broke into his thoughts like a recurring toothache. He

turned up the radio, hoping to catch the news.

* * *

WHEN CARLA OPENED her eyes again, Davy was asleep in the chair beside her bed. She had time to study him. She'd fallen in love with him not because of how drop-dead gorgeous he was. He was a good-hearted cowboy.

Unfortunately, the rodeo had stolen his heart long before she'd come along.

He stirred as if sensing she was awake. Smiling, he pushed himself up, then winced and grabbed the back of his neck to rub it.

"What time is it?" she asked, her throat dry.

"Nine thirty." She looked past him to see darkness beyond the windows.

"You slept all this time in that chair?" she asked.

"I wasn't about to leave you until I knew you were all right."

"I'm fine. You should go home and get some sleep. You heard what Dr. Hull said." She smiled despite her headache. "All I need is rest and I'll be good as new." At least she hoped so. She saw his expression. "I appreciate you being here though. Thank you. But I won't have you sleeping in a chair anymore."

"I suppose I could use a shower," Davy said and took a whiff of himself. "That's really what you're telling me, huh?"

She shook her head, surprised that it didn't hurt as much. "Before you go, have you heard anything? Have they caught the robbers?" She saw from his expression they hadn't. "I'm still confused. Dr. Hull said no one was hurt? Just me?"

Davy seemed to hesitate before he stood and stepped closer, then said, "Apparently one of the robbers decided to take you as a hostage."

The memory came back like a bolt of lightning. Her hand went to her throat as she remembered being in a headlock, fighting for breath while the other robbers argued with him to let her go as he tried to drag her outside.

"There was a van at the curb."

"So your memory is coming back. That's a good sign."

"But something happened, and he had to let me go. After that...there's nothing."

"Hey, that's progress," Davy said excitedly. "I can tell you feel better now that you can remember more."

Did she? He would know that not being able to remember would drive her

crazy. She prided herself on being capable, self-reliant, independent. Having a dark hole in her memory and lying in a hospital bed made her feel vulnerable and afraid. Davy would know that about her. Unless he'd forgotten.

"When he let you go, he kicked you and you fell back, hitting the floor hard with your head. At least that's what I heard. One of the tellers saw the whole thing. She was terrified that they were going to take you hostage."

Not half as terrified as she'd been, she thought.

"But it's over and you're doing great," he said, still looking worried though. "Are you sure you don't want me to stay?"

"Yes." She needed to be alone, to try to piece the rest of it together. What had she been doing at the bank in the first place? Wasn't it her day off? "Go."

"Well, I'm coming back later to make sure you're okay," he said as he picked up his Stetson. As he started for the door, it opened.

Carla saw Dr. Hull and two other men enter. FBI agents? They stopped for a moment to speak to Davy. She couldn't hear what was being said, but when Davy looked back toward her, there was worry in his expression.

"What's going on?" she asked the moment Davy left and the men came to her bedside.

"These are FBI agents Robert Grover and Hank Deeds," the doctor told her. "They'd like to ask you a few questions."

She didn't feel up to answering their questions right now. A lot of it had come back, but there were still holes in her memory that worried her. "You told him that I don't remember, didn't you?" she asked Dr. Hull before looking at the other men. Agent Deeds was younger with blond hair and blue eyes, Agent Grover had gray at his temples with dark eyes and bushy dark brows the color of his hair. She had another flash of memory of dark eyes peering at her from out of a mask and shivered. Pulling the blanket up, she said, "I doubt I can be much help."

"Well, let's see if that's true," Agent Grover said, and the doctor excused himself to take a call, saying he'd be right outside her door. "What were you doing at the bank? Wasn't it your day off?"

She frowned. "I must have forgotten something and stopped by." Wasn't there something about a file? Why did she suddenly have the image of mistletoe on her desk?

"Do you go into the bank on your day off normally?" Carla shook her head. He asked how long she'd worked at the bank, then how long she'd been

the executive loan officer. She told him. “You worked your way up pretty fast,” the agent commented. “You sound like you’re ambitious.”

His question made a hard knot rise in her chest because she was suddenly concerned about where he was headed with this. It also had been a bone of contention between her and Davy. Her need to make something of her life had been one of their problems, the rodeo the other. “I suppose I am.”

He laughed. “Looking at your school records, I’d say you definitely are.”
“Having ambition isn’t—”

He didn’t let her finish. “Were you aware of how much money was in the vault on the day of the robbery?”

The question disturbed her. “I’m the executive loan officer, so of course I know. It’s part of my job.”

He smiled and nodded. “You’re single, no boyfriend?”

Her heart began to beat harder. She definitely knew where he was headed with this. “I’ve been busy—”

“With your career,” he finished for her. “Is it everything you thought it would be?”

She couldn’t help being defensive since she’d chosen this life over Davy. “I enjoy what I do.”

“*Really?*” He studied her speculatively. “Don’t you have to turn down a lot of people who want a loan?”

“Not always. We try to work with everyone.”

He looked down at his notes. “Why do you think you were the only one hurt during the robbery?”

“I have no idea. Maybe if I could remember everything that happened...”

“How about you tell me everything that you do remember,” the agent said.

She’d seen the exchange between the agents and Davy just inside her door and now realized that something new had happened. “Have you caught them?” The agents shared a look. “Please, I have to know what’s happened.”

Agent Grover was studying her closely. “We found the getaway vehicle some miles from here in the mountains. It had been torched, no doubt to try to get rid of any evidence. A motorcycle was also destroyed in the fire.” His gaze bored into her as he said, “There were also three bodies found incinerated next to it. We’re still trying to identify them. One of the robbers got away, the one I suspect you know. The one who tried to take you hostage?”

“Why would I know him?” Carla stared at him as her heart took off at a

gallop. She could have been in that van. She would have been one of those incinerated bodies. If one of the robbers hadn't stopped the man... The angry man in the Santa suit who'd dragged her from her office. She saw him in her memory now standing over her, lifting the big white beard to scratch at his neck.

The tattoo. It flashed in her mind. *J heart J*. That's why he'd wanted to take her hostage. He'd been afraid she could identify him. He would have killed her. He'd gotten away? He was still out there?

The alarm on the machine next to her began to go off.

"That's enough for now," Dr. Hull said as he rushed back in. "Step outside the room, Agent Grover, Agent Deeds. Now." Then he turned to her. "You're having a panic attack. I need you to breathe, Carla." A nurse came racing into the room.

She closed her eyes, trying to blot out the memories that had suddenly rushed at her. That's why the man had wanted to take her hostage. He was going to kill her right there in the bank but changed his mind. He said as much to the others.

As frightening as that was, something else scared her more. The way he'd treated her from the moment he'd appeared in her office doorway. It had felt personal. It hadn't been random. He'd known her.

The next thought came hard and fast. But didn't that mean that she knew him? That she'd known the killer?

Chapter Eight

“How is Carla?” James asked when Davy walked into the office after showering and changing his clothing. He’d slept little after coming back to the office apartment. He’d waited until Carla was settled and safe—at least for now.

“She’s in pain and doesn’t remember what happened,” Davy told him as Willie and Tommy came through the front door of the Colt Brothers Investigation building. “Also, she’s scared. I just heard that they found the getaway van and three bodies. There’s a chance that the man who wanted to take Carla hostage killed them and is now on the run. I spoke to a couple of bank employees who stopped by the hospital to check on Carla. They said the robbers were arguing over the man taking Carla before they left.” He turned to his brother Willie, who shook his head.

“I was just at the sheriff’s department,” Willie said. “No news, but there’s a statewide manhunt that will probably be expanded before nightfall to the states around us. But so far, nothing.”

“The feds are assuming that he’s on the run,” Davy said. “But what if he didn’t run? What if he’s local? What if he merely drove home?”

“Why would he stick around?” James asked, and they all shared a look. They’d all heard how the robber had been rough with Carla before trying to take her hostage.

“For some reason, he singled her out,” Davy said.

“You think Carla’s in danger?”

He nodded. “Everyone seems to think he might have known her, had some reason to treat her more roughly than the others.”

“Is it possible she might have information that could lead to his arrest?” Tommy asked.

Davy swore. “Well, if she does, she doesn’t know it. She says she can’t remember a lot of it, but she was talking in her sleep. She saw something, something that has her scared. I think it’s why he tried to take her hostage. I’m not going to leave her alone until he’s caught.” He saw his brothers exchange glances again. “What?”

“Maybe you can stay with her 24/7 at the hospital, but what happens when she’s well enough to go home?” James asked. “Davy, you’re already dead on

your feet, not to mention you'll be leaving right after Christmas."

"You can't stay with her 24/7," Willie broke in. "We'll take turns. I'll go to the hospital now. Tommy?"

His brother nodded. "Just call me and I'll come relieve you."

"I'll help too, but it doesn't solve the problem," James said. "We can't do this indefinitely. We have no idea when or even if this man will be caught."

"Let's do what we can now and cross that bridge when we come to it," Willie told him. As the oldest, he'd always been the calmest in a disaster. It didn't surprise Davy that he was going into law enforcement. All three of his brothers had quit the rodeo now. It was only a matter of time before he hung up his spurs as well. He didn't want to think about any of that right now. All his concern was for Carla.

"The FBI agents were interviewing her when I left," he said. "Hopefully they'll find the robber quickly."

"Get some rest, Davy," Willie ordered as he left. "I'll stay with her until Tommy relieves me."

How could he rest knowing a killer was out there? One who had hurt Carla and might be back to finish the job? He realized he was exhausted. He'd gotten little sleep the night before because of thoughts of Carla, even before the robbery. All that time in the chair next to her bed had left his neck aching. Between that and worry, he hadn't slept much.

He went upstairs, knowing Willie wouldn't let anything happen to Carla. He'd drifted off for a while, then he'd spent some time talking to bank employees. Those who'd witnessed the robbery had been given the day off. Lonesome was such a small town it hadn't been hard to find out who to talk to and where to find them.

They all told the same story. It had looked as if Carla had been targeted by one of the robbers. The words *unnecessary roughness* and *seemed to single her out* had kept coming up.

"He was determined to take her as a hostage," a bank teller had told him. "I mean, he wasn't going to leave without her. If one of the other robbers hadn't hit him to make him let go of her..."

Davy knew there must have been a tie-in between Carla and the robber. What if she knew him? Why beat her up and want to take her hostage? Had she maybe recognized his voice or something about him and he'd realized it? If he'd taken her hostage... Then she would be dead right now.

Davy felt as if the clock were ticking. If the robber, now killer, thought she

knew something about him, then he wasn't finished. He wouldn't know that she couldn't remember. Davy cautioned himself that this was all speculation.

Either way, Carla had to remember, he thought, feeling the urgency. She had to help the feds catch him. Until then, Davy couldn't shake the feeling that Carla was in danger. He quickly reminded himself that Willie was sitting outside her hospital room to make sure she was safe. He'd insisted. As long as she was in the hospital, one of them would be keeping an eye on her, but once she got out...

Davy told himself they'd cross that bridge when they came to it. In the meantime, he'd do whatever he could to help find the robber turned killer.

* * *

JUD WAS HEADED home after lying low until the time he usually came home since quitting his night job. He'd just started to turn down his street when he saw a vehicle he didn't recognize behind him. He made a quick turn and then another and another. When he looked back, there was no one following him, but his heart was pounding. He couldn't even imagine how many people were looking for him or what would happen if he were caught.

He took a long way to the house he and Jesse rented. He knew she'd be at work. He parked and realized he couldn't just carry two huge bags of money into the house. Not in this neighborhood. He covered the bags on his floorboard with an old blanket, then let himself into the house. It was almost dark. He'd wait. The truck was locked, and he figured in this neighborhood no one stole from each other since they were all piss-poor.

After showering, he pulled on a white T-shirt, some faded jeans and an old pair of sneakers. He wadded up his smoky, bloody clothing and picked up his boots and socks. He hated to part with the boots since they had sentimental value, but he knew he had to. Who knew what kind of evidence was on them?

In the backyard he put everything into the burn barrel and set it on fire. He quickly stepped away and went back into the house. The sneakers would have to do until he could buy new boots. He smiled as he remembered that he now had money. He could buy a good pair. Hell, he could buy two pairs.

He tried to call Jesse, but her phone went to voice mail. He checked the time. Her shift would have just started unless she'd been called in early. He decided he'd stop by her work, something he rarely did after she'd asked him not to.

But he had to see her to tell her that he'd gotten all the money and that everything was going to be all right. As he parked at the rear of the building in a spot for employees only, he saw her standing just outside with another employee, who was male. The man was smoking and laughing at something Jesse had said. They both wore scrubs. Jealousy reared its ugly head to see her laughing with another man, but he tamped it back down.

Jesse said something to the man, who stubbed out his cigarette and hurried back inside as Jud got out and sauntered toward her. He checked his expression before he reached her. If he acted jealous, they'd argue about it. He didn't want to fight with her. They had more important things to discuss.

On the way here, he'd heard on the radio that one of the bank employees had been taken to the hospital. He couldn't be sure it was Carla. The bank manager was old enough that he could have had a heart attack. But he had a bad feeling the patient upstairs was Carla Richmond. Which meant that she wasn't dead. Not yet anyway. He had to know her condition.

As he neared the employee entrance of the hospital, he caught a whiff of food coming from the cafeteria and realized the patients would be getting their meal trays soon.

Chapter Nine

Jud walked toward the back steps where Jesse had been laughing with the man. He kept his head down until he got his emotions under control. He didn't want her to see that he was jealous, or worse, now that they had all this money, that he was uncertain what to do next. He was also scared that he hadn't covered his tracks well enough.

But the moment he lifted his head and his gaze met hers, he saw that she knew. Her eyes were wide, the words coming out on a breath. "You got it?"

He swallowed and nodded, hating that he was going to have to tell her everything. If he lied, she'd know it. It was like she had a sixth sense when it came to him. He didn't want to talk about killing Buddy and the others. She would see that it had gutted him. He quickly told her what was important.

When he got to the part about Carla Richmond seeing his tattoo, the one he'd had done on a boys' trip to Butte, she'd sat down hard on the top step.

By the time he told her about trying to take the executive loan officer hostage and Buddy interfering and then later going for his gun, Jesse dropped her face into her hands.

He sat down beside her, wanting to take her in his arms, but he was half-afraid to touch her. This couldn't be the end of them. He had all this money. What if she decided to go to the cops? He started to tell her his plan for the two of them to leave the country and make a brand-new life for themselves, when she lifted her head.

Jud was surprised to see that she hadn't been crying. Instead, she was dry-eyed. Nor did she look angry. He felt confused and almost afraid. Maybe she would rise and march inside and tell someone to call the cops. Or maybe she would—

"Carla Richmond's on my floor," she said, so calmly he felt a chill wriggle up his backbone. "I'll take care of it. From what I've heard, she doesn't remember anything. You need to get the money off the floorboard of your pickup, Jud. Remember that hike we went on just outside of town? That little rock cave?"

He remembered the two of them naked as jaybirds before winter set in next to that cave as he screwed her against one of the rocks.

"Hide the bags in the cave. Then tomorrow you need to go to work."

He started to argue that neither of them ever had to work again, but she cut him off.

“We need to act as normal as possible. You go to work as if nothing has happened.” She rose to her feet. “I got called in for a double today. They’ll be serving dinner. I need to go. So do you.”

“Jesse—”

“Don’t worry. I’m going to help you. But those two bill collectors stopped by earlier. When you go back to the house, the men could be there. Before you put the money in the cave, take out just over fifteen hundred dollars from the bag with the money from the tellers’ tills. Those will be the bills not banded. Tell your associates you hocked some stuff or sold your grandmother’s knickknacks and that you can get more. That should hold them off for now.”

“But Carla Richmond saw my tattoo. If she tells the feds... I think we should leave town now.”

She cupped his face in her hands, forcing him to meet her eyes. “Like I said, I’ll take care of it. Leave everything to me.”

He stared at her. She wasn’t upset with him. She wasn’t going to leave him and never look back. She wasn’t going to the cops. She was going to help him.

For the first time since the robbery, he felt as if he could breathe. He bent to quickly kiss her and headed for his pickup, his step lighter. Buddy had been wrong about Jesse, Jud thought with a grin. She was definitely the woman for him.

* * *

BY THE TIME a woman in scrubs brought her dinner, Carla knew she was getting some of her strength back because she was hungry. Her headache had lessened, and she was starting to feel more like her old self—until she remembered everything that had happened to her at the bank and how close she’d come to dying. Then she had to be careful not to have another anxiety attack.

Davy said she was safe now, but she didn’t feel like it. Nor did she think he believed it. Why else did he think she needed either him or his brothers stationed outside her hospital room door?

The door opened and she got a glimpse of Willie Colt out in the hallway.

He winked at her and gave her a thumbs-up as a young, attractive blonde in scrubs brought in her dinner tray.

“Hope you’re hungry,” the woman said cheerfully as she began to arrange the tray in front of Carla. “How are you feeling?”

“Better.”

“That’s good.” The blonde finished with the service and seemed to hesitate. “I heard what happened. How awful.” The aide took her hand and squeezed it quickly before letting go. “You must have been terrified.”

“I was.”

“Your memory of what happened has returned?”

Carla shook her head. “Just bits and pieces, but enough to be terrified all over again.”

The blonde tsk-tsked and shook her head. “Well, it’s over now and you can put it all behind you. Enjoy your dinner. I’ll be back to pick up your tray.” She smiled. “So you’d better eat everything.”

Carla returned her smile, promising to do her best.

At the door, the young woman turned to look back at her. “There’s an FBI agent outside and a friend of yours. I’m going to tell them that you’re eating and that they need to leave you alone.”

“Thank you,” Carla said as the aide left.

Why was the FBI agent waiting to talk to her again? She’d told him that she didn’t remember anything. Which wasn’t quite true, she realized. But when she replayed their conversation in her head, she realized the agent suspected the robbery had been an inside job—and that she’d been a part of it. No wonder he’d rattled her.

Not that she couldn’t see why he was suspicious. Why had the robber only hurt her? She recalled looking up and seeing him standing in her office doorway as if he’d come looking for her. His reaction to her seemed too aggressive even from the start. She couldn’t shake the feeling that he knew her and had reason to dislike her. Had she turned him down for a loan? Could he be someone from town, someone who had a grudge against her for some reason? Someone she’d offended back in high school?

She’d just assumed the robbers weren’t from around Lonesome. But what if they were? What if the man who’d attacked her lived in Lonesome? She thought of the tattoo on the man’s neck. She was sure that she’d never seen it before. But most of the time it could be covered, she thought and frowned. She remembered greasy-looking longish dark hair that had escaped the mask

covering his head.

So he could have a house down the street. He could be the man who waited on her at the grocery store or the one with the low ponytail who delivered her mail. He could be anyone and she wouldn't recognize him until it was too late. That made this situation all the more frightening.

But the FBI agent had it all wrong. She wished she knew how to convince him of that. He needed to be looking for the robber turned killer and not spend his time coming after her.

Her stomach growled. She realized that the last thing she'd eaten was Christmas sugar cookies a friend had dropped off that morning as she was headed for the bank and shopping. While she was feeling stronger, she knew if she hoped to feel like herself again she had to eat. More than anything, she wanted to feel strong and capable again—not vulnerable and scared like she was right now.

She began to uncover the small dishes on the tray.

* * *

THE TWO GOONS who'd roughed him up the last time were waiting for Jud when he returned home—just as Jesse had warned him. Before he'd left the hospital parking lot, he'd taken Jesse's advice and had the fifteen hundred and sixty-five dollars from the bank tills ready. He'd left the rest of the money in the small cave and had driven home, prepared with the story about stealing his grandmother's jewelry and knickknacks. He must have looked like the kind of guy who would steal from his grandmother because they bought his story—just as Jesse had said they would.

One of the goons had cuffed him hard upside the head, warning him he'd better have the rest next week, before they drove away. By next week he planned to be miles from here, he thought as he rubbed the side of his head and went inside the house.

The past few days had exhausted him. He went to bed early, determined that when he arrived at his delivery job in the morning, no one would suspect anything.

Still, it would be hard pretending that nothing had happened. He'd planned the robbery around the two days he had off.

The moment he clocked in and headed to the loading area, he heard people talking about the bank job. He couldn't help feeling superior as he joined

everyone and began loading boxes into his truck.

“I wonder how much money they got away with,” one of his coworkers was saying. “How much money does the Lonesome bank keep in the vault?”

He listened to them speculate and smiled to himself. He enjoyed this. He kept thinking, wouldn’t they all have a cow if they knew just how much the score had landed—and that he had every dollar of it?

There were five of them busy loading the trucks this morning. Because of the upcoming holidays, there were more packages than usual, which was why he’d been hired. The only time he felt uncomfortable was when they talked about the deaths of the robbery accomplices.

“Pretty cold-blooded to kill them all like that,” one of the men said.

“Greed. You know that’s all it was,” another said.

Jud bit his lip to keep from saying anything.

Their only female coworker added her two cents. “Bet he was the one who almost killed Carla Richmond. He was the kind who would kill his accomplices.”

Jud had never liked the fiftysomething know-it-all Cheryl. “What makes you think it was a man? Could have been a woman.”

That got a burst of laughter and put his female coworker on the defensive.

“Well, now he has all the money,” she said.

“Wonder what he’ll do with it,” someone said.

“Spend it,” another said.

“If it was a woman, she’d be smart enough to hang on to it and bide her time,” Cheryl said as she hefted a large box onto her truck.

The others scoffed and Jud joined in.

“Anyone heard how Carla is doing?” she asked.

One of the young men spoke up. “My girlfriend’s cousin is an orderly at the hospital. He said she can’t remember anything. She has a concussion. But that doesn’t mean that her memory won’t come back.”

Jud hoped that wasn’t true. “I had one of those. I never could remember what had happened to me.” He glanced up. No one was paying him any mind. They seemed to think that his interest had been in the concussion part of the story.

“She probably can’t help the feds catch the robbers anyway,” one of the men said. “I heard they had on Santa suits that covered everything. Doubt they’ll ever catch the one who’s left.” Jud could only hope.

“I heard the robber who hurt her had tried to take her hostage,” Cheryl

said. “Wonder what he had against her?”

“Or what he had against his accomplices,” another added with a laugh.

“He might have just been having a bad day,” Jud said and wished he hadn’t, although that didn’t stop him. “Or maybe they turned on him, pulling a gun with a plan to kill him. It could have been a double cross that ended with him being forced to defend himself.”

Their boss had come out then and everyone fell silent and kept working. But he could feel Cheryl giving him the eye as if she knew more than she did. It was boring and repetitious manual labor. But it wasn’t hard, and it paid the bills—just barely, and had he not been a temporary employee for the holidays, he would get an extra week’s vacation after five years.

The thought made him laugh out loud, which only made Cheryl squint her eyes at him. He didn’t care. He had a ton of money hidden outside town. He wouldn’t be needing that extra week of vacation. Let these fools break their backs day after day here. Judson Bruckner was putting this hick town behind him soon.

The trucks were almost loaded. He was glad he’d come into work. It was interesting hearing what people were saying, especially about Carla Richmond and what she might—or might not—have told the feds.

“I won’t feel safe until he’s caught,” a coworker said as they finished up and he slammed the rear door of his truck. There would be more to load tomorrow and a ton of packages to deliver. “Robbing the bank was one thing, but killing his accomplices?” The man shook his head. “If he’s still around, I’d feel better if he was caught.” The others agreed.

“But why would he stay around?” Cheryl asked.

“I agree,” another said. “I’m sure he’s long gone from here.”

“I know I would be,” one of the men added. “I’d be anxious to spend all that money.”

“Which would get you caught,” Cheryl said in that annoying tone of hers. “Some of that money is marked. I had a friend who worked in a bank. You know they keep marked money at every bank just in case they get robbed.”

“I didn’t know that,” one of the men said. “So he can’t spend that money? That would really suck.”

“Couldn’t he tell which bills were marked?” Jud asked as casually as he could over the sudden rush of his pulse. He’d heard about bank employees dropping into a robber’s bag a container of ink that blew up. He’d checked the bags when he’d gotten the money out for the goons. All the bills were just

fine.

“They’re not marked like that. They keep bills that have consecutive serial numbers they watch for. Everyone will be looking for those bills,” she said. “He’ll have trouble spending the money—even years from now—and not getting caught.”

Jud ground his teeth. Why hadn’t he known that? Had Buddy? Had the others? He thought of the bags of money and swore silently. Carla Richmond would have known that. She would have known it the whole time they were robbing the bank. That woman.

Then he had a thought that stopped him dead. He’d just given over fifteen hundred dollars of the money to Wes and Fletch, the two goons who worked for the loan shark.

His blood ran cold at the thought of what would happen if they pocketed some of the money, tried to spend it, were arrested—and told their boss where they’d gotten the cash.

He reminded himself that Jesse had been specific about him taking the money that had come from the tellers’ tills. He hadn’t, but it was probably fine.

* * *

CARLA WAS PLEASED to see that every lid she lifted on her food tray revealed something that looked and smelled delicious. She really was hungry. She hoped the aide was good to her word and kept the agent out of her room until she’d eaten. She’d already decided that because of the aide’s promise, she would take her time.

Eventually, she would have to tell the FBI agent about the tattoo. She had her doubts whether he could find the man based on it though. But it was a clue. She’d bet that the man’s name started with *J*. That had to be something, right?

She lifted the last lid to see what she had before she took her first bite and swallowed back a scream. On top of what smelled like a brownie lay a napkin. Someone had written in black marker TALK AND YOU DIE.

Chapter Ten

Reflexively, Carla slammed the lid back down as she fought the tears that came on the heels of her shock—and terror. Past her initial alarm came a chilling thought: she wasn't safe here. Not even with an FBI agent and Willie Colt outside her door.

Worse, she knew why she'd been left the note. The man from the bank robbery. He knew that she'd seen his tattoo. He feared that she could identify him. That was why he had been so desperate to take her hostage. He'd wanted to kill her and would have if she'd gotten into that van.

But how did he get a note onto her food tray? Did he work here or did he know someone who did? Not that it mattered. She wasn't safe, and if she told anyone about what she'd seen—

Agent Robert Grover stuck his head into her hospital room doorway.

“Up for a few questions while you eat?” he asked as he stepped into the room, with his partner Deeds right behind him.

Carla made angry swipes at her wet cheeks and pushed away the food tray, her appetite gone. She tried to pull herself together and decide what to do.

As long as she was in the hospital, she wasn't safe. The robber knew what room she was in. How else would he have been able to sneak her the note? He could be a nurse. Or an orderly. Or work in food service. He could be so close that he had seen the agent enter her room just moments ago.

Her thoughts were immediately at war. Wouldn't the smart thing be to tell the agent everything and let him track down the man and put him behind bars? Maybe J, as she now thought of him, had left fingerprints on the dish or the food tray. If he had a record...

But even as she considered it, she reminded herself that Agent Grover thought it was an inside job. He was busy looking at her as a suspect. He might think the tattoo was just a stalling tactic on her part, something to keep him busy tracking down red herrings instead of looking more closely at her.

If she talked, J would know and he'd be coming for her right here at the hospital. Right when she would be at her most vulnerable.

She kept her mouth shut about the note out of terror. After FBI agents Robert Grover and Hank Deeds left, the blonde aide came in to take her tray as if she had been waiting outside in the hallway—as anxious for him to

leave as Carla had been.

“You hardly touched your dinner. Is everything all right?” She didn’t wait for an answer as she started to reach for the dessert dish lid with the note under it. “You sure you don’t at least want your brownie?”

“No!” She’d said it a little too sharply, because the young woman looked at her with concern, but pulled back her hand without lifting the lid. “I’m just not hungry. Please take it and throw it all away.”

“If you’re sure,” the blonde said before picking up the tray. “Maybe you’ll be hungrier in the morning. Did I hear that you’re going to be released tomorrow afternoon? At least you’ll be with us for a while longer.” The young woman smiled. “That’s good news, even though I’m sure you’re anxious to get out of here. Once you get home, maybe then your appetite will return.”

Carla watched her go, feeling even sicker than she had been earlier. She wasn’t being released until tomorrow afternoon. If she lived that long, she was going home to an empty house. Not only did she live alone, but also her house was outside town. Her closest neighbor was a half mile away.

She thought of her cozy little house, which had always been her sanctuary. Now it felt ominous, set back off the road, the home surrounded by dense pines on three sides and large boulders at the edge of the river on the other. How quickly the privacy and quiet turned into something else—a place where she wouldn’t see the killer coming until it was too late.

How foolish she’d been to think it was over. She’d thought that she’d dodged a bullet when J hadn’t taken her hostage, when she’d awakened in the hospital and realized it was only a concussion and she was going to live.

Then she’d read the note. It was a reminder that he not only hadn’t forgotten about her, but that he could get to her at any time, even later when she was sleeping.

Carla could feel her pulse thumping hard just beneath her skin as the reality of her situation hit her. She had a killer worried that she might give him away to the feds. She had a federal agent who thought the robbery had been an inside job with her help. She wasn’t safe. Not here in the hospital. Not anywhere until J was caught.

Maybe she should have told the agent. Maybe if she’d shown him the note... It was too late now. Worse, she doubted J would trust her to keep her mouth shut. Which meant he wasn’t finished with her.

When Davy walked through her hospital door and rushed to her bedside,

she threw her arms around him. She was so glad to see him.

* * *

“HEY,” DAVY SAID, unable not to grin as he held her. It felt good having her in his arms again. He told himself not to make more of it than it probably was. Carla was scared after her ordeal at the bank. Who wouldn't be?

“I wasn't expecting that kind of reception, but I liked it,” he joked as he pulled back to look at her and sobered. “What's happened?” He could feel her trembling and swore he could hear her heart pounding it was beating so hard.

She looked toward the door. She was biting at her lower lip, tears welling in her blue eyes, and all the color had leached from her face.

“Talk to me,” he said, drawing her attention back to him. He'd never seen her like this in all the years he'd known her, including the intimate ones. “You're scaring me.”

She let out a strangled bark of a laugh. “*You're* scared? No one's threatening to kill you.”

He stared at her in confusion. He'd talked to Willie before coming into her room. His brother had sworn that the only people who'd come into her room were two FBI agents and a food server. “You were threatened here at the hospital?”

As she nodded, she brushed at her tears. “There was a note on my dinner tray.”

“You still have it?” he asked and looked around. The tray was gone. When he met her eyes again, he knew that so was the note. “How long ago was this? Maybe I can still—”

“No, I don't want you getting involved,” she cried.

He shook his head. “Carla, I am involved. You're in trouble and I'm here for you. Tell me. What was on the note?” He listened as she described it. TALK AND YOU DIE.

“He's here in the hospital,” she cried. “He can get to me at any time.”

“No, he can't,” Davy assured her, angry with himself for leaving her room. Not that it would have kept someone from getting the note to her. But at least they would have the note to give to the feds. “I'm not leaving you alone again.”

She groaned, but no longer appeared to be trembling. “You can't protect

me. Not from a killer. Or the FBI.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The FBI agent who questioned me? I can tell he thinks the robbery was an inside job and that I was involved.” She buried her face in her hands. “If only I hadn’t stopped by my office on my day off…”

“Don’t.” He took her hands in both of his. They felt cold. He rubbed a little heat back into them and thought about the winter they were together. She had always had cold hands and feet. He’d been more than happy to warm them up for her. “You can’t rewrite history. I’ve done some of that and all it does is make you feel worse.” He frowned. TALK AND YOU DIE. “Carla, why would the robber think you know something he doesn’t want you telling the law?”

She looked away for a moment, swallowed and then met his gaze as if making up her mind. “I remembered something about the robbery. He had a tattoo, the man who tried to abduct me.” She described it. “I’m assuming his name starts with *J*. Maybe so does his partner’s.”

“Did you tell the agent?”

Carla shook her head. “I was too afraid.”

“Tell me about the tattoo.”

“It was on his neck close to his shoulder. It was fairly crude. A *J*, then a heart and another *J*. The heart was a little sloppy and the ink had settled in the bottom of it.”

“You need to tell the FBI agent.”

She looked close to tears. “How is it going to help?”

“I’m not sure,” Davy said. “But it’s something. What about his voice? Would you recognize it if you heard it again?”

She shook her head. “It was muffled because of the mask and beard.”

He questioned her about the size of the man. Average in every way. She hadn’t gotten a good look at the other men. She thought one of them, the one who acted like the boss, had been larger, stockier.

“Who do you know whose name begins with *J*—other than my brother?”

She shook her head and winced. He could tell her headache had come back and was starting to hurt again.

“Try not to worry about it,” he said. “I’m staying right here to make sure you’re safe. No one is going to get to you.”

She met his gaze and tears again flooded her eyes. “Davy, I’m being released from the hospital tomorrow.”

He didn't have time to react before there was a knock at the door and a blonde in scrubs stuck her head in. She had an armful of flowers. So did the candy striper behind her.

"I'm sorry—you have company," the blonde said as she put down two vases of flowers and took three more from the young candy striper behind her. She placed them around the room. "Seems you have a lot of friends."

He watched the aide fuss with one of the bouquets. "Is this the woman who brought your dinner tray?" he whispered to Carla, who nodded. "Excuse me," he said to the blonde. "Were you in charge of her dinner tray?"

The woman looked surprised. She carefully straightened one of the vases before she said, "The patient said she wasn't hungry and asked me to take it away. If she's changed her mind, I'd be happy to get her another tray."

He shook his head. "Where is that original tray?"

She seemed confused. "I took it down to the kitchen. By now the dishes have been scraped clean and loaded in the dishwasher." She looked past him to Carla. "Did you leave something on the tray that you didn't mean to?"

"Never mind," Davy said and felt the woman's gaze turn to him. Something like anger flickered in those blue eyes before she dropped her lashes.

"I'm sorry, but visiting hours are over," she said to him.

"I'm not visiting. I'll be staying as long as Carla remains in the hospital."

The blonde aide raised a brow. "Sure? I can't imagine you would be comfortable—"

"No problem."

It wasn't until she'd left that he saw Carla frowning at him as if surprised by his reaction to the attendant. "At this point, we have to suspect everyone," he said. "She had access to your dinner tray." Carla's eyes widened in alarm. "I didn't see a name tag, did you?" She shook her head. "I'll get James and Tommy to find out who she is."

He moved to the side of her bed. "In the meantime, I'm not going anywhere. Don't worry." But even as he said it, he was more than worried. He had feared that her life might be in danger. Now they knew it was.

Chapter Eleven

Carla told herself that she couldn't do this as she listened to Davy inform the doctor that he would be sleeping in the reclining chair next to Carla's bed. The last thing she wanted was for him to spend his Christmas holidays here in this hospital. But she couldn't send him away either. His being here made her feel safe and less afraid.

Her head ached and she felt sick to her stomach. She hated feeling so vulnerable. She was the one who helped others—not the other way around. She didn't like asking for help. Especially from Davy Colt, the man she'd given an ultimatum to all those years ago.

But she'd never had a killer after her before. Was this going to be her life until the masked man was caught—if he was ever caught? Running scared and being afraid of everyone who crossed her path? "I can't do this," she said when Davy got off the phone. "I can't ask you to either."

She was so grateful to him, but what if the killer wasn't caught? Davy couldn't put his life on hold. She wouldn't allow that. He didn't have that many more years to rodeo. She knew what it meant to him and felt sick at how she'd demanded he give it up if he loved her. She'd forced him to choose—and he had, breaking both of their hearts. He'd begged her to come on the road with him, calling it an adventure they would talk about when they were old.

But she'd refused, telling him he needed to grow up and quit being so selfish. She cringed now at the memory. Given the way she'd treated him, she had no right to ask him to keep her safe now.

"Hey, you didn't ask," he said as he moved to the bed. He brushed a lock of her hair back from her forehead, his fingertips gliding over her skin and sending a shiver through her. "I'm here for you. Don't worry. The feds are looking for him and my brothers are beating the bushes for information on him. We've got this."

She couldn't help the relief that welled inside her. "Thank you, Davy."

His gaze softened. "Just try to get some rest. I'll be here."

As silly as it seemed, she was exhausted. She closed her eyes. Davy was here. He was the only man who'd ever made her feel completely safe. Within seconds, she drifted off into a deep, dreamless sleep.

* * *

WHILE CARLA SLEPT, Davy placed a call to the Colt Brothers Investigation office and filled James in on the latest information, including the tattoo and note.

“She needs to tell the FBI agent about both,” James said.

“I agree, but not until she’s out of the hospital. We can’t take the chance that J will find out. We know he has access to her here. Better for her to tell the agent after she’s at home. Not that I suspect the feds are going to like it.”

James agreed. “The agent is definitely going to be skeptical about this new information. She just now remembered the tattoo? As for the note, because she didn’t keep it, there is no evidence that she’s telling the truth. If he already suspects she’s involved, he’s going to think she’s lying to cover up something. But don’t worry, if the feds don’t follow up on this, we will.”

“Think you can get information on hospital employees with names that begin with *J*?”

“I’ll do what I can,” his brother said. “As for the tattoo clue, it could be an old girlfriend, so don’t hang too much hope on the second *J*. The first *J* could be a nickname. Unfortunately, Tommy and I are both working other cases too and Willie is training over at the sheriff’s department. Do you think you can hit the tattoo shops?”

It would give him something to do besides worry. The problem was, he couldn’t leave Carla. He’d have to take her with him.

“The tattoo doesn’t sound all that memorable,” James was saying. “Have Carla sketch out what she remembers. I’ll let you know if I get the hospital employee list.”

Davy knew James was right. Neither lead might be all that helpful, another reason the feds would suspect her. “She’s getting released from the hospital tomorrow.”

“What are you going to do then?” his brother asked.

“I’m not sure,” he said, looking toward the hospital bed where she was sleeping peacefully for the moment. “I’m not sure what she’ll *allow* me to do. She’s scared right now and still healing. Once she is strong again... Well, you know how she is, and given our history, well, it’s not like we’ve ever agreed on the future.”

“Don’t you have a ride coming up in the New Year?”

“I can’t leave knowing she’s in danger.”

James sighed. “Davy, have you considered what you’re going to do if this case isn’t solved for months or maybe ever?”

“I guess I’ll cross that bridge when I get to it.”

He could hear his brother’s concern in the silence that followed.

“Well, we’ll all do what we can to help. Keep us in the loop.”

A silence fell between them but neither disconnected. “I suppose you heard,” Davy said. “The reason the robbers were able to get away from the cops was because of the train crossing where Dad was killed.”

“I heard. Sounds like at least one of the robbers was familiar with that unregulated crossing and maybe even knew its history,” James said.

“Which could mean he’s a local.”

“Yeah.” His brother was silent for a moment before he said, “The two cases aren’t tied together.”

Davy didn’t answer for a moment. “I know. It just brings it all back. You still working on Dad’s case?”

“You know I am. Tommy’s helping. We’re trying to get the file on the case now that we have a new sheriff. Our lawyer thinks we should be able to since Dad’s death was ruled an accident.”

“Except that we don’t believe that.”

“No, we don’t.”

* * *

JUD HAD TRIED to call Jesse numerous times during work, but the calls had always gone to voice mail. He’d left messages. “Call back. I need to know what’s going on.” Each message had sounded more frantic, but still she hadn’t returned his calls.

He was thinking the worst had happened when he finally finished his shift and drove home. As he came down the street, he looked for any vehicles he didn’t recognize. Maybe the feds had already made him. He knew that was a long shot. They couldn’t have this quickly. Not based on a tattoo—and that was if Carla Richmond had told them what she’d seen.

Even if Carla remembered him coming into the bank for a loan weeks ago, she didn’t know his name. He’d never given it to her. Nor did they travel in the same circles. He also hadn’t left any fingerprints or DNA at the bank. Or in the getaway car.

Knowing all this still didn’t give him any peace of mind. Too much was at

stake. He hated loose ends. That's why he was glad that he'd parted ways with Buddy, Rick and Eli. He'd learned a long time ago not to trust anyone. Like his old man used to say, two people can keep a secret—if one of them is dead.

No one even knew that he'd robbed the bank.

Except Jesse.

The thought made his pulse spike. She wouldn't turn on him. He trusted her with his life, didn't he? He thought about how well she'd taken the news earlier. But what if she'd just been pretending?

His breath came out in a rush of both relief and worry when he saw her sedan parked by the house. The curtains were closed in the front window, a light glowing behind them. There were no other vehicles around. He thought about driving around the block to make sure none were idling in the alley. But if he had, he'd feel guilty about not trusting her, so he pulled in next to her car.

He and Jesse were cut from the same cloth, his mother would have said. From what little she'd told him about herself, he knew that neither of them had ever colored inside the lines. They'd always taken the easiest way, no matter how many rules they had to break. Some people would have thought that dishonest, but he knew that he and Jesse just thought of it as surviving in a world that was against them since birth. His mother would have said he was making an excuse for his despicable behavior. But then his mother was no saint herself, was she?

Jud cut his pickup's engine and sat for a moment, staring at the front door. He wouldn't know if she'd betrayed him until he got out and went inside. If she had... Well, then he'd be going to prison. That's if he got lucky and didn't get the chair. Fortunately, Montana hadn't executed anyone in a long time. He didn't want to be the one they fired up Old Sparky for.

On what felt like a long walk to the house, he realized electric chairs were a thing of the past—at least in Montana. They'd gone to lethal injection a long time ago, he now remembered hearing. That didn't relieve him much as he opened the front door of his house expecting to see Jesse sitting in the living room with the feds—after making a deal.

Chapter Twelve

Jesse came out of the kitchen bringing the smell of fried chicken like a cloud around her. He could hear music playing at the back of the house. It could have been any other day. Except that Jesse hadn't brought home takeout. She was apparently *cooking* dinner.

Not just that. She looked happy.

Jud frowned as he glanced past her, still expecting the feds to come bursting out, weapons drawn and a SWAT team hiding in the alley.

"I hope you're hungry," she said, smiling as she leaned in to kiss him. "I made us a special meal to celebrate. Smarter than going out for dinner."

They were celebrating? He wondered if this was his last meal before he ended up behind bars. It dawned on him that making a deal with the feds was just one way she could have betrayed him. There was also Leon Trainer, the loan shark who'd sent the goons to collect his debt. She could nark him out to Leon.

He realized that Jesse had all kinds of ways to come out of this on top. He thought of the other women he'd known. None of them would have given a thought to double-crossing him. Did he really believe this one was different?

"What are we celebrating?" he asked, the words coming out slow and awkward.

"Are you kidding?" She laughed, making him feel as if he should go out and come in again. Had she forgotten how much trouble they were in? Leon's goons wouldn't hesitate to refresh her memory. Good luck convincing the feds that she wasn't involved from the beginning.

"Carla Richmond didn't tell the feds."

He shook his head as if to clear it. "How do you know that?"

Jesse grinned. "I know because I took care of it."

He suddenly had a vision of her holding a pillow down on Carla Richmond's face at the hospital. "How did you—"

"I'll tell you over dinner. Come on, I don't want the chicken to burn."

Like a sleepwalker, he followed her into the kitchen. She had the table set and candles burning. She wasn't kidding. This was a celebratory dinner. He just wished he felt like celebrating after the day he'd had.

But he wasn't in handcuffs. Yet. And Jesse was cooking. His stomach

growled as she put a bowl of real mashed potatoes on the table and motioned him into his chair. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had anything but instant potatoes from some drive-through.

She plated the fried chicken, put it down next to the mountain of potatoes and then she brought out a bowl of corn. He could see the can still sitting on the counter, but he wasn't about to complain that it wasn't fresh from the cob.

"Eat," she said as she joined him.

He began to load his plate, not sure how much longer he could wait to hear what was going on. "Jesse—"

"Not until you take a bite of my chicken. My grandma used to make the best fried chicken. She taught me how. I'd thought I'd forgotten." She loaded her own plate while humming along with the song on the radio.

He took a bite out of a drumstick. It was delicious and he said as much. She beamed at the compliment. He took another bite and asked around it, "Come on, Jesse, what did you do?"

"I made sure she got the message."

He listened while she explained how she'd gotten a note onto Carla Richmond's dinner tray and been the one to bring the woman's tray to her hospital room.

"You should have seen her face when I went back in to get the tray," Jesse said and laughed. "She was scared spitless. Couldn't eat any of her meal." She took a big bite of the mashed potatoes, still grinning.

"How do you know she didn't tell the feds?"

Jesse gave him an impatient look. "Because the note was still on top of the brownie. Don't you see? If she was going to tell, she would have taken the note and shown it to the federal agent. He was right outside her door waiting for her to finish her meal." She shrugged as if all this was child's play for her. "When I came in to take her tray, the lid was still on, the note under it. She could have given it to the feds, but she didn't. She got the message." She laughed, then sobered. "There's one problem though."

He had to wait as she took a bite of her dinner. He wondered if she'd heard about some of the money being marked.

"There's a long, lanky cowboy with her," Jesse said as she chewed. "Davy Colt? You know him?"

Jud swore. "Everyone in four counties around us knows about the Colt brothers. They're wild rodeo cowboys." At least they used to be, he realized. He'd lived in Lonesome long enough to know who they were—not that he'd

ever met any of them. But he'd heard about them. "Two of them took over their father's old private-investigation business on Main Street. I think another was just hired as a deputy sheriff."

"Should we be worried?"

He gave it a moment's thought. "Naw. I doubt bronc riders know what they're doing out of the arena."

She gave him the eye for a moment as if trying to tell whether he was being truthful or just trying to mollify her. "Well, Davy Colt seems to think that Carla might be in danger. He's staying the night with her at the hospital." She blew out a puff of air, lifting her blond bangs from her forehead. The kitchen was small and hot. They usually ate takeout in front of the television in the living room.

"You think she told Davy Colt about the note?"

Jesse shrugged. "Depends on how much she trusts him. They seem close but not like they're involved. There's something between them though. He's way too protective. You sure he and his brothers won't be a problem?"

"They don't have anything because she doesn't have anything. If she knew who I was, she would have already told and I'd be behind bars."

"What about that tattoo?"

He shrugged, playing it down. "So she knows our names start with *J*. Good luck finding us—even if she does talk to the feds."

"She'd better not or she'll regret it," Jesse said.

He was beginning to think that Buddy had been right. "The only way they'll catch us is if I make a move on her."

Jesse didn't seem to be listening. Instead, she had a strange look on her face, her eyes narrowed, her lip caught in her teeth. "Carla's being released from the hospital today. I'll know if she talks."

* * *

CARLA OPENED HER eyes to sunshine streaming in the hospital room window. She couldn't believe that she'd slept through the whole night. For a moment she forgot where she was. When it all came back in a rush, she sat up abruptly.

"Easy, Sleeping Beauty," Davy said as he approached. He'd been standing on the far side of the room by the window. She hadn't seen him until he spoke. Her expression must have given her away. "You thought I'd left."

She started to deny it but stopped herself. “I was just startled for a few moments.”

“Have I ever given you reason not to trust me?” he asked, frowning.

“No.” She chastised herself. If anyone wasn’t trustworthy, it was her. Davy had trusted her, thinking they had a future all those years ago. Then she’d given him the ultimatum—her or the rodeo. She’d known it was a mistake the moment the demand left her lips, but there had been no taking it back.

She’d never forgotten the hurt she’d seen in his eyes. He’d pleaded with her not to make their relationship an either-or. But she’d been adamant, determined to make him choose. When he hadn’t, she’d broken up with him and started dating Levi Johnson. She’d known about the animosity between Davy and Levi. It was one of the reasons she’d jumped at going out with him when he’d called. News of her breakup with Davy had spread fast and Levi had moved quickly.

Carla realized fast that she and Levi had both wanted to hurt Davy. After a few dates, she’d told Levi that she couldn’t see him anymore. By then Davy had gone back to the rodeo circuit, so he probably hadn’t even known anyway.

That she’d purposely tried to hurt him was one of her deepest regrets. That he had now slept in her hospital room on the visitor’s chair to protect her only made her feel worse about the past.

“I’ve given you reason not to trust me though,” she said quietly.

Davy shook his head and gave her a smile. “All water under the bridge.”

She felt tears sting her eyes and had to look away as the doctor came in to tell her she could get dressed to go home. It was no surprise Davy had had one of his brothers get her clothes from her house.

“I’m going to step out into the hall while you change,” Davy said, pretending he didn’t see how close she was to crying.

Carla changed in the bathroom once he was gone. The clothing she’d been wearing the day of the robbery was now in the hands of the feds. Davy had picked up her coat, hat and scarf from her office at the bank.

As she came out of the bathroom, she saw an aide waiting with a wheelchair. Not the same aide who’d brought her food and flowers yesterday.

“We can have your flowers sent to your house if you like,” the woman said.

Carla felt ashamed because she didn’t want to take the flowers. She’d hardly acknowledged the ones from her boss and coworkers. Her life had

been so much about her work that she'd let other friendships go, hardly ever seeing old friends who'd stayed in town. How had her life become so small? And now there was a killer threatening to destroy it?

"Could you share the flowers with other patients?" she asked the aide, who quickly nodded.

"I have some elderly patients who would love them," the woman said, pulling all the cards from the bouquets and handing them to her. "I'll take care of it."

As the aide wheeled her from the hospital room, Carla saw Davy waiting for her just outside the door. Sometimes she forgot how handsome he was with his longish dark hair and those incredible blue eyes. But what struck her most was how genuine he was. It made her heart ache for what could have been and the lost years between them.

* * *

DAVY HELPED CARLA into his pickup and hurried around to slide behind the wheel. He knew this woman, so he could tell that she was uncomfortable being dependent on him. And yet she was scared and didn't want to be alone.

He knew she would balk when he suggested he stay at her house—at least for a while. James was right. It could take months for J to be found. Worse, he might never be caught. If so, Carla would have to look over her shoulder the rest of her life. She would never feel safe. Davy couldn't bear that for her, knowing how she prided herself on her independence.

"This isn't the way to my house," she said after he'd driven only a few blocks.

"Nope." He turned down the alley and came to a stop behind the Colt Brothers Investigation building. Shutting off the motor, he turned toward her. "I want you to stay here for just a little while. James and Tommy redid the upstairs apartment. There's now two bedrooms and two baths." He was talking fast, hoping he could get out his plan before she stopped him. "I'm staying up there, but I'll give you all the space you want. Please say you'll at least stay here until you're cleared to go back to work."

He took a breath. He could see her fighting the idea. "Or at least through the holidays. You'd be doing me a huge favor. You know how my brothers are. They'll cut me some slack with you around."

She sighed and looked over at him. Her expression said that he wasn't

fooling her. She knew why he wanted her to stay here—in a place that he would find easier to protect her.

“Just until I’m cleared to go back to work,” she said. “I had some time off coming anyway. After that, you go back to the rodeo, and I go home. Agreed?”

Davy saw that he had no choice but to agree, so he nodded. The truth was, if the killer wasn’t caught, he couldn’t see how he could ever leave her.

Chapter Thirteen

Jud felt as if he was being watched—and had since the robbery. He especially hated doing any shopping in Lonesome, but Jesse had asked him to pick up a few things on his way home. How could he say no to a quick stop at the local grocery store?

Fortunately, it wasn't very busy. Maybe if he hurried... He brushed a lock of hair back from his face as he glanced through the frosty glass of the ice-cream freezer in front of him and tried to remember what kind of ice cream she'd asked for. There were dark circles under his eyes. He hadn't slept well. Last night, he'd awakened to find Jesse lying next to him, staring at him. When he'd started to ask if something was wrong, she'd closed her eyes and rolled over.

He studied his reflection. He looked older too, he thought, as if he'd aged ten years since the robbery. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a figure standing a little off to one side behind him. His breath rushed out of him and he half turned to reach for the pistol at his back, but then he saw who it was. Not Davy Colt or any of his brothers. Not the local sheriff or his deputies. Not the feds.

Just an annoying old woman.

He silently cursed her for scaring him. His heart ping-ponged around in his chest as he released his hold on his weapon and said, "You need something, Mrs. Brooks?"

"I need to know why you have a gun stuck in the back of your jeans," she snapped.

"Keep your voice down." He glared at her. She was old and frail and a little more hunched over than he remembered, but that tongue of hers was sharp and lethal. The worst busybody in the entire county had just seen him staring at himself in a freezer glass door before going for his gun. She seemed to be waiting impatiently for an answer as if it was any of her business.

"These are dangerous times," he said. He'd started carrying the gun, except at work. "I'm sure you heard about the bank being robbed."

"Not to mention the robber's accomplices being murdered," she said, still eyeing him suspiciously.

"Exactly." He turned back to the freezer, opened the door and took out a

quart of vanilla ice cream. “Jesse’s making peach cobbler. Got to have ice cream,” he said, hoping to change the subject. “Better get this home before it melts.” He started to step past her, but she grabbed his arm in her clawlike fingers.

“Jesse Watney?” She spat the name out like a mouthful of dirt. “I heard a rumor that she was back here. So you’ve hooked up with her. Guess you’ve lost your mind. She ever mention that family of hers, who used to live not far from here? No? Suppose she wouldn’t want to scare you away. Bet she hasn’t mentioned her sister, who went missing, either.” Cora Brooks chuckled. “Wonder why she kept that from you.”

“I think you have her confused with someone else. Jesse isn’t from around here. All her kin are down in Idaho.”

“That what she told you?”

He wanted to wipe that knowing smile off her face. “My ice cream is melting.” He stepped past her.

“Best watch your back,” Cora called after him. “You have no idea who you’re living with.” She let out a cackle that raised the hair on the back of his neck. “I’d keep that gun handy if I were you.”

“What was that about?” the checkout woman asked.

“Just Cora. You know how she is,” he said, more shaken than he wanted to admit.

“She seems to have nothing to do but butt in to other people’s business,” the checker said. “Half the time I don’t think she knows what she’s talking about.”

Jud wondered about that. “You’ve lived here your whole life. You ever know anyone named Watney?”

The woman thought for a moment before she counted out his change and handed it to him. “You sure it was Watney? I remember a family that lived back in the mountains. But I thought their name was Welsh. Or maybe they were Welsh. I just remember my grandmother talking about them. I think one of them was murdered or disappeared. There was something everyone was whispering about.” She shrugged. “That what Cora was giving you a hard time about?”

“Like you said, she probably doesn’t know what she’s talking about.”

* * *

IT HADN'T TAKEN Agent Grover long to find her. Carla had just gotten settled into one of the bedrooms over the Colt Brothers Investigation office when he and Agent Deeds had shown up downstairs demanding to see her.

Not long before that, she'd made a list of clothing and other items she needed from her house. Willie had gone to take care of that while Tommy had asked her to draw the tattoo as close to the size, shape and design as she could remember.

"I'm no artist, but I'll try." She'd been glad to do it. They were trying so hard to find J, she'd do whatever she could to help them. Carla knew the only chance she had of getting her life back was for the killer to be caught and locked up.

She'd just finished the drawing when James called to say the agents were waiting downstairs.

"James and I talked about this. I think you should tell him everything," Davy said. "It doesn't matter if he's skeptical or suspicious. The feds' best chance of catching this man is with all the information. But maybe you should have a lawyer present."

Carla shook her head. Although not looking forward to another interrogation by Agent Grover, she wasn't ready to lawyer up. She felt it would only make her look guiltier. She said as much to Davy.

"Well, at any point during the questioning that you change your mind, ask for your lawyer. Give me your phone." He put in his cell number. "All you have to do is hit this button, and I'll come in and make sure the next time he talks to you will be with your lawyer present."

"Thank you."

"You don't have to thank me."

But she did, she thought even as she knew she'd never be able to thank him enough.

The agents were sitting in the office downstairs when she and Davy came through the door. James suggested they talk in the conference room at the back.

"We'll speak with Ms. Richmond alone," Grover said.

"You might want this," Tommy said and stepped toward the copy machine. He handed the agent the copy he'd made.

"What is this?"

"A tattoo. Carla will fill you in," Davy said.

The agent scowled at them before ushering her back into the conference

room and closing the door. He tossed the copy of the tattoo she'd drawn onto the large table and pulled out his phone as Agent Deeds pulled up a chair.

Carla took a seat some distance from them, waiting for Grover to ask his first question. His expression had her on edge. She wasn't used to anyone not trusting her—let alone not liking her for no apparent reason other than a false belief that she was a liar and a crook and in league with a killer.

“What's this?” he asked, indicating the paper with the drawing on it.

“It's the man's tattoo—at least the only one I saw,” she said.

He shoved the drawing over to Deeds. “So you're starting to remember, huh?” he asked after he had his phone recording their conversation. “Now you remember a tattoo. How is that possible, since as I understand it, the men were completely covered in their Santa costumes?”

She told him about the robber scratching at his neck and exposing the tattoo.

When she finished, he said, “That's it? That's all you remember?”

“I remember the robbery, but I didn't see the man who tried to take me hostage other than the slash in the mask for his mouth and the holes for his eyes.” She hesitated, already knowing how this was going to look. “His eyes were dark. I saw the tattoo when he lifted his false beard to scratch his neck.”

“That's it?” Grover said as he looked again at her drawing.

She swallowed, seeing that he thought she was making all of this up. What would he say when she told him about the note? “Something happened while I was in the hospital.”

The agent looked up in surprise. Even Deeds seemed interested.

“Someone put a message on my dinner tray last night. It read ‘Talk and You Die.’”

“Where is the note?” Grover asked, just as she knew he would.

She mentally kicked herself for not keeping the note, but at the time she'd been so shocked and terrified knowing that the killer could get to her even in the hospital that she'd just wanted it gone.

When she told him that he nodded, his mouth twisting in a smirk. “So you didn't keep the evidence that might help us find the person who robbed your bank and killed three of his associates.”

Carla bit her lip. “I was scared. I'm still scared. I'm the one he almost killed. If he'd taken me hostage the way he'd wanted to...” Her voice broke.

“When's the best time to rob a bank?” Agent Grover asked.

The question was so out of the blue that she stared at him. “I beg your

pardon?”

“Isn’t there more money in the vault at Christmastime than any other time because a lot of businesses like to give cash bonuses?”

“I don’t know where you heard that,” she said, but she could see that he already knew the answer. It was true. As one of the top financial officers, she knew there had been more money in the vault than usual. Had the robbers hit the bank any other day, it wouldn’t have been the case. Was that why he thought someone employed by the bank had given the robbers this information, making it an inside job?

“But it’s true, isn’t it,” he said, eyeing her. “The day those men walked armed into your bank was the perfect time to rob a bank that hasn’t been robbed in more than a hundred years.”

She pushed back her chair and rose.

“We aren’t finished here,” Grover snapped. “Let’s stop playing games, Ms. Richmond. You know exactly who robbed the bank. Isn’t that what you were doing in the bank on your day off? Isn’t that why you were the only one who ended up in the hospital? Make it look good. Isn’t that what you told him? You saw the perfect way to—”

“You couldn’t be more wrong. I’m going to say this one more time. I had nothing to do with the robbery. From now on, I won’t be talking to you unless my lawyer is present.” She had her hand in her pocket, gripping her phone, and she pushed the button as the agent started to argue the point. Davy’s phone rang in the other room and an instant later he came through the door.

Davy looked at her face and turned to Grover. “I think we’re done here.”

Grover rose slowly, his gaze locked on her. Deeds got to his feet. He gave her a “what did you expect” look before they started out of the room. “I wouldn’t leave town if I was you, Ms. Richmond,” Grover said over his shoulder. “I suggest you get yourself a lawyer, because we’ll be back.”

* * *

“I THOUGHT YOU said we didn’t have to worry about the Colt brothers,” Jesse demanded the moment Jud picked up the call later that night after she’d gone to work.

He could tell from the background noise that she was standing outside on the back steps at the hospital and that she was smoking and not even trying to

hide it from him. “What’s going on?”

“The administrator’s assistant told me that James Colt asked for the names of all the hospital employees. Why would he want those unless she talked?”

“He’s just fishing. He’s looking for someone whose name begins with *J*.” He laughed, relieved that’s all it was. “So there’s no problem. They aren’t looking for Debra Watney.”

She lowered her voice. “But if the feds get involved, they could find out that I’m not who I say I am.” Jesse had used her twin sister’s name and nurse’s aide experience to get the job at the hospital.

Jud had questioned her at the time, asking, “What happens if your sister shows up or applies for a job somewhere else?”

“We don’t have to worry about Deb,” Jesse had said. “It’s all good.”

Now he thought about what Cora Brooks had said. Was Debra the missing sister?

“The last thing I need is the feds snooping around here,” Jesse was saying.

He told himself that the fear he heard in Jesse’s voice had nothing to do with a missing sister. Cora Brooks didn’t know what she was talking about. “You’re not going to be working there much longer anyway.”

Did he have to remind her that they had a ton of money in a cave? Or that she was the one who’d insisted they continue working at their jobs as if nothing had happened? She’d made a good argument, even though he couldn’t wait to blow this town, this county, this state, maybe even this country.

But she was right. If she quit now, she’d look guilty and the hospital might dig deeper. Same with his boring job. He hadn’t been completely truthful on his application either.

“Did you drive by her house?” Jesse asked.

They’d discussed this and she’d warned him to stay clear of Carla Richmond and her house. “You told me not to.” He’d driven past earlier. The sidewalk hadn’t been shoveled since the latest snowstorm. There was a fresh set of tracks where someone had driven in, gotten out and gone inside the house. Large prints, like a man’s boot size. The tracks had gone in and come back out.

“Well, if you did drive by there, you’d realize that she isn’t there,” Jesse said as if knowing he’d lied. “She’s staying with the Colts for the holidays above that office of theirs.” He wondered how she knew this. “So there is no getting to her until she returns home.”

“I think it’s a sign that we shouldn’t wait,” he said. “We should get the money and leave. She told the feds everything she knows and nothing has really happened. We’re in the clear. Why press our luck?”

He waited for her to agree or put up an argument. All he got was a cold, dead silence. “Jesse?” He thought maybe she’d already disconnected, before he heard her let out an angry sigh.

“I’ve got to go.” This time she did disconnect.

Jud swore under his breath. He knew that sigh. Jesse was in this now up to her neck. He’d told himself the Colt brothers weren’t going to be a problem and now they were. In the meantime, he needed to find out just how hot the bank money might be. If he’d given marked bills to the loan shark, he should hear about it soon. This day just kept getting better.

Before work, he’d spent some time on the computer at the town library. He’d quickly learned what a fool he was. Marked bills, he’d discovered, were often not really “marked.” Instead, banks kept bills with sequential serial numbers—in the tills of the tellers. Once those bills were mixed with those from the main vault, there was no telling which bills were marked and which weren’t. Apparently a countrywide bulletin was issued to all retailers to watch out for those serial numbers.

So now he realized he may have given the wrong people marked bills.

Jud hated feeling so asinine. It made him angry and that anger found itself aimed at Carla Richmond. She knew all of this. She’d known it the day of the robbery. That’s why he’d driven by her house. He hadn’t known what he was going to do. He knew he’d be smart to just let it go. But it made him angrier that he couldn’t get to Carla even if he wanted to.

So he’d passed her house and gone to work feeling out of sorts long before his conversation with Jesse. He felt worse after her second call.

“I was right. Your bank girl talked,” Jesse said without preamble. “The feds know about the note. They’re interviewing everyone with access to her food tray. I’ll be called in at any moment.”

“Lie.” It was the best advice he had to give. “Tell them you didn’t know anything about it. You can handle this.”

“It just makes me so angry that she talked to the feds after I warned her not to,” Jesse was saying. “She can’t get away with this.”

Alarmed by her tone as well as her words, Jud tried to calm her down.

“Easy. We don’t want to do anything rash, right? You’re the one who said we had to keep our heads and play it cool.”

“I’m getting paged. I have to go.” She disconnected, leaving him still alarmed and worried. Jesse could handle this, he assured himself. Unless she let her anger get the better of her, and he knew from experience how dangerous that could be. He’d almost blown the bank job because he’d wanted to punish Carla Richmond for not giving him a loan he hadn’t even applied for. At least now he had a good reason to hate her and want to harm her.

He didn’t even make an excuse this time for driving past her house.

Chapter Fourteen

“Are you feeling all right?” Davy asked when Carla said she was going upstairs to lie down. “Maybe you checked out of the hospital too soon.”

She scoffed at that. “I couldn’t get out of there soon enough. I’m fine, really. I just tire quickly.” He offered to go with her to make sure she made it upstairs.

“Davy, I can climb stairs by myself. Please, I feel helpless enough.”

“Sorry.” He let her go and went back to the office.

“Everything okay?” James asked when he walked in.

“She’s still weak from her injuries.” But he knew that wasn’t the real cause. Like him, she was worried. The feds seemed to think the robbery had been an inside job. Agent Grover especially thought it was Carla. “She needs a good lawyer. You know one?”

“Slim pickings in Lonesome,” his brother said. “You might want to try Missoula. I’ll ask around. How soon do you need one?”

“Yesterday,” Davy said. “What about the lawyer helping us with Dad’s case?”

“Carla needs someone who specializes in defense cases,” James said. “Especially with the FBI involved.”

Davy was worried about her, and he knew that his brother saw it.

“Might have trouble finding one over the holidays,” James said. “Could be a problem.”

That wasn’t the biggest problem, Davy thought. After giving Carla some time alone, he climbed the stairs, hoping she’d gotten some sleep and was feeling better. At least he hoped she was upstairs and hadn’t sneaked out. It would be just like her to feel like she was too much trouble and go home, scared or not.

As he entered the apartment, he saw that she was up and awake. He also saw that she looked anxious. She’d always been so independent. Not like other girls at high school who had to be with their boyfriends 24/7.

Before he could speak, she said, “I’m sorry I snapped at you earlier.” He started to wave it off, but she continued. “You know me. I can’t stay locked up here like a princess hiding in her castle.”

“This space is nice, but it’s no castle.”

“You know what I mean. I’ll stay for a few more days until I’m more myself, but I’d at least like to go over to the house and pick up a few more things. Willie brought everything on my list, but if I’m staying longer...”

“Sure. I’ll take you.” He realized that she was going to make it harder for him to keep her safe, but he was surprised that she’d agreed to come here to begin with. Not that he’d given her much choice. He and his brother Tommy had picked up her car from where she’d parked it downtown and taken it back to her house. He hoped she wouldn’t want it yet. “Whatever you need.”

“I’m not trying to be difficult.”

“You’re not. I would feel the same way.” Their gazes held for a few moments. He did know her, intimately. Or at least he had a long time ago. Had either of them really changed all that much? He didn’t think so. She looked more rested. He could see that she was feeling better, getting stronger and more like her old self. So it would surprise him if she stayed even a few more days.

“Then I want to be part of the investigation,” she said. “I overheard you and James talking about tattoo shops. I want to come along.”

Davy’s first thought was to argue all the reasons she would be safer not to, but he could see that she’d made up her mind and he didn’t like leaving her here alone with everyone out of the office. “Sure, if you’re up to it.”

He saw her visibly relax. He knew she would feel better being involved, but still he worried. The killer was out there. He could be anyone on the street. They wouldn’t know until it was too late.

She was quiet on the drive to the small house she’d bought outside Lonesome. Covered in snow, it looked like a fairy-tale cottage in a snow globe. Davy parked in the unplowed driveway and took in his surroundings. Dark shadows hunkered in the snow-laden pines that sheltered the house on three sides. He was glad he’d talked her into coming back to the office, even though he wasn’t sure how long he could keep her there. But out here at the house, it would be hard to keep her safe unless he moved in, something he really doubted she would allow him to do.

After getting out, they walked through the fresh snow to the front door. *No tracks*, he thought. But that didn’t mean that someone hadn’t been here, hadn’t checked out the place for when they planned to come back.

Carla unlocked the door and they entered the foyer. They left their snowy boots on the mat by the door, and he followed her through the house. It struck him how much this place reflected her personality. Everything was neat and

clean, the colors bright and sunny. There was no clutter. It appeared every furnishing had been handpicked over time to give the place a warm and welcoming feel.

It drew him in more than he wanted to admit. He'd been living out of a camper in his horse trailer all this time. He couldn't help but feel a sense of pride and admiration for Carla. She'd done what she'd set out to do. She'd made a good life for herself.

And yet he knew this wasn't what she had planned. She'd had higher aspirations, but had to put those on hold to come home to Lonesome and take care of her mother. She'd wanted to make something of herself, while he had just wanted adventure—and her to share in it as his wife.

Davy felt that old ache. He'd wanted her more than his next breath. But he couldn't give up his dreams any more than she could hers. Still, he found himself wondering what their lives could have been if they'd married in these past ten years. Couldn't they both have had what they wanted and still found a way to be together?

He scoffed silently at that as he looked around the house. Could he not see that Carla had wanted permanency, security, a place to call home? She'd never wanted his transient lifestyle. For her it wouldn't have been an adventure at all.

Like she'd said back then, they wanted different things. This house stood as an example of how true that was. Except for one thing. They had wanted each other. Did they still?

She came out of the bedroom with a small bag that warned him she wouldn't be staying long with him at the office.

“Got everything you need?” He watched her glance around the house before she nodded. She had roots, a home she clearly loved, a career. He would have taken that all from her had she come with him on the road. They'd chosen the trajectory of their lives back then based on what they wanted out of life. Thanks to a robbery and a killer on the loose, those lives had intersected again. But for how long?

Once the killer was caught, Carla would be going back to her life and he'd be going back to his. Even as he thought it, he knew that he wouldn't come out of this experience unchanged though. But changed enough to find a way to be together? Or again brokenhearted and alone?

He turned his thoughts to finding the killer. With James and Tommy both busy on cases and Willie down at the sheriff's department as part of his

training as deputy, he and Carla would hit tattoo shops with the sketch she'd made.

"I thought we'd start with the local tattoo shop," he told her once they were back in his pickup. "And if no luck there, branch out."

Carla said nothing. She was looking in her side mirror as if she thought someone might be following them.

Davy glanced back. All he saw was a delivery truck behind them.

* * *

CARLA LEANED BACK and closed her eyes as they drove back into Lonesome. She hadn't been able to sleep at first when she'd gone upstairs at the agency earlier. She'd felt restless and had found herself moving around the apartment, studying the posters and photographs.

She'd seen them as a teenager when she and Davy had been together. The movie poster was of his great-grandfather Ransom Del Colt, an old Hollywood Westerns star. There were flyers from Davy's grandfather's Wild West shows. RD Colt Jr. had traveled the globe ridin' and ropin' until late in his life.

Del Colt, the brothers' father, had only stopped rodeoing because of an injury. He was the one who had started the investigation business. He was also the one who had taught his four sons to ride a horse when they were probably still in diapers.

As she'd moved around the room, she'd seen the Colt family legacy on the walls. Each generation had passed on that love to the next. Rodeo and horses and competition were embedded deep in the brothers' genes. Had she really thought she could get Davy to give that up? What had made her think she had the right?

Well, he'd made his choice all those years ago and it hadn't been her. That's what made this so hard. The past was almost palpable between them. She knew it was why he felt he had to protect her. It wasn't because of any residual feelings for her, she told herself. Yet she kept thinking about the day he'd come into the bank. Had he wanted to ask her out? If only he had. If only they could have started over then.

Feeling the weight of everything after she'd looked over the posters in the room, she'd finally lain down. As she'd drifted off, her last thought had been how desperately they both needed to get back to their lives before they tried

to rewrite history—and got their hearts broken all over again.

* * *

JUD FOUND JESSE waiting for him when he got home from work the next day. She'd traded schedules with a friend, apparently, so wasn't working her late shift. She seemed calm after being questioned by the feds about the note on the food tray.

"You think they believed you?" he asked as he joined her on the couch. He didn't smell anything cooking and wondered if she'd gotten takeout or if he'd misunderstood and had been expected to pick something up.

She shot him a look. "Why wouldn't they? Do I look like someone who would lie?"

He wasn't about to touch that. At first glance, no. But he'd gotten to know her. He'd seen below the sweet, shy, blond exterior.

She got right down to business. "We have to assume that they know about the tattoo and will start looking for the person who inked it." He'd never told her where he'd gone. He'd just come home with a tattoo. She might have thought a friend had done it because the tattoo was so simple. "The question is, how long before they track it back to you?"

Jud scoffed. "How would they do that? I didn't have it done around here." He could feel her gaze boring into him. "As many tattoo artists as there are in the state..." He shrugged. "Maybe if it were a unique design..."

She'd been sitting cross-legged at the end of the couch, but now she rolled up onto her knees and crawled toward him. He tried not to flinch when she jerked back the collar of his shirt to expose the tattoo.

"Why is your neck all red?" she asked, as if afraid to touch it.

"I told you—the Santa costume gave me a rash. I was itchy. I had to scratch or go crazy."

She made no comment, simply ran the tip of her finger over one *J*, then the heart. He was waiting for her to finish by tracing the other *J* when she said, "What's that at the bottom of the heart?" as if she'd never paid much attention to the tattoo before.

He'd gotten the painful tattoo for *her* as a symbol of his love. He bit back the bitter taste in his mouth that urged his tongue to lash out at her. "It's another, smaller heart."

"It looks black, but it has something in it. Something squiggly. Maybe it's

just a mistake, but it looks like a snake.”

“What is your point?” he snapped and pulled away from her, buttoning up his collar as he tried to tamp down his growing impatience with her. He’d gotten the tattoo for her, he’d robbed the bank for her, he’d gone back to work instead of taking the money and leaving—all for her. So things hadn’t gone as planned. That was life. Learn to live with it. He had.

“Who did your tattoo?” she asked, after going back to the other end of the couch and picking up her wineglass. Even that annoyed him. She couldn’t drink beer with him and had to have wine like she was someone he really doubted she was. But even as he thought it, he realized he didn’t know much about her.

He couldn’t help but think about what Cora Brooks had said. Was it possible her family had lived up in the mountains around here? Cora had made them sound like survivalists or criminals or squatters. Nothing good. Jesse had never wanted to talk about her family.

Then again, maybe Cora didn’t know what she was talking about. Maybe Jesse came from money. Maybe all her relatives drank wine. She could have been royalty for all he knew.

Except that she was with him, which told him she didn’t come from money any more than he did and there wasn’t a royal bone in her body.

“It was just a shop on the street in Butte. I don’t even remember its name.” There was no reason not to tell her. Then again, she didn’t have to know everything, especially about that night.

“You don’t remember which shop.” Clearly she didn’t believe him. She turned to glare down the length of the couch at him. “You might not remember the shop, but there will be paperwork. Paperwork with your name on it.”

He wondered how she knew so much about tattoos, since as far as he knew, she’d never had one. But now she had him worried. He tried to remember what information he’d given the tattooist. He vaguely recalled signing something. A consent form? Had he shown his driver’s license? Maybe—he wasn’t sure. He’d had way too much to drink, and his friend had plied him with more as he’d egged him on. Jud had been feeling no pain—at first—and had been glad that he hadn’t had enough money for Jesse’s whole name. He’d gotten what he could afford. Something simple and quick. So who cared what was at the bottom of the heart?

“Maybe you should try to remember and get to the artist before the feds do,

don't you think?" Jesse said.

Only if the feds find out where I got the tattoo, he thought. What were the chances?

Jesse sighed and asked as if reading his mind, "Haven't you taken enough chances?"

He didn't bother to answer. He could tell that nothing he could say would make a difference. Only one thing would appease her. He shook his head, even as he knew he would do whatever she asked. Worse, she knew it.

Chapter Fifteen

Davy had little hope that they could track down the person who'd given the man the tattoo, but they had to try. The tattoo was simple, nothing unique about it that he could tell from the sketch Carla had drawn.

He'd had to park off Main Street because of the lack of parking with Christmas so close. Even the sidewalk was fairly crowded as they headed to Lonesome's only tattoo shop. He found himself looking at everyone they passed and trying to keep himself between them and Carla. Earlier, he'd considered just emailing all the tattoo parlors within a hundred-mile radius with an accompanying shot of the tattoo, but he'd learned that people were more forthcoming in person.

The shop wasn't much more than a hole-in-the-wall with one chair and one artist. The sign in the window read only Tattoos. The owner's name was Big John, a burly former state-champion wrestler who'd done time in Deer Lodge for check fraud. It was in prison that he'd apparently gotten hooked on injecting ink under other people's skin, where it stayed forever.

"Davy Colt!" Big John bellowed when he saw him. "You finally decided to get a tattoo." He laughed uproariously and slapped him on the back before saying hello to Carla. It was a small town and Big John had gotten his start-up loan at her bank, she'd told Davy before they entered the shop. "Not afraid of an angry bull, but a little needle..."

Davy had heard all of this before. Big John had been trying to get him and his brothers tatted for years. He hoped to get this over with as quickly as possible. He pulled the sketch from his pocket and held it out to the tattooist.

"This is what you want?" Big John asked with a chortle.

"No, I need to know if you did this design."

The man looked insulted. "A child could have done that."

"So I'm taking it that you didn't. Who might have done it?"

The tattoo artist was shaking his head when Carla spoke up. "I know it's really basic, but I think that little squiggle at the bottom inside the tiny black heart could be a trademark or just a slip of the needle."

Davy shot her a look, surprised she knew something about tattoos.

"I did a little research on my phone," she said without looking at him.

Big John considered the two of them before he took the sketch and held it

up to the light. Stepping over to a tray next to his chair, he picked up a large magnifying glass and studied the sketch more closely. He nodded and handed the paper back.

“You’re right. It could be a trademark sign. If so, then I know the so-called artist. An embarrassment to our craft. Bad for business, you know,” he said, giving Carla a nod.

“What’s inside the tiny black heart?” Davy asked.

“Up close with a magnifying glass on the tattoo itself it could be a tiny broken heart with an S in it,” Big John said. “Some artists put a little of themselves into every tattoo they do, kind of like a signature at the bottom of a canvas.”

He handed back the sketch. “So let’s talk about a tattoo for you, Davy Colt. I could do a bucking horse.”

“I see enough of those, but thanks.”

“Still afraid of needles, huh? Your girlfriend here wasn’t afraid.”

Davy didn’t think Carla could surprise him more. “You got a tattoo?” Her face flamed.

“You haven’t seen it yet, huh?” Big John laughed and winked at Carla.

“He’s in for a surprise, huh.”

“Can you tell us where we can find the tattoo artist who might have done the tattoo?” she asked, clearly anxious to change the subject.

“If I’m right, Butte,” Big John said with a sigh. “The name of the shop is Sam’s Pit. Get it?”

“After the Berkeley Pit,” Davy said. A former open-pit copper mine, The Pit, as it was known, was a mile long and a half mile wide and held fifty billion gallons of toxic water. It was a lasting symbol of mining gone wrong. Only 19 percent of cities were more dangerous as a place to live because of the toxic pit.

“Sam is really Samantha Elliot,” Big John said with a chuckle. “You’ll find her rather interesting. You might want to take a sidearm just in case she doesn’t like the looks of you. Or take Carla here with you.” His belly laugh followed them out the door.

* * *

“I DON’T WANT to talk about it,” Carla said the moment they were outside Big John’s tattoo parlor.

Davy glanced over at her as they walked back to where he'd parked the pickup. She knew that grin. She also recognized the curiosity in those blue eyes of his. He was dying to know about the tattoo along with what and where it was. She should have known Big John would say something.

Holding up both hands in surrender, Davy said, "I won't mention your tattoo again." But that wouldn't stop him from thinking about it, she thought, feeling her cheeks redden again.

"So when do we go to Butte?" she asked, hating that he could get under her skin so easily.

"We can go today. I need to stop by the office and see if James is back. He might have heard something from the hospital," Davy said as they climbed into his pickup. "I'm anxious to find out the name of the blonde aide who brought you your dinner tray—and then took it away."

Carla knew she'd messed up by not keeping the note. She wanted to blame her concussion and that she hadn't been thinking clearly. That probably had played a part in it since she'd been feeling so vulnerable. But she knew it had also been fear. Just the thought that the person who'd hurt her could get to her even in the hospital...

"It's not your fault," Davy said as they drove the few blocks to the Colt Brothers Investigation building. Fortunately, there was parking in the back alley. "You were recovering from a head injury and you were scared."

She wished he would stop reading her mind. It had always been like this between them. She had thought it would have changed in all the time they'd been apart. "Maybe the feds could have gotten fingerprints or—"

"Not likely."

"But it would have been proof," she cried.

Davy glanced at her. "Or the agent would have suspected you wrote it yourself."

She groaned. He was right. She had to let it go. They now had a lead on the tattoo. Once they had J's full name...

* * *

AFTER DAVY LEFT Carla's overnight bag upstairs in her room, they went down to the office to find James sitting behind the large desk. "Good news," he announced when he saw them. "I just got the list of hospital personnel and information about who's nearing retirement and vacation schedules."

Davy quickly moved to look over his brother's shoulder at the computer screen. It didn't take long to sort the names by the initial *J*. Carla joined him.

There was one Jennifer and one Jane. Jane worked in medical records and was about to retire. Jennifer was a young nurse's aide who was on Christmas vacation all week in Mexico.

Disappointed, Davy said, "Did you get the name of the blonde aide? She not only brought Carla's dinner tray, but also took it away."

"I thought you might be onto something when you first mentioned her," James said. "When I asked who had delivered Carla's tray, it turned out that one of the aides had volunteered to take it to her, saying she felt sorry for Carla after what had happened at the bank."

"Sounds like a red flag to me," Davy said.

"Her name is Debra Anne Watney. She's been there more than two months now and is a model employee," James said. "Apparently it's not unusual for her to help out in any department, and she's very compassionate with patients."

"She seemed *nice*," Carla said.

"And her name doesn't start with *J*," James pointed out unnecessarily. "But like I said, the tattoo could be about an old girlfriend."

Davy shook his head. "I felt like there was something off about her. I'd like to find out more about her." He told him about what they'd learned at the local tattoo parlor. "Big John thinks it might have been inked by a woman named Samantha Elliot at Sam's Pit in Butte."

"The tiny heart at the bottom might be her trademark," Carla said.

"I think you need to tell the feds," James said.

"We wanted to talk to her first," Davy said.

"Might be better to let them follow the lead. If it came from Carla and it pans out..."

"You think it might get Grover off my back," she said and James nodded.

"And if they don't take it seriously?" Davy demanded. "I think we should make sure and then tell the feds. If it turns out to be another dead end, Agent Grover is going to be even more suspicious of Carla."

"You make a good point," James said. "Still, I'd call up there and make sure the tattooist hasn't taken off for the holidays. Hopefully the woman will be able to help you. In the meantime, Willie said he'd help, but he had a ride-along down at the sheriff's department. Tommy's on a stakeout. I'll see what I can find out about Debra Anne Watney."

“Willie really is going to become a deputy sheriff?” Davy said, shaking his head.

James nodded thoughtfully. “I hope he knows what he’s doing.” He quickly changed the subject. “Lori called earlier. She and Bella are asking about our plans for the holidays. They were thinking Christmas Eve out at the Worthington Ranch and New Year’s Eve to at least begin at our place,” James said. “They’re delighted Carla will be coming. But we’d also like to have you guys out to our house for dinner one night as well.”

Davy looked over at Carla. “You game?” He hoped he didn’t have to remind her that she’d promised to stay with him for a while.

She hesitated only a moment before she nodded. “Sure. Thank you.”

“Definitely Christmas Eve at Bella’s,” Davy said and smiled, thinking of their last Christmas together. Now he and Carla would be spending Christmas together again—just not the way he’d often dreamed.

* * *

CARLA COULDN’T HELP being disappointed that the hospital employee list hadn’t been fruitful. But it had been a long shot. J could have a friend who worked there, although she couldn’t imagine the sort of person who’d agree to put a note like that on her tray. Surely that person would know through Lonesome’s grapevine that she’d been through enough trauma with the bank robbery. No way would anyone think the note was funny or just a harmless prank.

James was going to check out Debra Anne Watney, but Carla thought that too would be a dead end. She didn’t see it leading anywhere since there had been nothing threatening about the blonde aide. Nor did the woman’s name begin with *J*. Carla would have been much happier if they had more of a lead on J.

She’d been thinking about another possible way to find him. She stepped into the conference room and called her boss, president and manager of the bank, Larry Baxter. After he’d asked how she was and said how glad he was that she was out of the hospital, she asked him for the favor she’d been thinking about.

“I know it’s against bank privacy rules, but I have a feeling that the man who attacked me at the bank might have come in recently for a loan,” she told him. “If I could go through the latest requests that I’ve had to deny...”

She could hear her boss trying to let her down easy. “If not all of them, then any whose names start with the letter *J*.”

“Why *J*?”

“I saw the man’s tattoo. I believe his name begins with *J*. I know this request is unorthodox but—”

“I’ll tell you what,” Larry said. “I’ll go through your files and pull out all the ones starting with *J*, first and last name. I’m sure you told the federal agents this so they’ll be asking for the same information at some point. But,” he said, lowering his voice. “Because of the circumstances, I’m allowing it for your eyes only, and this stays between the two of us.”

“I think it would be best if you let me know when you have the list ready,” she said. “No need to send it by email. I could meet you at the coffee shop down from the bank.”

“You’re beginning to think like a criminal,” he joked.

“I wish that were true. Then maybe I’d know what the man will do next.”

“How about coffee this afternoon? Two?” Larry asked and she quickly agreed. They wished each other well before he disconnected.

“I need to do some Christmas shopping” she told Davy, knowing he was going to try to stop her. “I don’t have anything for your family.”

“My family doesn’t expect gifts from you, especially under the circumstances.” She merely looked at him until he said, “I suppose it won’t do any good to mention how dangerous it is with all those last-minute shoppers crowding the stores and us not knowing which of them is a killer?” He must have seen that it didn’t.

She knew she couldn’t keep the truth from him. “I’m also meeting my boss at the coffee shop down from the bank at two. He’d prefer I come alone since it’s bank business.” Davy groaned. “You could drop me off, watch the shop from across the street in the bar and I could text you when I’m done. It shouldn’t take long.” She gave him a broad smile and saw him weaken.

“You’re not an easy woman to keep alive, Carla Richmond.”

“I appreciate you trying though,” she said. “But you aren’t always going to be around. Maybe it would be best if you changed your mind and walked away now so—”

“Not happening.” He met her gaze. “Just to be clear, I’m not changing my mind. I don’t want to see anything happen to you if I can prevent it.”

She sighed. “Davy, I know this isn’t how you planned to spend your holiday.”

His blue eyes darkened. “Plans change, Carla. You should know that. Ten years ago I planned to marry you. If I’d had my way, we would be married right now. It wouldn’t have been the life you had planned though, but I’d be just as determined to keep you safe as I am now.”

She couldn’t speak around the lump in her throat.

“Now that we have that settled, let me try to reach Sam’s Pit tattoo shop again. I know that the shop is open. I left her a message to say we were coming. If I can’t reach her, we’ll have to drive to Butte tomorrow. She could be busy doing a tattoo and not taking calls. But I’d feel better if I could reach her before we take the drive.”

* * *

IT WAS NO coincidence that Samantha “Sam” Elliot’s mother named her after the baritone heartthrob who just happened to be in a Western on the hospital room television the night Sam came into the world.

Over the years though, Sam had done everything possible to erase that Hollywood image when it came to her appearance. The truth was, her body was the direct result of her love of food, alcohol and tattoos. A massive woman, she had a deep voice and a laugh that carried for at least four blocks. She loved life and she lived as if there were no tomorrow.

As for the tattoos, Sam had once thought that she’d become a famous artist. She could laugh about that now, but it had hurt when critics called her talentless. That, however, turned out to be true. It was after her first tattoo that she realized she’d found her calling. Since then she’d covered almost every square inch of her body with her art and others’.

That’s how she’d found her career path. With her robust personality, her decorative flesh and her limited talent, she’d made a name for herself in the regional world of tattoo artists. She’d even put her own stamp on it with the tiny black hearts she put in every tattoo she inked. Inside that black heart was a tiny S. It was her trademark.

She never forgot a tattoo. So she recognized Jud the moment he walked in, right after her last customer had left and she was about to close for the rest of the holidays. She had a great memory. It would take her a minute or two to recall his last name though, without looking it up in her file. But she remembered that, when he’d come in originally, he’d been drunk and so had his friend with him. He’d wanted something for his girlfriend and asked what

he could get for... He'd dug some crumpled bills from his pocket and shoved them at her.

She'd almost turned him away. But there was something pathetic about Jud. So, feeling sorry for him, she'd told him what she could do. It wasn't much, but then again his money didn't even cover her time.

She'd have wagered that he wouldn't be a return customer even before she'd sat him down in her chair that first time. He'd had trouble sitting still, so it hadn't been her best work. Some people couldn't take the pain. But Jud was in lust with someone named Jesse. He was merely trying to make a statement, so Sam had helped him out.

When he walked in now though, she got the feeling that things hadn't worked out. He looked so unhappy she thought he'd come to ask about redesigning the tattoo or covering it up since Jesse was now nothing more than a bad memory.

That's why she was surprised when he said, "That form I signed? I need it back." He glanced toward the adjoining room where the file cabinets were kept.

Her cell phone began to ring. She looked toward it resting on the table off to her right. It had rung earlier, but she'd let it go to voice mail because she'd been busy with a customer.

"Your consent form?" she asked, wondering why he would want it and if she could even find it as she took a step toward her ringing cell phone.

Before she could reach it, she saw the gun he'd pulled from behind him. "The consent form, *now*."

She saw then that he wasn't just unhappy. He was clearly agitated. Was he on something? Her phone rang again. He snatched it up and threw it across the room, where it landed on the chairs used for those waiting their turn. Fortunately, it had quit ringing.

"Jud, I'll be happy to give you your form. I file them by last name. You'll have to remind me—" She saw his surprise that she knew his first name. That's probably why she hadn't seen the blow coming, when in retrospect she should have, she thought. The butt of his gun broke her cheekbone and cut her nose, which began to bleed profusely.

She stumbled back, crashing into her table of tools. They scattered noisily across the floor. She was trying to get to the chairs and her cell phone when he hit her again. The room dimmed. She tried to speak, but nothing came out. As she began to slump to the floor, she saw him coming at her again. He

appeared to be crying, his face flushed, spittle flying from his lips as he attacked. She felt nothing after the fourth blow.

Chapter Sixteen

Jud had been home for hours pacing the floor as he waited to hear from Jesse. He'd tried calling her, but all his calls had gone straight to voice mail. The last time he'd talked to her, she'd been about to be called in to be questioned by the feds again. He was losing his mind and was about to go look for her when he heard her come in through the front door.

"Where the hell—" He caught himself even though he wanted to strangle her. Instead, he rushed to her, taking her in his arms. She smelled of booze, answering his question about where she'd been. But why hadn't she called him? She had to have known how worried he was.

He wondered who she'd had drinks with. Some other man? He held her tighter and realized that she was trembling. Letting go, he stepped back to study her face. At first he'd thought she was scared. But he quickly realized that she was furious. For a moment, he thought it was with him. It wouldn't be the first time. But he tried hard to keep Jesse happy. He'd dated a lot of women, most of them walking out on him once they really got to know him.

Jesse was different. She was worth keeping. It was one reason he'd taken the mind-numbing delivery job even temporarily. It was another reason he'd decided to pull off the bank job. He'd promised himself he would do whatever it took to make this one stay.

"Want to tell me what happened?" he asked as he followed her into the kitchen.

She opened the refrigerator and took out the wine bottle. As she poured herself a glass, she finally looked at him again. "I got grilled by the feds. They already knew I was the one who took in the dinner tray and picked it up from the first time they talked to me. Again, they wanted to know what I did with it. What they really wanted to know was if there was a note with it."

"What did you tell them?" he asked as he followed her into the living room.

She kicked off her shoes and sprawled on the couch, leaving him just enough room to sit, if he didn't mind her feet in his lap. "What do you think I told them? That I wrote the note?" She shook her head. "I said like I did the first time that I didn't see any note. At least one of the feds believes me. He asked what Carla had said to me. I told him again that she said she wasn't

hungry and to get rid of the tray.” Jesse smiled. “I could tell that they suspect she lied about there being a note.”

“So it’s all good,” he said, sighing in relief. So why was she so upset? She looked angrier than when she’d come home.

“No, it’s not all good, Jud.” She bit off each word. “Carla Richmond drew them a sketch of your tattoo. They were showing it around to everyone, asking if they knew anyone who had a tattoo like that.”

“No one did, right?”

“That’s not the point. The point is I warned her to keep her trap shut.” She shifted on the couch, her expression going dark. “That woman is as good as dead. She should have done what I told her.”

He was no fan of Carla Richmond either, but all he really wanted was for this to be over. “I think we should take the money and leave.” He’d been thinking about it all the way home from Butte. It was time to get the hell out of Dodge. Not that he thought anyone could connect him to what had happened at the tattoo parlor. He’d gotten his forms and destroyed them on the way home. At least for this, he was home free.

He didn’t want to wait around until the loan goons got arrested in case the money he’d given them was marked. Mostly, he was ready to start spending some of that cash—the unmarked cash. “We can go anywhere we want. I was thinking—”

“We’re not going anywhere, not yet,” she said, sitting up. She pulled her legs into her and wrapped her arms around them. She wasn’t as angry now. Somehow it made her scarier. “I’m not leaving until she’s dead.”

He hoped she was merely venting. “That’s not going to happen as long as she’s staying with Davy Colt.”

Jesse nodded. “Eventually she’ll have to go back to her place. No one crosses me. No one.” Her gaze met his, and he had to fight hard not to flinch. “I’m going to make something to eat.” She got up and left the room.

He sat for a moment listening to her bang around in the kitchen before he got up and followed her. He couldn’t let her go off half-cocked. She’d get them both arrested.

“Jesse, you’re making me nervous,” Jud said as he watched her chopping up carrots. She was angry and waving the knife around as she cursed and fumed. “I can’t let you do something you’ll regret,” he said.

“Then cut up the carrots yourself,” she snapped, throwing down the knife.

“That’s not what I was talking about,” he said, quickly pulling the knife

and then sliding the cutting board and the rest of the carrots across the counter out of her reach. “You can’t kill Carla Richmond.”

She glared at him, and he was glad he now had their only decent knife. “That’s your problem, Jud. You don’t stand up for yourself. You would have never robbed the bank if I hadn’t put the idea into your head.” Was that true? She had been nagging him relentlessly. “Just once, don’t you want to prove to people that you have a backbone?”

He thought of what he’d done in Butte and grimaced. “I can’t see how killing that woman would help matters,” he said, only to have her turn toward him with a look in her eyes that chilled him to his very core. “I’m not saying we can’t kill her,” he amended quickly. “But we have to plan. We don’t want to get caught, right?”

Her mouth was set in a stubborn line. “What are you suggesting?”

“That you let me take care of it.” He thought of the day he’d had—all the blood—and tried not to gag. “You didn’t ask me about my day.”

“You have blood on your shoes,” she said and met his gaze. “What is there to ask?”

He looked down, shocked to see that while he’d stripped out of his bloody clothing, tossed it into the wash and changed as soon as he got home, he’d put on the same shoes. He swallowed back the bile that rose in his throat. With the other bank robbers, it had been self-defense. They would have killed him for the money if he hadn’t killed them first. But the woman at the tattoo shop...

“All I’m saying is that I have more experience with this than you do,” he said.

Jesse laughed and cocked a brow at him. “You sure about that?”

He wasn’t. He thought her more than capable of murder though, especially when she was angry. He could hear Cora Brooks again warning him about Jesse. Buddy too.

“Then you’re going to handle this before we leave?” she asked, crossing her arms over her chest and glaring at him as she waited.

At this stage, he thought it unnecessary to kill Carla. It was risky and foolish, but right then he would have said anything to mollify Jesse. “You know she can’t hurt either of us since she’s already told the feds everything she knows.” Jesse’s eyes narrowed to slits. He could see that there was no talking her out of this. “I’ll take care of her, though I don’t think it’s necessary.” Jesse began to tap her foot. “I’ll kill her, okay?” The tapping

stopped.

Jesse took the knife, cutting board and carrots from him. She carefully chopped up the rest and dumped them into the pot. “When? When will you do it?” she asked, still holding the knife.

* * *

IT WASN'T UNTIL Carla came back downstairs after getting ready for her meeting with the bank manager that she heard. As she walked into the office, she saw Davy on the phone. From his expression, she knew something had happened—and it wasn't good.

“What?” she asked the moment he disconnected from the call.

“That was the Butte Police Department. They heard the message I left on Samantha Elliot's voice mail,” Davy said. She felt her eyes widen in alarm and tried to swallow. “She was attacked and her office destroyed. When I told them why we'd been anxious to talk to her...” He met Carla's gaze. “They think her attack might be related to the robbery and murders. She's in serious condition in the hospital. They don't think she'll make it.”

She lowered herself into a chair as her legs threatened to give out under her. “This is his doing.” The shock of the horrifying reality of this situation ricocheted through her. “He's covering his trail.” She felt her eyes widen as her pulse thundered in her ears. “He knows that I told the federal agents about the tattoo.” She felt tears burn her eyes. She'd drawn a picture of the man's tattoo and now the woman who'd inked it could die. “This is all my fault.”

Davy moved to her, kneeling down in front of her to grasp her shoulders. “None of this is your fault.”

“I told the agents about the tattoo. He knows I told. That's why that woman—”

“There's only one way he would know that you told the agents,” James said. “J either works at the hospital or he knows someone who does.”

“Which means he's local,” Davy said as he rose.

“There was no one with a *J* name on the list though that fit the description,” Carla pointed out. She felt as if she were trapped in a nightmare and couldn't wake up. But somehow she had to. They had to figure this out. They had to find him and stop him before... She shook off the rest of that thought as a tremor moved through her.

“Then more than likely he knows someone who does. Someone close to

him. Just not with a name that starts with *J*,” Davy said.

“I have to find him,” she said as she pushed herself up from the chair. “If he applied for a loan at the bank and I turned him down...” His name had to be there. It was the only hope she had right now. She glanced at the time and wondered if her boss had those names. She felt as if the clock were ticking. She quickly made the call. He had the names and would meet her in ten minutes. “I need to go.”

“I’m taking you in my truck,” Davy said.

She started to point out that it was just a few blocks, but she saved her breath. He wasn’t going to let her even walk down the street until the man was caught.

That’s why she had to do everything possible to make that happen for both her sake and Davy’s.

* * *

DAVY WAS SURPRISED that the meeting at the coffee shop was so short. Carla had gone in, ordered coffee and was joined only minutes later by an older man. They’d spoken for a few moments before he’d slipped her a manila envelope and she’d gotten up and left. Davy had been waiting for her parked at the curb, after earlier going in a few shops with her as she finished her Christmas shopping as if there wasn’t a killer after her.

“I need to go by my house again,” she said as she climbed into his pickup now. “If we’re going to your brother’s, I need more clothes. Sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize. I’m happy to take you.” He started the engine, just grateful that there was no talk of going back to her house to stay.

She snapped on her seat belt and without another word opened the envelope and began to go through what looked like copies of loan forms. She made sure he couldn’t read them, but he thought he already knew.

“People you turned down for a loan?” he asked.

She shot him a look, and for a moment, he thought she might not answer. “This is highly irregular.”

“So is a bank robbery and you almost dying and having a killer after you,” he said.

Carla rolled her eyes. “Well, when you put it that way. Still, it would be best if you didn’t know.” She glanced at the sheets of paper she’d been given. “I thought maybe one of them might jog my memory. Only a couple have

names that begin with a *J*. My boss gave me all of the requests over the past month. They're people I remember. He's not in here," she said and pushed the copies back into the envelope. "Neither are their spouses."

He could see how disappointed she was. She'd been counting on the man's name being in there. He hated that it was another dead end.

She sighed. "Also I need to go by the gift store. I have to do a little more Christmas shopping since my plans have changed."

"Under the circumstances, the last thing you need to do is go shopping for my family."

She shot him a look.

"Fine, but know I'll be at your side the entire time."

"Have you always been this stubborn?"

"Yes, but I think you already know that." Their gazes met and he could feel the chemistry sparking between them. He knew her as well as she knew him. They'd both been each other's firsts. They'd reveled in each other and the sex and had basically been crazy in love their entire last year of high school.

Then everything had gone south when he'd told her that he wasn't following her to college. He was joining the rodeo circuit. That had been the end for her. The end for them.

They'd parted, but so much of that passion was still simmering between them. He could feel it, stronger than ever. If she felt it, she didn't let on. But then, neither did he. He was home only for Christmas and then it was on the back of a bronco. They'd be fools to start up anything again. Letting her go way back then had been hard enough. He didn't want to do that to himself again—let alone to her.

"Stubbornness is something we have in common, among other things." He was no longer talking about stubbornness, and from her expression, she knew it.

"Davy—"

"Clothes first, then shopping? I will say again that my family isn't expecting gifts."

She looked away. "It's Christmas. Sometimes you get something you didn't ask for or expect."

He smiled at that, wondering if this time with her was just that.

Her gaze was on the snow-filled pines as he headed down the narrow two-lane road toward her house. There was fresh color in her cheeks. He smiled to

himself. She felt the chemistry too. He'd bet his horse on it.

As they neared her house, he was again aware of how isolated her place was. Somehow he had to keep her from returning there until the killer was caught. He glanced over at her and shook his head. Ten years ago he'd tried to convince her that they belonged together and would find a way. Ten years ago they'd been in love. Did he really think he stood a chance of convincing her of anything now that they were no longer together?

* * *

JUD WALKED UP to Carla Richmond's house through the deep snow blanketing her sidewalk. He could see that she hadn't been here for a while. There were recent tire tracks in her driveway, so she'd at least stopped by. Or someone had.

But from the looks of the place, what he'd heard was true. She was staying with Davy Colt at the Colt Brothers Investigation building on Main. Apparently, the two had been tight in high school.

Still, he needed to scout out the place for when she returned. The rodeo cowboy would be leaving again soon. Right after Christmas probably, since from what Jud knew about the Colt brothers, Davy made his money on the rodeo circuit. Carla would have no choice then but to come home.

He trudged through the snow, carrying an empty box like it was a delivery just in case someone drove by and saw him. He knocked on the door and waited. While he did, he looked for any indication of an alarm system. This was Montana—hardly anyone had security systems unless they'd moved here from somewhere else and brought their paranoia with them.

Jud still didn't want to do this, he thought, as he peered in the window through a crack in the curtains. The best thing he and Jesse could do was get the hidden money and skip the country. He didn't understand why they were still in Lonesome as it was. The longer they stayed, the more worried he was that they would get caught—especially if he did something stupid like kill Carla Richmond.

But he worried that if he didn't, Jesse might take matters into her own hands. He was still hoping that he could talk her out of it. He couldn't wait to put this hick town in his rearview mirror.

He was about to put the box down and walk around the house to check the back door lock when he heard a pickup turn into the drive. The last thing he'd

wanted to do was be seen here. Fortunately, he was wearing his large company winter jacket and hat with earflaps even though the day wasn't that cold.

* * *

AS DAVY DROVE UP, he saw a delivery man standing on Carla's front porch—and a delivery truck parked at the edge of the road. The man, seemingly startled, turned at the sound of the truck's engine. Davy parked in the driveway and he and Carla climbed out.

"Do you have a package for me?" Carla called as the man started to retrace his steps back down the sidewalk toward his truck—carrying the package.

Davy could see where the man had left tracks in the deep snow of the sidewalk to the front door. He made a mental note to shovel her walk before he left. It was supposed to snow again tonight. Davy wanted to be able to tell who'd been here after they were gone.

The delivery man looked down at the package in his arms and shook his head. "Wrong address," he said over his shoulder as he headed for his truck.

Davy started across the yard toward the man. "What address are you looking for?" The man didn't answer, as if he hadn't heard. He disappeared inside his truck. A moment later, the engine revved and he took off.

"That wasn't weird at all," Carla said next to him.

"Yes, it was." He tried to see the plate number on the truck, but it was covered in snow and ice.

"It's a busy time of year," Carla said. "That's probably all it was."

Maybe, Davy thought. Yet when he'd driven up, he'd thought the man had been trying to see inside the house. Not necessarily suspicious, unless the homeowner had recently crossed paths with a killer.

"Tell me where your snow shovel is and I'll take care of your walk while you get what you need," he said, putting the delivery man out of his thoughts for the moment.

She smiled. "What is the point? It's supposed to snow again tonight and I'm not staying here."

Davy saw her eye him with suspicion. "A clean walk makes it look like someone's home. Just safer." That too was true. But he had a bad feeling that the delivery man would come back. He wanted to be able to check the tracks when they returned.

Carla shook her head. “You think that man was checking out the place to steal my silverware?” When he didn’t answer right away, she said, “No, you think he might be...” She shivered and looked down the road where the delivery truck had disappeared. “If he comes back—”

“There will be fresh tracks in the snow. Snow shovel?” he asked.

She swallowed. “Garage.”

* * *

CARLA LET HERSELF into the house. She’d left the heat on, but still it felt cold inside. She flipped on lights as she went, hating how easily she’d been spooked. She wanted to blame Davy for scaring her. Was she going to have to be afraid of every delivery man who came to her door?

She had just started to gather more clothing for the rest of the holidays when her cell phone rang, and she saw it was her boss. “Hello?”

“Carla.” The way he said that one word had her heart battering her rib cage.

“Has something happened?”

He cleared his voice. “Sorry, no, that is...I know you mentioned earlier how anxious you are to come back to work, but unfortunately, until the FBI’s investigation is finished, I have to put you on administrative leave. You’ll still be paid.”

Unless I’m found guilty of being involved in the robbery, she thought. Then she would have to pay all of that back. That was the least of her problems, since she hadn’t been involved. But could she prove it?

“I understand,” she said, her voice breaking. She’d already lost so much, and yet her credibility and now her job hung in the balance? Not to mention her life.

“Also, I’d appreciate it if you shred those copies I gave you,” he said, dropping his voice. “I’d just as soon no one knew about that.”

“Of course. I didn’t find anything anyway. But thank you for trying to help me.” She disconnected and fought the sudden rush of tears. She’d almost lost her life and now she’d lost her independence. She would never feel safe again if the man wasn’t caught. What if the federal agents felt they had enough evidence to charge her as an accomplice to the robbery and subsequent murders?

Fighting her growing fear, she finished packing. How was she going to get

through the holidays? The FBI suspected her, Davy thought she was still in danger and, if that wasn't enough, how could she spend so much time with the man she'd almost married ten years ago and not fall in love with him all over again?

As if on cue, Davy came through the door smelling of the wintry outdoors. There were snowflakes in his hair and his dark eyelashes. He was flushed, his blue eyes sparkling. He stole her breath—just as he'd stolen her heart all those years ago. It wasn't as if she'd ever gotten it back.

Chapter Seventeen

Back at the office, while Carla unpacked upstairs, Davy called the delivery company with a fictional story about wanting to give their usual driver a Christmas gift. He asked for the names of the drivers who covered her neighborhood, and the woman said she'd have to get back to him.

As he hung up, James came in and he filled him in. His brother fell silent for a moment. "Are you that sure Carla is still in danger?" he asked.

Davy turned to look at his brother. He'd heard something in his tone, making the question more loaded than it might have sounded to someone else. "What are you asking?"

James raised his hands in surrender. "Has there been another threat made against her?" Obviously aware of the answer, he quickly continued. "So the killer could be miles from here by now."

"Or only as far as Butte," Davy snapped.

"I'm just asking about your endgame because I care about you. It's great that you want to protect her, but for how long can you do this?"

"If you're saying that I'm using this situation to be with her..." He saw that it was exactly what his brother was saying. He shook his head, feeling his anger flare inside him. "Why would I do that? Carla made her feelings clear ten years ago. Nothing has changed."

"Exactly," James said. "That's why we're worried about you."

"*We're?* So you've *all* been discussing my life?" he demanded as he raked a hand through his hair and angrily began to pace the room.

"Davy, we love you. You're like a brother to us." James's attempt to lighten the mood fell flat. "Come on, we just don't want to see you get hurt again. We never want to see you that brokenhearted. We're concerned that being thrown together like this... You aren't falling for her again, are you?"

Davy stopped pacing and laughed as he turned to face his brother. "There's no need to fall for her again. I've never stopped loving her," he said and left the office before his brother could ask how Carla felt about him.

* * *

CHRISTMAS EVE WAS busier than usual. Jud knew that the time he'd spent

driving out to Carla Richmond's house and screwing around had been part of it. Mostly it had been all the packages that just had to get delivered before Christmas morning—which meant he had to work until his truck was empty.

He hated the holidays. Did people really need all this stuff? His mother would have said he was jealous. He didn't even want to think about his Christmas mornings as a boy. A sad-looking store-bought tree with several branches missing because his mom had gotten a deal on it. Under the tree was always worse.

The year he was eight, she'd gotten him a can of black olives. When he'd cried, she'd said, "But I thought you liked them."

It was dark by the time he returned his truck, left behind his hooded coat with the company's insignia on it, pulled on his ragged jean jacket and walked to where he'd parked his pickup earlier that morning. His entire body hurt, from the soles of his feet to the top of his head and all the way down his back.

All he could think about was a beer and Jesse. If he was lucky, she'd be in a good mood after he told her that he'd scoped out Carla's house and then she'd make him feel better. He realized that he hadn't bought her a present and tomorrow was Christmas. He'd been afraid to use the money. Not that he would have known what to get her anyway. She wasn't like the other women he'd known. She didn't care that much about clothes or jewelry.

When he thought about it, he wasn't sure what she cared about other than money. Well, he'd gotten her a ton of cash, hadn't he? Maybe he'd go pick up a bag from the hiding place in the cave and dump it in the middle of the living room and they could roll around in it. Jud smiled at that idea. Jesse had been in such a dark mood the past few days he was almost afraid of what he would find when he got home.

He was a few feet from his pickup when one of the dark shadows moved. He'd been so lost in thought that he didn't have time to react before the man he knew only as Wes had him in a beefy-armed headlock.

"What the—"

Wes tightened his hold, cutting off the rest of Jud's words. "Fletch was arrested after he tried to spend one of those twenties you gave us."

Jud closed his eyes. Wasn't this what he'd feared? Jud tried to talk, but couldn't get more than a strangled groan out, and finally Wes loosened his hold. "I don't know what you're talking about," he croaked out.

"Don't lie. I know you pulled the bank job. So where's the money?"

* * *

CARLA HAD TOLD herself that she wasn't in the mood for a holiday party. So it surprised her when she slipped into one of her two fancy dresses. She looked in the mirror and felt a rush of excitement. She smoothed the rich silky emerald green fabric down over her hips and felt her mood lighten for the first time in days. She wanted to enjoy this night, to forget about everything but Christmas and...and Davy.

"Carla?" The sound of Davy's voice outside her bedroom door made her swallow and take a final look at herself in the mirror. She'd put her hair up for the party and wore the pearl earrings Davy had bought her for Christmas all those years ago. She hadn't let herself wear them before now because of the painful memories of their breakup.

"Coming!" she called. Pushing back an errant curl, she took a deep breath and had to smile. She was nervous, she realized, because this felt like a date. She quickly reminded herself that Davy was only trying to protect her. He couldn't very well leave her here in the office apartment while he went to his family Christmas Eve celebration.

She warned herself not to make too much of this. It was like any other night. She was only playing dress-up for the occasion.

But then she opened the door and saw Davy. He was dressed in a Western suit, his thick dark hair brushed back to where it curled at his neck. He was wearing his good boots and he held his white Stetson between the fingers of his left hand.

What struck her was that he looked as nervous as she felt. He'd taken her in, his eyes widening in what could only be approval. He let out a low whistle and she felt her cheeks warm.

"Wow," he said, his eyes glowing. "You're *beautiful*."

She felt a little embarrassed. "Is the dress too much?"

Davy chuckled. "Not too much at all."

"I guess I should have asked if this was a casual or formal dinner."

His gaze met hers. "It's perfect. You look...perfect."

She swallowed. If this wasn't a date, she didn't know what was.

* * *

DAVY HAD BEEN at a loss for words when Carla stepped out of the bedroom.

He was struck by how gorgeous she was. The green dress accentuated her curves, diving at the neck to the swell of her breasts, tucking into her slim waist and skimming down over her hips to fall to midcalf. She'd piled her wild, curly mane of hair up, baring her throat, making him remember the feel of it on his lips. Several locks brushed her high cheekbones, making her blue eyes look wide and liquid.

If he hadn't been enchanted by this woman for years, he would have fallen all over again. He felt that old ache more acutely than ever. James was right—he was in dangerous territory.

"Ready? It's snowing," he said as he helped her with her coat. The faint, sweet scent of her familiar perfume whirled around him for a moment. He took a step back, finally admitting how hard this was. It was hell being this close to her and not being able to take her in his arms and make love to her. He took another step back.

When she turned, she seemed to see the battle going on inside him as if it were etched on his face. "Davy, I—"

He shook his head, stopping whatever she was about to say. "I already loaded the presents in the truck, if that's what you're worried about."

She studied him for a moment, then shook her head. "I guess we should go then."

He readily agreed. The upstairs apartment felt as if it had shrunk and was suddenly too close, too intimate. He was too aware of how bare she was beneath the coat, let alone the dress. He'd once known that body. It had matured in the years since, making it even more lush, more titillating. One more minute in this space with her looking at him like that...

Pushing those thoughts away, he headed down the stairs to his pickup, Carla following. Snow whirled around them, and he remembered another winter night and a stolen kiss. He almost reached for her, his desire to kiss those lips again so strong that he felt powerless over it.

Instead, he opened her door and she climbed inside. Closing the door, he stood for a moment breathing in the cold night air, comforted by the feel of the icy flakes melting on his face. Then, feeling as if he'd been kicked in the gut, he walked around the pickup and climbed behind the wheel.

All he had to do was get through this night without acting on his feelings. *Good luck with that*, he thought as he drove toward Worthington Ranch.

* * *

JUD TOLD HIMSELF that Wes wasn't going to kill him—not if he thought he had the robbery money. He'd want to know where it was first.

“I don't know what you're talking about,” he told the man, once Wes let up the pressure enough on his throat that he could speak clearly. He'd feared that he'd given the men marked money. Now those fears were realized.

What gave him hope was that the men hadn't told their boss where they'd gotten the money. Otherwise, Leon would be here instead of his henchman. Leon wouldn't have had him in a choke hold. Instead, Jud would have battery cables hooked up to parts of his body that would have made him regret being born.

“Where did you really get the money you said your grandmother gave you?” Wes demanded.

“I didn't say she gave it to me. I pawned some of her knickknacks and jewelry hoping she wouldn't miss them,” Jud said with enough anger he hoped it would be convincing for Wes.

“What pawnshop?”

Jud told him it had been one in Missoula, where he let Wes believe his grandmother lived. Had she been alive. “Then I bought a few groceries, paid for gas, went home and gave you what I had left. So whoever pulled the heist could have already shopped at one of those places.”

Wes eyed him suspiciously. “That's quite a story.”

“Would I still be delivering packages if I had that kind of money?” Jud could see that the man wasn't so sure now. He was glad that Jesse had reminded him to use as many old bills as he could find in the bags. So Wes wouldn't have gotten all marked bills, which would help sell his story.

“If you're lying...” Wes said and let him go. “I'll be back for another installment.”

Jud groaned. “I'll have to visit my grandmother again because I don't have it.” He could feel Wes studying him. “It's Christmas. Can't you give me until after the holidays? My grandmother's in poor health. Once she crosses over, I'll get everything and can settle my bill in full.”

“The boss won't wait that long. I'll be back.” With that, the man left.

Jud let himself breathe for a few minutes after Wes drove away. He'd just dodged a bullet. But it didn't leave him much time. They couldn't chance giving Fletch or Wes any more marked money from the robbery. He had to talk to Jesse.

“We need to leave town,” he told her when she came home from work. He

related his encounter with Wes. “We have all this money. Enough time has gone by. Let’s get out of here before another bill turns up from the robbery or Leon comes himself to collect.”

“Not until you finish things,” she said without looking at him.

“Jesse—”

She spun on him. “If you can’t do it, I will. I warned her not to talk and she talked. I can’t let that stand.”

“Technically, she didn’t even know it was you warning her.”

“Are you serious right now?” Jesse demanded. “Tell me you aren’t taking up for her.”

He raised both hands. “I’m not. We’re free and rich. Why take a chance getting caught because some dumb fool didn’t do what you said?”

“It’s about betrayal, standing up for yourself, not letting people disrespect you.”

“But no one even knows that she disrespected you.”

“*I know*,” Jesse said, giving him a look that seemed to nail him to the floor. “I know and that’s all that matters.” With that, she turned and stormed into the bedroom.

Jud flinched as she slammed the door. His instincts told him to leave, to go get the money and keep going. Why did he always get involved with domineering women? Before he could move, she came out of the bedroom dressed in all black. He watched her walk into the kitchen and come back out with a butcher’s knife.

“Jesse?” His voice cracked.

She stopped to hold the knife up. The blade caught the light. “I’m going to take care of this myself. Be ready to leave when I get back.” With that she headed for the door, but stopped with her hand on the knob. “And, Jud, don’t even think about leaving me behind. I moved the money.” With that, she left.

* * *

THAT MAGICAL MOMENT standing outside in the falling snow was lost. All Carla had, along with the ache in her heart, was the memory of what she’d seen in Davy’s expression. He’d remembered their kiss that Christmas together—just as she had. The cold, the snow falling around them. Davy had pulled her close for their winter kiss. Wasn’t that when they’d both known that they were truly in love—the forever kind?

She closed her eyes now. Carla knew she wasn't wrong. He'd come close to kissing her. Her heart had started to pound, and she'd felt such a yearning... She hadn't realized how badly she'd wanted that kiss until it hadn't happened.

The drive to Worthington Ranch didn't take long. Neither of them spoke. What was there to say? Earlier she had almost brought up the subject of *them*, but Davy had stopped her. Because there was no them. She'd made her choice all those years ago. And he'd made his.

If I'd had my way, we would be married right now.

She'd heard the hurt and pain in his voice. If he'd had his way. She'd tried to imagine what their life would have been like with him on the road all the time, following the rodeo circuit. It wasn't what she'd wanted. It wasn't her idea of marriage and happy-ever-after.

And this is? the little voice at the back of her mind demanded. She hadn't met anyone else she wanted to spend the rest of her life with. Because she'd never gotten over Davy, she admitted to herself now. Being with him and yet not being with him...

She glanced over at him. He looked so handsome in his Western dress suit. She wanted to reach out and touch his arm and tell him—

"We're here," he said, and she looked up to see that he was pulling in front of the Worthington Ranch lodge.

* * *

SHE MOVED THE MONEY? Jud stared after Jesse for several moments, too stunned to move. He didn't have to guess where she was going—or what she planned to do. She was going to get them both arrested. He had to stop her, make her see that she wasn't being rational. How had this become about her and Carla Richmond?

He charged out into the darkness and falling snow in time to see her speeding away. He told himself that she'd come to her senses before she did anything, but he wasn't sure he believed that. He didn't know what to do. Maybe she was lying about moving the money, but somehow he didn't believe that either. Maybe he could find where she hid the money, take it and run. Not unless he wanted that crazed woman with the knife to come after him. Go try to stop her?

With a groan, he realized that he'd set all of this in motion the night he'd

gotten involved in that poker game. Once he was in so deep, he'd thought for sure that he could dig his way out with just one more game—double or nothing. He hadn't realized who he was playing against. What had started as a friendly poker game had gotten ugly fast. If Leon hadn't offered to bail him out...

Jud shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts. He couldn't go back and change any of that. That's why he had to end this.

He grabbed his coat. Jesse would go to Carla's house and then the Colt Brothers Investigation office. She didn't know that she wouldn't find Carla at either of those places. Jud wouldn't have either if he hadn't seen Bella Worthington Colt in the grocery store parking lot. He'd overheard the conversation she'd been having with another woman as she'd unloaded her shopping cart into the back of her SUV.

All of the family were coming to her house tonight for Christmas Eve.

Jud started his pickup, his mind clearer than it had been in days. He thought about the day he'd walked into the bank to get a loan. Now he knew that it always had to end this way.

Chapter Eighteen

Carla had been quiet on the drive out to the Worthington Ranch. Davy was glad that she didn't feel the need for small talk. He wasn't sure he could have handled that. But he hated the awkward silence that had filled the cab of the pickup the entire drive. He didn't like leaving things this way between them. What had made him think he could spend this much time together and not get involved again? Being around her and not being able to touch her was pure hell.

He'd come so close to kissing her. He blamed the falling snow and cold for the memory. She'd called it their winter kiss. Like he could ever forget it. Or her.

She had no idea how many times after he'd first left her that he'd thought about quitting the rodeo circuit, coming back to Lonesome and proposing. He'd wanted her that badly. He still did.

It wasn't like he couldn't find a job. He'd recently been offered a position promoting rodeo statewide. Except he wasn't ready to quit the circuit. It was in his blood. Just another year or two, he kept telling himself. But then what? He had some ideas, one in particular he'd been thinking about more since coming home and seeing Carla.

What was a couple more years rodeoing? Like Carla would still be single and waiting for him? He was surprised that some smart man hadn't already snatched her up.

As he pulled in front of the Worthington Ranch lodge, he was relieved that the drive was over. He'd had too much time to think about the almost kiss and his future. *Love shouldn't hurt. It shouldn't demand giving up your dreams*, he told himself as he got out and went around to open Carla's door.

He told himself that they'd chosen their completely different paths years ago. There was no going back, even as he felt his heart ache at the sight of her. Look what his stubborn determination had gotten him, he thought as he saw her avoid his gaze as they headed inside. She couldn't even stand to look at him.

The moment they'd hung up their coats and walked into the main room, James pulled him aside. "Have you heard?" Clearly, he hadn't. "It was just on the news. A man was arrested at the local convenience store trying to buy

beer with a twenty-dollar bill from the bank robbery.”

Davy couldn't help but get his hopes up. This might be it. The killer might already be behind bars. Then he and Carla would go their separate ways. Isn't that what they both wanted? “What's his name?”

“Fletch. He's a caretaker for that big ranch outside of town that was bought up by that corporation,” James said.

Fletch? His disappointment must have shown. “So do they think he had something to do with the robbery?”

James shook his head. “Apparently not. He had an airtight alibi for the day of the robbery, and he's already been released. But the bills are surfacing, Davy. You might be right about the man still being in Lonesome.”

Davy groaned as he looked across the room where Carla was visiting with Bella. As James said, if the bills were circulating locally, there was a good chance that the robber hadn't left town. Hadn't his gut told him that Carla was still in danger?

As if sensing him looking at her, she glanced in his direction. She looked so pretty, her cheeks a little flushed from coming in out of the cold into the warm ranch house.

“Please don't say anything tonight about this to Carla,” he said.

“She's going to hear about it,” James said. “Might be better if it came from you. If the bills are turning up...” James sighed. “I don't know about you, but I could use a drink.”

Forty-five minutes and several drinks later, Bella announced that everyone should start heading into the dining room. Davy knew James was right. It would probably be better coming from him. But what he would give if they could just have this one night, he thought as he made a beeline for Carla.

* * *

EVERYONE BEGAN TO move toward the entrance to the dining room. Bella had invited family and friends, so the huge table inside would be full. Carla had tried to lose herself in the party atmosphere. Everyone was dressed up, tiny Christmas lights twinkled from the log rafters and holiday music formed a background for the laughter and chatter.

She'd wanted to enjoy herself tonight. To let her hair down, so to speak. She needed this. But earlier she'd seen James pull Davy aside. From their expressions it wasn't good news. She'd wanted to go to him and find out

what had happened, but Bella had approached her. By the time that conversation ended, Davy had disappeared.

That's why she was startled when he suddenly reappeared beside her. Ahead of her, the crowd was milling toward the dining room. He touched her arm and indicated that he wanted to talk to her. She felt her heart drop. Hadn't they said enough earlier? Or maybe he wanted to tell her what he and James had been discussing. Either way, she feared it was bad news.

Not tonight, she wanted to say. Not tonight in this beautiful home on Christmas Eve. But she also knew that whatever it was, she needed to hear it. Could she even pretend for one night that there wasn't a killer after her?

She turned toward him as the others disappeared into the dining room. "I saw you talking to James. I know something's happened."

"That's not what I wanted to talk about."

"Davy, we can't keep going over the same old grou—"

He touched his finger to her lips to silence her and pointed upward. She frowned since she'd been bracing herself for bad news. When she looked up, she blinked at the sight of mistletoe hanging from one of the log rafters above them.

Her gaze dropped to his. She looked into his amazing blue eyes, fringed with dark lashes. The man was drop-dead gorgeous. But it was that kindness in those eyes, that caring, that love. She felt her heart lean in. What would one kiss hurt?

"Carla, it's Christmas. Could we just enjoy this time together?" he asked as he brushed a lock of her hair back from her eyes. "Can we put our differences aside? We used to be good friends before we became..." He seemed to hesitate. Lovers? "More," he finished. "Can't we just enjoy the holidays together like old friends?" His gaze met hers and practically burned her with its intensity.

Carla wanted that desperately—no matter how dangerous. Davy Colt was a good, loving man. He'd dropped everything to protect her. One night without the past pushing its way between them sounded like heaven. She nodded and he pulled her to him.

The kiss was sweet and soft—at first. But then it changed as he drew her closer, arousing emotions so strong that she found her arms around his neck. He deepened the kiss and she surrendered so willingly that it shocked her. But she couldn't stop herself. She met his tongue with her own, the taste of bourbon and champagne like an accelerant fanning the flames.

They could never be just friends again. They would always be lovers. The thought breezed past as he whispered her name against her lips like an oath. Or a curse. She felt her nipples harden beneath her sheer dress. Her heart took off at a gallop as she pressed the soft swell of her breasts to his rock-hard, solid chest and heard him moan. Her heart drummed in answer.

Wrapped in each other's arms, locked in the passionate kiss, neither of them heard anyone approach.

"Excuse me," Willie said, clearing his throat. "I told Bella it was probably the mistletoe. Guess I was right."

Davy and Carla sprung apart like teenagers caught on the sofa. But when they looked at each other, the fire still burning inside her, she began to laugh. Davy joined in.

Willie chuckled, shaking his head as he turned to go back to the dining room. "Christmas Eve dinner is being served, in case either of you are interested." He mumbled something under his breath, which only made them laugh harder.

As Willie disappeared, Davy turned toward her. "I guess we should..." He waved a hand toward the dining room.

"Yes, I suppose we should." Carla knew her face was flushed, her lipstick smeared. "I should probably stop in the ladies' room first." She bit her lower lip, the kiss still raging through her veins. But it had felt so good to laugh. To laugh together, like they used to before she'd broken both of their hearts. "You go ahead. Tell them I'll be right in and they shouldn't wait."

He smiled at her. "I'm not sorry."

She knew he meant the kiss and how they'd gotten carried away. She shook her head. "Me neither." She had to clear her voice. "I'll hurry." With that she escaped to the restroom.

Once the door closed behind her, she stepped in front of the mirror. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes bright. She felt as if she were floating. It was as if all they'd needed was a little Christmas magic like in the movies. A sprinkle of pixie dust and they found their way back together.

The thought made her shake her head. It wasn't pixie dust, but she had to believe that all of this had happened for a reason. The bank robbery right before the holidays had thrown them together. *Maybe it was meant to be*, she told herself, even as that tiny rational killjoy Carla on her shoulder argued that this would only lead to heartbreak. She mentally swatted the pesky voice of reason away. There was no fighting fate, right?

Yet she saw the truth in the mirror as the kiss's effect began to lessen. Nothing had really changed between her and Davy. She would never ask him to choose between rodeo and her again. Had he stayed in Lonesome for her, he would have ended up resenting her. The thought broke her heart.

She'd thought she could forget for one night about what was going on in her life. But that was impossible. Being here with Davy didn't help. He was a constant reminder of how temporary and off-kilter everything was right now—and how it could get so much worse.

As much as she appreciated him being with her, she didn't want him involved. What if the killer did come after her and Davy tried to stop him? She couldn't bear the thought that she might get the man she loved killed when he should be miles from here.

Fate might have thrown them together, but it was temporary. How had she forgotten that in his arms? As she headed for the dining room, she knew in her head and her heart that what fate had given them was a few precious days together—and nothing more.

* * *

DAVY SLIPPED INTO the dining room. "Sorry to keep you all waiting. Carla's right behind me. Just had to make a stop." He picked up his wineglass and took a drink. His body vibrated from the kiss, from the rush of desire still thrumming in his veins. Hadn't he known that if he kissed her, all those old feelings would be there? Their chemistry had always been so strong. They'd started as friends long before they'd become lovers years ago. That foundation was still there. He'd take a bullet for this woman.

"Is there news on the robbery?" Bella asked, drawing him back.

"Apparently one of the marked bills has turned up," he said and put down his empty wineglass.

"That's good, right?" Lori asked. "So they have the man."

James shook his head. "He had an airtight alibi and the police let him go. It appears the bills are circulating in town though. Which could mean the man is a local. Also that he might still be around." Davy felt everyone look to him.

"Why would he still be here?" Bella asked, frowning.

"That we don't know," Davy said and was glad when his wineglass was refilled. He picked it up and turned it in his hands. "He might not be finished with Carla."

Bella let out a cry. "That's horrible. Why?"

Davy shook his head. "We're trying to find that out."

"How is she doing?" Lori asked. Davy was sure she'd quizzed James but she was just being polite by asking.

"She's strong. This is hard for her. She's always been so independent and self-reliant. She's anxious to get back her old life."

"I'm sure you are too," Lori said. "Don't you have a ride coming up right after Christmas?"

They all turned as Carla came into the room. When Davy saw her expression, he knew that she'd heard the last part and was just as keen as everyone else to hear his reply.

"There are other rides," he said and got up to pull out Carla's chair.

The moment he was seated again, she said, "He isn't going to miss any rides." Carla was smiling as she looked over at him, but he caught the unshed tears glistening in her eyes. "I appreciate how wonderful he's been, but he's a rodeo cowboy. He has to do what he was born to do."

"But what if the killer hasn't been caught by the time he has to leave?" Bella asked, sounding worried.

Davy started to say something, but Carla cut him off. "Neither of us can put our lives on hold until that happens. It might be months, even years or never. Once the investigation is over, I'll be going back to work."

She said it with such ferocity that Davy couldn't help staring at her in surprise before she added, "The bank has put me on administrative leave until then."

He hadn't known. He reached for her hand under the table and squeezed it, but after a moment she pulled it away. He could see her fighting tears. She'd worked so hard to get where she was. This was so wrong. None of this was her fault.

His cell phone rang. He checked the screen, apologizing as he pushed back his chair and stood. "I need to take this. I've been waiting for this call."

Once outside the room, he accepted the call from the delivery company. Earlier, he'd left a message, needing to know which delivery drivers worked in Carla's area. Now he listened as a woman told him. No name that started with *J*.

"Thank you for getting back to me. Merry Christmas." He disconnected. Another dead end. He'd been so sure that there was something strange about the man he'd seen standing on her doorstep with the package. It might have

just been a case of a wrong address as the man said.

Davy sighed. He had to question his instincts. He'd also thought for sure that James would find out something suspicious about the nurse, Debra Watney, but he hadn't. Apparently, he'd been wrong about her as well. He'd become so suspicious since the robbery, since there was a killer out there who'd hurt Carla and might still be in town and not finished with her.

But he knew the kiss also had him worked up. The earth had moved for him. But had it for her? If so, then how could she keep denying what the two of them had together? She seemed anxious to get rid of him again.

He felt that old frustration. But he also had to admit that there was some residual anger in him because she hadn't given them a chance ten years ago. He regretted the years they'd spent apart. He looked over at her. Had he really thought anything had changed? He told himself that he couldn't do this again.

She wanted him to leave right after Christmas? Wouldn't that be the smart thing to do? But as he thought it, he knew it was already too late to keep his heart from getting broken all over again.

Davy took his seat again and looked into her eyes. He realized that he wasn't going to let her push him away. Not this time. He reached over and took her hand as he leaned close. "You're not getting rid of me that easily. Not this time."

* * *

HIS WORDS SENT a shiver through her. He squeezed her hand. Their gazes locked, stealing her breath. The kiss earlier proved how dangerous it was for them to be together any longer. Why postpone the inevitable? He needed to go back to the rodeo circuit, and she needed to get her job back.

But at the back of her mind, she kept hearing that voice of reason. What if the robber wasn't caught? What if she couldn't go back to her job? For years she'd lost herself in her pursuit of a career. Even with the detour back to Lonesome when her mother got sick and later died, she'd managed to stay in a job using her degree.

Her mother used to joke that her daughter would thrive no matter where she was planted. Often Carla felt like a stubborn weed that fought its way to the sun no matter what she had to overcome. She wasn't one to give up easily.

Yet she'd given up on Davy.

She looked into his eyes and knew that she couldn't again. As painful as it would be when they finally parted again, she wanted this time together. She concentrated on the food as dinner was served by chef Roberto. She'd heard Bella saying what an amazing cook he was. Everything was delicious.

For the rest of the meal, the conversation stayed clear of the robbery. Bella wanted to know if Carla would like to come out and ride horses with her. Carla said she would love that. She hadn't ridden for years but hoped it was like riding a bike.

"You used to love riding," Davy said. "It was something we had in common."

"With any of the Colt brothers you have to love horses," Bella said with a laugh. "Fortunately, I do."

The conversation moved on to babies, with Lori pregnant with a daughter and Bella and Tommy trying to get pregnant. Carla again felt Davy's gaze on her, but she didn't dare look in his direction. Was he thinking that if they'd gotten married right out of high school, or even after she'd finished college, they could have had children of their own now?

The thought made her sad and stirred that desire in her for a family of her own. But there was only one man she'd wanted to have kids with. Davy Colt. Except with Davy on the rodeo circuit, she would have been a single mother—like her own mother.

That wasn't what she had wanted. That hadn't been part of her dream. But the passion of their kiss still thrumming through her veins demanded to know why she was still hanging on to that old dream, since she'd never been able to fit Davy Colt into it.

* * *

THE NIGHT WAS BLACK. Low clouds pressed down on the road between the banks of dense pines that lined the road. The pickup's headlights punched a shallow hole in the darkness ahead. Inside the truck cab, Davy felt too close, and yet Carla could feel an ocean between them.

"I know you're angry with me," she said at last, needing to break the tense silence. She didn't know what to blame. The kiss? Or what she'd said at dinner?

He glanced over at her, looking surprised. "Is that what I am? Angry?"

“You tell me.” She saw his jaw tighten along with his hands on the wheel, but he didn’t speak. “I wish we could just be friends again, but I can’t see how we can. That kiss proves it, doesn’t it?”

“It was just—” he started, then shook his head no. “Like hell it was,” he amended quickly, looking over at her. “What that kiss proves is that we’re still in love, Carla. Have been for years. When are we going to quit denying it?”

“I’m not denying it. We just want different things.”

“Oh, right, that’s why we broke up.”

“Would you please stop doing that,” she snapped. “And stop pretending that you don’t know why I broke up with you.”

Davy sighed. “I thought we wanted the same things—marriage, a house, kids, a life together. I thought we were in love.”

“We were.” Her voice broke. She didn’t want to argue, but she couldn’t let the past lie between them like a dead body they were both trying to ignore. “What kind of life would that have been with you on the road all the time?”

“I wouldn’t have been on the road all the time. Other people make it work—truck drivers, pilots, commercial fishermen. But that wasn’t what you wanted, was it?”

“No,” she admitted and felt tears sting her eyes. “Breaking up with you was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. It broke…” Her voice choked again as well and she had to look away. “It broke my heart to walk away from you.” She felt him look over at her and swallowed back the tears that threatened to fall.

“You didn’t give us a chance,” he said quietly, the pain clear in his words.

“You don’t know how badly I wanted to.” She looked over at him as she was enveloped in the memory of the kiss, of his arms wrapped about her, their bodies molded together in the heat of passion. The worst part was that she still did want to.

The moment their eyes locked she knew she could no longer fight her feelings for him. “Davy.” The word came out a plea. She wanted to throw herself into his arms and tell him that she’d never stopped loving him and plead for them to find a way to be together. She opened her mouth, but what came out was a scream as she saw headlights headed right for them.

Chapter Nineteen

At Carla's scream, Davy's gaze returned to the road, only to find himself blinded by the set of headlights bearing down on them. "Hang on!" he cried and jerked the wheel hard to the right. The cab interior filled with light. He braced himself for impact as he caught a flash of the vehicle as it whizzed past his driver's-side window.

To his amazement, the vehicle barely missed the rear of the pickup as he and Carla crashed into the snow-filled ditch. The front tires dropped down into the wind-crusted depths. Snow cascaded over the hood to cover the windshield as the pickup buried itself before coming to a stop.

"Carla," Davy said, glancing over at her. "Are you all right?" Her face had lost all color and she was hanging on tightly if her white knuckles were any indication.

"I thought for sure that car was going to hit us," she said haltingly.

"That was way too close." He glanced over his shoulder and saw a pair of taillights disappearing down the road. "The driver didn't even stop. Must be drunk or..."

She looked over at him then. "It wasn't a drunk driver. It was him, wasn't it?"

Davy wanted to argue but couldn't. The car had been headed unerringly at them. If he hadn't jerked the wheel and put them in the ditch, the vehicle would have hit them head-on. It would have been a suicidal mission—if it was J. He'd caught a glimpse of the pickup as it had sped past. While he hadn't seen the driver, his impression in that split second was that there'd been a man behind the wheel. A man wearing a baseball cap.

As Carla began to cry, he unsnapped his seat belt, then reached over and did the same with hers before pulling her into his arms. She was trembling and fighting tears. His heart was still pounding. He told himself that whoever had run them off the road wouldn't be back to finish them off, but he was glad that his .22 pistol was under the seat. If anyone came down the road from that direction, he would be ready.

"This is killing me," Carla said through sobs against his shoulder.

"I know. I'm so sorry." He knew being a suspect in the bank robbery was added to her pain. That and not being able to get back to her job, her life.

She'd always been so independent. She'd always been so strong. He knew how hard this was on her.

"It's going to be all right," he said as he ran his hand over her hair and held her close. "I'm here for you."

At those words she pulled back, her eyes brimming with tears as she shook her head. He could well imagine what she wanted to say. The last thing she wanted was to keep him from going back to his life, the life he'd chosen over her.

"Carla," he said, his heart breaking for her. "I'm sorry this is so hard on you, but I'm not letting you out of my sight until this monster is caught. I'll put the past aside if you can quit worrying about the future. Maybe we could find some common ground because—let's face it—we still feel the same, don't we?"

She nodded, tears filling her eyes. "Yes."

He smiled then and touched her face as he pulled her close. "We're going to get through this." She nodded against his chest, then sat up to wipe her tears. He saw her gather herself, her strength and determination taking over again, before he reached for his phone to call for a tow truck.

* * *

JUD LOOKED OUT the window, angry that Jesse had taken his truck. "What did you do?" he demanded, worry filling him with dread as she walked in the door. He could tell by her flushed face and the brittle brightness in her eyes that she'd done something. He didn't dare guess what.

Jesse shook her head angrily as she swept past him. She took off her coat, kicking off her boots on her way and leaving a trail of snow behind her. "Someone had to do something, and since you don't have the—"

"What did you do?"

She pulled the knife from her coat pocket and tossed it onto the table beside the couch. His gaze shot to it, his heart hammering as he looked to see if there was blood on it. There didn't appear to be.

When Jesse spoke, she spit the words at him. "I tried to kill her." She wiped the spittle at the corner of her mouth. "I drove right at them, but unfortunately, they swerved. I left them in the ditch. I should have gone back and finished them," she said, shaking her head. "But I wasn't sure he wouldn't be armed."

Jud groaned. “Don’t you realize what you’ve done? The word on the street was that the feds were looking for me in Washington State. Some of the heat was off and now...” He swore. “What was the point of that?”

“It made me feel better.” She glared at him, daring him to say that wasn’t good enough.

“None of this makes any sense. You do realize that, don’t you?” He shook his head. “We should be miles from here. Staying around to make you feel better...” He didn’t finish as her eyes narrowed.

“I told you. I’m not leaving until she’s dead.”

“Then be smart. There is no way to get to her right now. Once she moves back home—”

Jesse’s laugh cut him off. “You really want to wait that long? Because I don’t. Anyway, how do you know the cowboy won’t move in with her and you’ll have another excuse not to finish this?” She shook her head. “If you ever want to see that money again, you’d better do something and soon.”

* * *

WHEN JAMES HEARD what had happened, he insisted Carla call Agent Grover.

She wasn’t surprised when the agent again didn’t believe her.

“Probably just someone who had too much to drink on Christmas Eve,” the agent said on the phone call. “We have reason to believe that your J might be in Washington State.”

The “your J” grated, but she didn’t let the agent get to her. When she asked what made him think J was in Washington State, he said he couldn’t say but that he would be returning to Lonesome soon for a talk with her, so she’d better have a lawyer.

She hung up more frustrated than ever and repeated what the agent had told her.

“There were several arrested for drunk driving,” Willie told them. “It’s possible that one of them was responsible for running you off the road.”

“The good news is that if they have a lead out in Washington State, then last night was only an accident,” James said.

Carla knew that, like her, Davy wanted to believe that’s all it had been. She’d made a few calls to attorneys, leaving her number since most were out of the office until the end of the year. But she felt better since making the contact. Hopefully, Agent Grover would find J out in Washington and that

would be the end of it.

By Christmas morning, both she and Davy were in better spirits. Davy had picked up a small decorated tree for the upstairs apartment and she woke to Christmas music. They exchanged presents.

“It’s just a little something that I saw that reminded me of you,” he said when he handed her the tiny wrapped package he’d taken from under the tree.

For a moment, her heart had begun to drum as she remembered another small box he’d given her all those years ago—one with a diamond engagement ring inside.

She quickly unwrapped the box and opened it with trembling fingers, telling herself Davy would never make that mistake again.

“Do you like it?” he asked, sounding worried.

“It’s beautiful,” she said with relief as she picked up the silver bracelet from its nest in the box. “I love it.” It was delicate, with one tiny star dangling from it.

“For making wishes,” he said, seeming a little embarrassed.

She looked up at him, feeling her eyes sting, and asked him to help her with the clasp. Then she handed Davy his present. She’d gotten him a new leather belt for the many buckles he’d won over the years.

He immediately put it on. It fit perfectly, just as she knew it would. “I’ll wear it tonight at James and Lori’s. You haven’t forgotten that we’re invited for dinner, right?”

They’d both gone to the small kitchen after that to make a Christmas breakfast. Davy had thought of everything. He seemed determined to make her forget her problems—at least for the holidays. It was almost working, Carla thought.

After their near collision, they’d both gone out of their way to avoid any mention of the past or the future. They both had seemed to adopt a “one day at a time” philosophy.

For Carla, it was strange. She’d seldom taken time off from work, accumulating weeks of vacation time. She realized that it was kind of nice not to have to wake to an alarm clock, not to have to go to work.

The feds were apparently convinced that J had left town with the bank money and gone to Washington State. The focus of their investigation had moved—at least temporarily. Maybe that *had* been a drunk driver last night.

What bothered her was that Agent Grover still believed that it had been an inside job—with her helping the robbers. She’d heard that he was looking at

several former employees at the bank—one who now worked at the hospital.

She'd quit fighting Davy about returning to her home—at least for the time being. Instead, she told herself that these days together were a dream, one she didn't ever want to wake up from. For most of her life, she'd spent it looking to the future, planning what it would be like.

When it hadn't turned out anything like she'd planned, she'd been devastated. But now she could see just how different she and Davy were. He lived more day by day, and she was beginning to see the value in that. It was something she'd never done before—not looking to the future, but just enjoying one day at a time.

She'd also come to realize that she'd been living around her job. Without it, she felt adrift. Now with all this time on her hands, she saw that even on her days off work she'd had a list of things to do and would check them off. She'd kept so busy she'd never questioned if she was truly happy.

Being here with Davy without lists and a schedule was truly her first holiday. She tried hard not to remind herself that it had to end. Instead, she couldn't wait to open her door and see Davy every morning. Also, there was usually coffee.

This morning was no different. They finished breakfast. He handed her a cup of coffee before clearing away their dishes. “Remember what we used to do over the holidays?”

She remembered building snowmen, hanging on to the bumpers of cars and sliding down the streets, climbing snow-laden roofs and jumping off into deep drifts. She also remembered making love in his pickup one very cold, starry night.

“You're going to have to be more specific,” she said, curious where he was going with this.

“Sledding,” he said and grinned as if he'd known where her mind had gone. “Although the thought of getting you in the back of my pickup...” He laughed and she joined him.

“Neither of us want that,” she said. They made eye contact for a little too long before she pulled away. They were falling back into their old, easy relationship. She'd forgotten what good friends they'd been. They could tell each other anything and everything. It was nice to be close again.

They'd avoided any more mistletoe though, being close again but not that close. Not that Carla couldn't feel that combination of chemistry bubbling between them. She knew Davy felt it too. When they'd parted last night to go

to their separate bedrooms, Carla had had to bite her tongue to keep from calling him back to her.

But this was nice, them being friends again. She told herself that she'd be a fool to let it go further. While they'd agreed to make the best of this time they had together, she knew he'd suggested it to keep her mind off the robbery and the investigation and the killer.

She just hoped the feds were right and the killer was long gone from Lonesome—and her.

Chapter Twenty

Jud slept in late since he didn't have to work Christmas Day—and he was in no mood to deal with Jesse after last night. By the time he got up, she had left for the hospital. All he could think about was the money. If he found it, he would be in control of his life again. It was his way out.

He tried to think like Jesse, expanding his search and starting with her car, which was now in his driveway because she'd taken his pickup, saying her car was out of gas. Unfortunately, she was too smart to hide the money in such an obvious place. But at the same time, it would be just like her to hide it in front of his nose.

Back in the house, he tore the place apart. Winded and sweating, he stared at the mess he'd made. No money. What if she'd given it to a friend for safekeeping? He immediately discarded that idea. Jesse didn't have any friends that he knew of, especially any she would trust with money.

No, she'd hidden it. He'd start in the rocks up in the mountain near the cave where he'd initially stashed it and work from there.

But when he opened the door, he was shocked to find Cora Brooks standing out by Jesse's car. "Mrs. Brooks?" he asked as he approached her.

"This is her sister's car," Cora said, pointing at the small sedan. "Her sister Debra's car."

He hadn't known that. Jesse had taken her sister's identity right down to her checking and savings accounts—and her car, apparently. How was that possible? Unless...

"They're identical twins, you know," Cora said with distaste. "But only in looks. I'd always hoped that Debra would turn up." She shook her head. "Realizing what Jesse has done... Debra is dead, isn't she?"

He figured it was the reason Jesse had taken not just her car but her life, including the job as an aide at the hospital. "I wouldn't know anything about that," he said.

The old woman sneered. "Thought I'd have a chat with her." Cora tried to see around him inside the house, which he'd just torn apart.

He blocked her view. "She's not here, and I was just going to work."

She gave him a once-over, as if wondering where he went to work dressed like he was, in old jeans and a T-shirt. He was going to tell her it was none of

her business, but that had never stopped Cora.

“I’ll tell her you stopped by,” he said and started back toward the house, hoping she’d take the hint and leave.

“Don’t bother,” she said and turned to leave. “I’d rather surprise her. Maybe I’ll pay her a visit at the hospital. I heard she’s working there.” Something about Cora’s smile chilled him to the bone. He’d heard that she had a bad habit of finding out things about people and then extorting money from them to keep silent. Hadn’t she almost gotten killed last year because she’d tried to blackmail the sheriff’s brother? Or maybe that was just a small-town rumor.

He watched her head down the street and flag down the senior citizen bus, which pulled up to stop for her. Once she disappeared inside, he went back in for his winter coat and boots. He should probably warn Jesse about Cora. He pushed the thought away. He had bigger fish to fry. He had to find the money and outsmart Jesse.

Once he was rich, this hick town would never see him again—and, he realized with relief, neither would Jesse.

* * *

DAVY COULDN’T REMEMBER the last time he’d been sledding. He’d had to borrow a sled from old friends in town before driving up into the mountains where he and Carla used to go. They could have gone to the sledding hills around town, but he wanted to be alone with her. He was still worried, even though the feds seemed convinced she was safe. He felt better when they weren’t around a lot of other people. Not that it necessarily felt safer.

It had been his idea for them to put the past behind them and just be friends again for the holidays. He’d had good intentions. He’d wanted to keep Carla’s mind off the killer. But he’d also wanted this time with her. If this was all they had, then he’d take it.

He just hadn’t realized how hard it would be. They’d grown close again, so close that taking her in his arms and kissing her seemed like the most natural thing. Sometimes the way she looked at him... He felt that old firestorm inside him. He wanted her so badly it hurt.

On the drive into the mountains, they fell into a companionable silence. He saw Carla looking out the window, taking in the snowy winter landscape as if seeing it for the first time. He wondered if she hadn’t had her head down

working for so long that she'd forgotten to look around her—let alone to have fun. He was glad that he'd suggested sledding.

After he parked the pickup, they made the hike up the open mountainside, with him pulling the sled behind him. The sky overhead was cerulean blue without a cloud anywhere, the sun turning the snow into bejeweled waves. The slope was perfect for sledding—and yet not so steep that they had to worry about avalanche danger. Also, they were entirely alone up here. The fresh snow on the narrow road up hadn't been disturbed.

The cold air came out in puffs as they reached the top and caught their breaths. He looked over at Carla. "Ready?"

"I haven't done this in years."

"Me neither. I think it's like riding a bike though," he joked. "Let's find out. Hop on." He held the sled on a flat spot at the top to make sure it didn't take off until he was ready. Once she was situated, he gave the sled a shove and jumped on at the last minute. Putting his legs on each side of her, he wrapped his arms around Carla's waist and pulled her against him as the sled took off.

Snow blew up in an icy wave as they careened down the mountainside. He heard her squeal and then laugh. He pressed his face against her shoulder, feeling the cold and the exhilaration. They'd both needed this, he thought.

The sled slowed and came to a stop. Carla turned to look at him, all grins. Her cheeks were red from the cold, her eyes bright. Snow crystals clung to her lashes and the locks of hair that had escaped her hat.

Davy felt himself grinning as widely as she was.

"Can we do it again?" she cried.

He laughed. "We can do it as many times as you want to."

They both scrambled off and began the trudge back up the mountain. The next few times were as exhilarating as the first one. But this time, when the sled slowed and finally stopped at the bottom of the mountainside, neither of them moved.

"That was amazing," she said and leaned back into him. "Thank you for this." He nodded, unable to speak around the lump that had formed in his throat. She shifted on the sled to face him. Their gazes locked and he felt a rush of heat course through him. Her hat and coat were covered in snow. He brushed one frozen lock of her hair back from her face.

"Carla." He said her name like a plea, an oath, a prayer.

* * *

SHE KISSED HIM. His lips were cool at first—just like her own. She breathed in the scent of him, the pines, the cold. They'd shared other winter kisses that year they were together. But this one—this one was pure joy.

It felt like that first winter kiss of so long ago. Except this one was so filled with pent-up passion it felt like igniting a rocket. Desire swept through her like the sled had careened down the mountainside. The thrill was there along with the heat as she straddled him, cupping his frosty face in her hands.

She heard him unzip her coat and moments later his hand snaked up under her sweater. His ungloved fingers were warm against her naked skin as they moved upward to cup her breast. She felt her nipple harden to an aching peak even before his fingers slipped inside her bra. A blaze of heat rushed through her veins to her center, and she felt herself go molten.

"I think we should take this to the pickup," Davy said, pulling back from the kiss. His gaze met hers. "Unless you want to stop now."

She shook her head. She could feel his desire pressing into her through her snow pants. She wanted this, needed this, felt as if she would scream if they stopped now. The voice of reason could be heard warning her in the back of her mind, but her need was stronger. "Pickup."

They rose and began stripping off their outer snowy clothes before they reached the truck. Once inside, Davy started the engine and turned on the heater, but Carla knew they didn't need it. Her body felt on fire, and when he touched her again, she groaned with pleasure.

He was easing off her shirt when he saw the tattoo over her heart. It was small and delicate, but when she felt him start, she knew he recognized it. "Carla?"

She felt shy, peeking at him through her lashes. "I know it's silly, but I wanted something that would remind me of you and our dreams. Don't you remember? You gave me your great-grandfather's old branding iron." It had felt like a promise for the future at the time. "That night, you told me about your plans for Colt Ranch. The brand is your family history, your legacy. Now it's part of my history as well."

He shook his head as he gently ran a calloused finger across the tiny brand over her heart before lifting his eyes to hers. "Oh, Carla." He pulled her to him, wrapping her in his arms. "I love you with all my heart. I always have." He drew back to kiss her, and she felt the chemistry between them rocket through her.

When they were teens, their lovemaking had been a concoction of jacked-up hormones as they raced to a climax. Now Davy took it slow, as if revisiting all her pleasure points, teasing her nipples into rock-hard points and sucking them until she leaned back with a cry of release. It was as if he could make love to her all afternoon and the rest of the night.

When they finally came together, Carla cried out, heart thundering, body quivering as the pleasure roared through her in waves. He reached over and turned off the engine. Then he held her, the two of them catching their breaths, the silence of the winter day around them. Snowflakes fluttered past the steamed-over windows.

“I wish we could just stay right here forever,” she whispered.

“Then we have to get a bigger truck,” Davy said, his arm around her. He stretched out one long leg, then the other, and they both laughed. They weren’t kids anymore, but it was nice revisiting their youth in the cab of his pickup again. The truck began to cool quickly.

“No regrets?” he whispered, and she felt him turn to look at her.

She met his eyes. “None.” She leaned up to kiss him on the lips. “None,” she repeated. He smiled then and pulled her closer.

Carla could hear the unspoken questions between them as the pickup chilled and Davy started the engine again and they began to dress. Had it been a mistake? How could they not do this again and again until he left? But would they regret it, if not today, then tomorrow or the days ahead?

“I suppose we better get going,” Davy said as he climbed out to retrieve the sled. They were going to James and Lori’s new house on what was known as the Colt Ranch. The original homestead cabin was gone and so was the double-wide trailer the boys had used when they were home. But the land was still there, with plenty of room for each of the brothers to build their own lives on.

Years ago, Carla remembered Davy talking about someday building a house for them on the ranch. His great-grandfather had run a few cattle on the land at one time. His grandfather had kept stock in the corrals.

Davy had always said he would come back to the ranch when he quit the rodeo. He’d talked about making it a working ranch again, either raising cattle or horses. Like rodeo, the place was part of the Colt brothers’ legacy. At one time the ranch had been part of her dream as well, the blueprint she’d had for her perfect life. But Davy hadn’t fit into her perfect plan so neither had Colt Ranch. Still, like Davy, it had a place in her heart.

Carla thought about that as they drove back toward Lonesome.

* * *

CARLA HAD GROWN quiet on the drive out of the mountains. Davy worried that instead of bringing them closer, their earlier lovemaking would drive them even further apart. That was the last thing he wanted.

He was still blown away by Carla's tattoo of his family brand. The chemistry between them had been undeniable. He still wanted her and knew that he would the rest of his days.

But he wasn't fool enough to think it was enough, he told himself as he turned onto a narrow county road that cut through the snow-filled pines. His pickup's headlights punched a hole in the growing darkness, but only yards up the road. This time of the year it got dark by five o'clock. With the weatherman calling for more snow, the night was pitch-black.

"Are you okay?" Davy asked, glancing over at her. He saw her nod. "I'm still planning to come back, you know. I always thought... I hoped..." Their gazes met and he saw that she knew what he'd hoped because she had the same hope.

"Davy."

He heard her unbuckle her seat belt and start to slide across the bench seat toward him. His foot went to the brake.

The cab of the pickup exploded, filling the air with tiny cubes of glass and the shriek of twisted metal. The impact from the right side of the pickup shoved the vehicle into the pines next to the road. He heard wood splintering. A limb struck the windshield, shattering it, as the pickup came to an abrupt stop.

Chapter Twenty-One

“Carla!” Davy cried as his brain fought to understand what had happened. They’d been hit. The passenger-side door was caved in, and Carla lay in his lap. If he’d been going any faster... “Carla!”

She sat up, blinking at him in confusion. He could see her in the light from the dash. “Are you hurt?” With relief he saw her shake her head.

“I don’t think so. What happened?” she asked.

“I’m not sure.” He glanced back and saw what had hit them. A huge truck sat halfway in the old logging road, the headlights shining out at odd angles. He thought he could hear the engine still running.

With a shock, Davy saw that the passenger-side door of the truck hung open.

“I...I think I’m all right,” Carla said, then winced. “But I think I might have ___”

He didn’t hear the rest of her words as he caught movement beyond what was left of her side window. A man dressed in dark clothes, hood up, was looking at them as if to see if they were...hurt? Still alive? Then suddenly, the man turned and ran down the road behind them.

Before that instant, Davy had assumed the crash had been an accident. Like the other night, this hadn’t been an accident.

He swore, then grabbed his door handle and shoved his shoulder against it. But the door, wedged tight against the pine trees, didn’t budge. He realized that he wasn’t getting out that way and quickly smashed the rest of the windshield and climbed out over the hood. “Stay here,” he said back at Carla. Once his boots hit the ground, he took off running after the man.

It had begun to snow, visibility dropping quickly. Not that it would have made a difference. He hadn’t gone far when he realized that he’d lost him. The figure had cut off into the pines. Davy could see the man’s footprints in the snow, but only in the ambient light of the large rig’s headlights. Once he stepped into the dark pines, he couldn’t see anything.

He turned back, heart pounding. If only he’d thought to grab his flashlight. And his gun from under the seat. He hadn’t been prepared. He told himself he would be next time, because just as he’d feared, this wasn’t over.

By the time he reached the pickup, he could hear the sound of sirens. Carla

must have made the call. Fortunately, they weren't far from town—just like the last crash. He looked into the pickup and saw her cradling her right ankle. “I think it's broken,” she said, pain in her voice. He could tell that she was trying hard not to cry.

“I'm so sorry,” he said and reached through her side window for her hand and squeezed it as she met his gaze.

“I was so afraid that you would go after him into the woods. It was him, wasn't it?”

“I think so,” he said, hating how close they'd come to the killer—how close they'd come to almost catching him. The sound of sirens grew louder. Flashing lights came about the bend in the road. “It's going to be all right,” he said to Carla, but neither of them believed that.

* * *

THE NIGHT BECAME a blur of flashing lights and sirens. Carla swam in and out of pain as she was extricated from Davy's wrecked pickup. She still didn't understand what had happened. The EMTs gave her something for the pain once she was on the stretcher and they'd stabilized her ankle. She closed her eyes, welcoming the easing of the pain as the drugs did their job.

It wasn't until she opened her eyes that her terror returned. In alarm, she saw that they were taking her back to the hospital. “No!” she cried and tried to get up.

“As soon as they get a cast on your leg in the ER, I'll get you out of there,” Davy said. “I promise.”

She closed her eyes, but couldn't shake off the memory of flying broken glass, the sound of metal screaming and looking back to see that a huge truck had T-boned Davy's pickup. Worse was the memory of Davy going after the man while she called 911 because she couldn't help.

True to his word, he stayed by her side even when his brothers rushed down to the hospital to make sure they were both all right. “How are you feeling?” James asked her.

The pain pills had her a little loopy, but unfortunately, she could still feel her ankle. “I feel like I've been hit by a truck.”

“It all happened too fast,” Davy said. “I never saw it coming.”

“But you're all right?” Tommy asked when he saw Davy favoring his left side. Carla hadn't realized he'd been hurt in the crash. So like Davy to brush

it off.

“My body got slammed into the driver’s-side door. The EMTs checked me out. I’m fine.” He touched the left side of his head. “My head apparently connected with the side window. Dazed me.”

“Which explains why you went after the driver of the truck rather than wait for the law,” Willie said.

“Aren’t you guys wanted somewhere?” Davy asked his brothers, but he smiled when he said it. She loved how close they all were. She’d always wished that she had siblings.

Tommy and Willie started to leave, calling back, “Feel better, Carla.”

James had pulled Davy aside. She couldn’t hear all of their conversation, but enough of it to know that the driver of the truck that had T-boned Davy’s pickup hadn’t been found yet.

“This proves that he’s still in town and that he’s going to continue coming after Carla,” she heard Davy say. “He’s waiting for her to return to her house, for me to go back to the rodeo circuit and leave her alone.”

James said something about him being wrong about Debra Watney. She caught the words “model student” and “excellent work history,” then “she left her last job abruptly apparently, because of a family emergency.”

Davy shook his head. He’d been so sure there was something off about the woman, Carla thought as he raised his voice. “Well, someone at the hospital put that note on Carla’s food tray. The killer wanted her to know he could get to her at any time. The only reason he hasn’t is because I’ve hardly let her out of my sight. But clearly he’s not giving up and it looks personal to me.”

James nodded. “Apparently he’s fine with killing you as well.”

“I’m going to find this man if it’s the last thing I do.”

“You’re a rodeo cowboy. No offense, but you have no training for this. Let the feds handle this. Let us see what we can find out. Don’t—”

Davy shook his head. “For whatever reason, he wants her dead. Which means he’ll come for her again. I plan to be ready this time when he does. Nothing you can say will change my mind.”

His brother gave him a hug, whispering something to him before he left.

“How’s our patient?” Dr. Hull asked as he came in as James left the room.

“Sore. My ankle hurts.”

He nodded. “I’ll order you some pain medication. How’s the head?”

“It aches some. I think I hit the steering wheel with it.”

He shook his head. “At least this time you didn’t get another concussion,

so that's good. I've ordered you a pair of crutches. Have you ever used crutches before?" She shook her head. "I'll get you into a walking cast as soon as I can. Knowing you, you won't like being immobile, but best to take it easy for a while. No stairs."

"I'll take her home to her house," Davy said. "No stairs."

"I know you'll take good care of her." He winked at Carla and left the room.

She looked over at Davy. "How can you take me home? Your truck—"

"I borrowed a truck. I've got this."

Carla shook her head. "Do I have a say in any of this?"

"I guess it will depend on how well you get around on crutches," Davy joked. "But as long as I can outrun you? Then I guess not."

"Davy." It came out a plea. "Doc said I can get in-home help if necessary. You can't keep taking care of me."

He shook his head. Carla would have argued further if FBI agents Grover and Deeds hadn't come into the room. Grover asked Davy to wait outside.

"Carla?" Davy asked.

She nodded. She'd sworn she wouldn't talk to them again without an attorney present, but she hadn't been able to get one yet. "I'll be fine, since I don't have much I can tell them," she said.

Davy said, "I'll get a wheelchair so you can get out of here. I won't be long." He scowled at the agents as he left the room.

"Did I hear you say you don't remember this any better than the robbery?" Grover glanced around the room. "I don't see your attorney."

"I haven't been able to get an attorney, but we can make this quick. I didn't see anything last night. But it wasn't an accident. The man I call J tried to kill me and Davy as well."

"You know that for a fact?" asked his partner.

"There aren't that many people who want me dead," she snapped.

Grover seemed to consider that. "Why would the same person who robbed the bank steal a truck to run into you? He's got the money. Why would he take the chance of getting caught? Unless there's something more he's afraid you're going to tell us."

She groaned. "I've told you everything I know. I was warned not to talk to you, and someone ran us off the road and now crashed into us. What does that tell you?"

"A falling out among thieves?" Grover said and smiled as if joking. They

both knew he wasn't.

Carla shook her head and winced. "It doesn't matter what I tell you. You don't believe me. You're convinced that I'm involved in all this."

"Clearly, you are involved," the agent said.

"Not the way you think." She closed her eyes for a moment. "I told you everything I know."

"You didn't tell us about Samantha Elliot until she was in the hospital in a coma," he said.

"She's still alive?" Carla couldn't help her surprise. Last she'd heard, the woman was in serious condition. Maybe she would make it and give them a name or at least a description of the man who attacked her. Carla couldn't help but believe the man's name started with a *J*. "Did you find *J*'s name in her files?"

"The office was ransacked and a lot of files destroyed," Deeds said. "The Butte police are going through them trying to match the tattoo to the one you told us about. But we suspect the attacker took the file."

"Been to Butte recently?" Grover asked.

"No. Why would we share that information with you if we had anything to do with this?"

"Because you thought she may not have survived. Isn't that right? Now she has a guard outside her hospital room door. Should she regain consciousness and remember her attacker..." He left the rest hanging as a threat.

"I hope she does and remembers not just her attacker but that he is the man she tattooed *J* heart *J* on," she said. "That will be the only way this will ever be over since you aren't looking for this man."

"We are looking for him," Grover said, sounding like he was losing his temper. "But you have to admit. You have given us very little."

"What about the truck that hit us last night?" she demanded. She saw the agents exchange a look. Her heart fell.

"The truck was stolen," Deeds said. "We suspect the driver was wearing gloves. Everything was wiped clean."

"So you have nothing," she said and closed her eyes.

"Ms. Richmond," Deeds said. "We might be able to get you a deal if you tell us the truth. We know you didn't kill those other men. I really doubt you or Davy Colt tried to silence Samantha Elliot. Give us the man's name, turn state's evidence against him and—"

"I can't do that, Agent," she said, opening her eyes with a groan. "If I

knew who he was, you would already have his name and he would already be behind bars. Now please, leave. After the holidays I'll get a lawyer before we talk again."

"We're going to keep coming back until you tell us the truth," Grover said. "Think about making a deal, Ms. Richmond. I'd hate to see you spend the rest of your life behind bars. So either hire a lawyer or..."

"Or what?" she snapped.

"Or wait until we arrest you and one will be provided for you." Grover signaled his partner and the two left her room as Davy came in with the wheelchair—and a pair of crutches.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Jud wasn't surprised to find Jesse waiting for him when he finally got home late the next morning. He figured she'd already heard about what had happened last night. She might have been close enough by that she'd heard the sirens or maybe even seen the flashing lights of the cop cars. She might have even chased the ambulance to the hospital to find out who was inside—and whether or not they were going to survive.

He wouldn't have put it past her.

That's why he half expected her to have the butcher knife within reach as he came through the door. He hesitated as he closed the front door behind him.

She was sitting in the dark waiting for him. He could feel her rage. He stayed where he was as his eyes adjusted and he could see her shape more clearly.

As he decided how to handle this, he watched for any movement. He might have only an instant between when the blade of the knife caught a slice of sunlight through the crack in the curtains and when she was on him.

"Where have you been?" she asked quietly.

It had been close to daylight before he'd been able to get Jesse's car where he'd left it. He'd been cold and wet. He'd started the engine and turned on the heater and must have fallen asleep. He awoke when the engine died. He'd run out of gas. He'd had to hike into town with the gas can he kept in the back, since this wasn't the first time something like this had happened.

"I think you know where I've been."

She smiled, her teeth shining in the darkness. "While you were messing up my plans, did you also check to make sure the money wasn't where you left it?"

He wanted to turn on a light so he could see her better, but he was afraid of what she might see in his eyes. He would have been home hours ago, but of course she was right—he'd been searching for the money.

"You didn't think I believed that you moved it? By the way, why did you do that? Don't you trust me?"

She made a sound of displeasure before she said, "You know why I moved the money." She waved a hand through the air, as if that covered it. "I told

you I would handle things with Carla Richmond if you didn't." Her tone was scarily reasonable. He hadn't seen the butcher's knife out of her reach for a while now.

"I didn't want blood on your hands too," he said. "I did it to protect you."

Her laugh could have shattered crystal. "But you didn't kill her. *Surprise.*"

It was a surprise. He'd T-boned Davy Colt's pickup on the passenger side hard enough to kill her. Now he was even happier that he hadn't turned on a lamp. For sure she would have seen his disappointment that this wasn't over—and right on its heels, his relief that he hadn't killed another person to get out of this mess.

"I had a plan, Jud," Jesse said. "It would have worked too. I was waiting in the alley behind Colt Brothers Investigation. I was waiting for them to come back. She and her cowboy would be dead now. But you had to...*protect* me. I don't think you trust me anymore."

He looked down at the floor, no longer shocked by anything she did. But he didn't want her to know that he'd gone to the spot where he'd hidden the money. She would take that as a betrayal, and he already knew how she reacted when feeling betrayed.

Last night, he'd heard sirens and an ambulance. "She has to be badly injured."

She shook her head. "A broken ankle and a bump on her head. So no, Jud, you failed, and we're not leaving until it's finished."

"It *is* finished," he said, raising his voice. He saw her shift on the couch. He could no longer see both of her hands. "Jesse, I'm begging you. She's not worth it. Let's get the money and leave." He took a wary step toward her, then another. "Staying here will only get us arrested or killed. Please, let this go."

She snapped on the lamp next to the couch, stopping him in his tracks and momentarily blinding him. He blinked and saw that she wouldn't be happy until Carla Richmond was dead.

He wasn't sure he cared about trying to make her happy anymore, but if he wanted the money, he had no choice. He had to kill Carla Richmond—and soon. The problem was that the woman seemed to have nine lives.

Then he would deal with his other problem. Jesse. She was right about one thing. He no longer trusted her. He wasn't all that sure that she wasn't planning to take off with the money without him. Or worse, kill him.

"The good news is that she'll have to go home now to her house—and on

crutches,” Jesse said. “Even you should be able to handle that.”

He watched her get up from the couch. Both of her hands were empty. No butcher’s knife. That should have relieved him, except that she was now headed for the kitchen.

“I hope you’re hungry,” she said over her shoulder. “There’s leftover stew.”

His first instinct at that moment was to forget about the money, the women, everything and just cut and run. Maybe if he’d had a full tank of gas in the pickup he would have.

“Starved!” he called after her, telling himself that he would outsmart her. “Something smells good,” he said, coming up behind Jesse as she pulled a bowl of stew from the microwave and set it on a trivet on the table. He put his arms around her and pulled her against him. At least she didn’t have the knife on her. But if he wanted the money and to live to spend it, he’d have to make sure the knife didn’t get stuck between his ribs.

* * *

CARLA LOOKED DOWN at the cast on her leg and wanted to cry. Crutches? She thought her freedom had been taken away before this. Now she really was in trouble. She was a sitting duck. Finding the man should prove easy. She could just sit and wait for him to come. It wasn’t like she could run.

Now Davy felt he had no choice but to stay with her. How could things get worse? They were both trapped. But the worst part was that when J came for her again, Davy would try to stop him. She could get the man she loved killed.

Dr. Hull and Davy helped her into the wheelchair. Her other option was, as Dr. Hull had suggested, getting a nurse. Carla wanted to laugh out loud. Someone from the hospital—a place she was now terrified of? It would just be her luck to bring the killer or his accomplice into her home.

But at the same time, she hated that Davy felt he had to take care of her. She couldn’t bear to think of how this was going to end. Davy couldn’t stay and protect her forever. Nor would she allow him to.

“Ready?” he asked as he took the wheelchair handles.

“This isn’t what I wanted.” She sounded close to tears and felt them pool in her eyes.

“You don’t always get what you want. Sometimes you get what you need.”

She recognized the verse. He'd sung it to her all those years ago—before they'd parted. "Something tells me that we aren't talking about this current situation."

He smiled as he pushed her out of the room and down the hall to the elevator. "I should have fought harder ten years ago. This time, you can't push me away."

Davy drove her home to her house. As he pulled into the drive, she said, "I overheard you talking to your brother. James is right. I'm not your responsibility. I don't want you risking your life for me or putting it on hold any longer." Her voice broke as he parked and turned off the engine. "I'm not going to be responsible for keeping you from what you love." She took hold of her crutches.

"You aren't keeping me from what I love, Carla. Stop fighting me, because you can't change my mind." His gaze burned into her. "Now let's see how you do on these crutches. I cleaned off the sidewalk of snow earlier, but it will still be icy. You sure you don't want me to carry you to the door?"

She looked at him, aghast, and it made him laugh.

"Just a thought," he said, grinning, and he got out to rush around and open her door.

Carla was determined to make it to the house on the crutches. If she fell... Well, she just wasn't going to fall. She was awkward, but she didn't fall. She felt a rush of pride when she even managed the front steps to the porch. True, Davy was right behind her and would have caught her if she'd even wobbled, but she'd made it on her own.

He reached into her purse, pulled out the keys and opened the front door. She had to prove to him that she would be all right. She had to believe that J would be caught and that she would do fine on crutches until Dr. Hull put her in a walking cast. She had to believe that when Davy left, her heart would somehow survive.

Once inside, she turned to him. She looked into his denim-blue eyes. All of the Colt brothers had the same thick head of dark hair and blue eyes that ranged from faded denim to sky blue. They were all pretty much built alike as well, and all wanted to believe that they were the most handsome of the bunch. Close in age, they spent years confusing their teachers and the town.

But Carla knew that Davy was the most gorgeous of the Colt brothers. He was also the kindest, sweetest and most thoughtful. That she'd let him walk away ten years ago... That she was going to push him away again...

Before she could speak, he said, “Why don’t I make us something to eat?” He moved past her on his way to the kitchen.

“Wait. You cook?” If true, this made him even more irresistible.

He stopped to turn. “You keep underestimating me.”

It was true and they both knew it. He would make someone a great husband. She felt it to the tender center of her heart. She almost said that, but knew she couldn’t joke about him being with anyone else. She held his look for a few moments, then moved past him on her crutches. “I’m not even sure there is anything to cook in the fridge.”

* * *

JUD HAD BEEN called in to work for a few hours and had readily agreed. Anything to get away from Jesse for a while. Not to mention it took the pressure off him to deal with Carla Richmond.

On the way back home that afternoon after cashing his paycheck, Jud realized with everything that had been going on, he’d forgotten that one of Leon’s goons would be coming by for a payment. Wes knew what day Jud got paid. He almost turned around—until he saw that Wes was standing by his big black SUV—with a headlock on Jesse. Her hands were bound in front of her with duct tape and so was her mouth.

Heart jumping to his throat, Jud sped up. He couldn’t let Wes kill her. Jesse was the only one who knew where the money was. He wheeled in next to the SUV and jumped out.

“Let her go,” Jud cried and tried to pull Wes off her. Two men Jud had never seen before tumbled out of the SUV and grabbed him. “What the hell is going on?” he demanded, becoming even more afraid.

“Leon wants all of his money *now*. I’m taking your girlfriend as collateral. You ever hear of collateral damage, Jud?”

Jud tried to break free of the men holding him as Wes shoved Jesse into the back of the SUV. “Wait!” he cried as the two men released him and climbed back in the rig to shove Jesse down on the floorboard and slam the door.

Wes came toward him so quickly that he didn’t see the incoming fist. It hit him in the gut, dropping him to his knees on the driveway. He gasped for oxygen, unable to speak.

“Let us know when you have the money,” Wes said, crouching down next to him. “Your girlfriend told us that we’d already have our money if you had

taken care of things. I suggest you do what has to be done, Jud. You have twenty-four hours. Otherwise, we'll take care of her and come back for you.”

“Don't kill her,” he managed as Wes climbed into the SUV, started the engine and roared away.

Jud couldn't believe this was happening. Only Jesse knew where the money was. His mind raced. Why hadn't she given them the payment? What the hell was going on? Had she lost her mind?

He watched Wes drive away with Jesse—and his only way to pay the debt before the twenty-four hours were up.

Wes thought that this was about getting the money from his dying grandmother. But Jud had gotten the message loud and clear. Jesse wouldn't pay off Leon—not until Jud took care of Carla Richmond. No matter what he did, the woman wasn't giving up. If he'd had any doubt about her mental state, he no longer did. Cora Brooks was right. There was definitely something wrong with Jesse Watney, a flaw that he had foolishly overlooked—and now deeply regretted.

His back against the wall, he had twenty-four hours. Otherwise, he could kiss the bank money goodbye. He'd risked his life for it. Not that he didn't realize that even if he did what she wanted, Jesse might still double-cross him.

But he told himself that over his dead body would Jesse get away with all that money as he decided to end this.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Agent Grover got the call from Butte on his way back to Lonesome.

“Samantha Elliot has regained consciousness,” the doctor told him. “She is determined to speak with you. She had me call the number on the card you left for her.”

The phone was handed over. He listened as she told him that she’d done some work for a man named Judson Bruckner. “He’s the one who attacked me.”

Just to clarify, Grover asked, “What did the tattoo look like?”

She described the one that Carla Richmond had said she’d seen during the robbery. *J heart J*. He recalled the drawing she’d done of it.

“You’re sure he’s the man?”

The tattoo artist cursed at him. “I never forget a face—or a tattoo. It just took me a minute to recall his last name. If he had waited, I would have handed over his paperwork. Stupid fool. When you catch him, I’d be happy to identify him in a lineup and testify against him.”

The woman had no idea how lucky she’d been, since if true, Judson Bruckner had already killed three men. He thanked her and quickly did a background check on the suspect. Judson was currently renting a house in Lonesome and temporarily employed by a delivery company for the holidays. He drove an old red pickup. Grover scribbled down the plate number. His rap sheet showed that he’d had a few run-ins with the law, but nothing close to armed robbery and murder.

As he disconnected, he started to call the sheriff’s department in Lonesome, but hesitated. He was on his way back from Washington State. He could be in Lonesome in a few hours. He wanted to make this bust himself because he had one very important question for Judson. Who inside the bank had helped him? Because someone had, and he knew that for a fact. He couldn’t chance that the local law enforcement would screw up the collar, so he just kept driving, anxious to finally get to the truth.

* * *

CARLA COULDN’T IMAGINE how the two of them could live together in her

small one-bedroom house. It felt too intimate, Carla thought as she agilely glided across the floor on the crutches past Davy. She stopped to look back at him. “See? I’m fine.”

He nodded. “You’re better than fine.” His gaze was hot and sexy and full of promise.

She felt a rush of desire. How long before the two of them were making love in her double bed as snow fell outside? She shook off the image. It would be fine for a while, but eventually he would resent her for keeping him here. It didn’t matter that none of this was her fault—or his either. They’d been thrown together because of an armed bank robbery and a killer who had his own reasons for wanting her dead, apparently.

But how was she going to get Davy to leave if the killer wasn’t caught? Because she couldn’t keep him. He wasn’t hers. Too much of his heart was still taken by the rodeo. If anyone could understand that, it was her. Look how hard she’d worked to succeed, giving up everything but work to prove herself.

Carla leaned on her crutches and opened the refrigerator, surprised to find it stocked. She looked back at Davy, who was lounging against the doorjamb, watching her. “You did this,” she said, feeling even guiltier. This man had dropped everything to make sure she was safe, and now this?

“Actually, Lori helped. She thought we might be hungry since we never made it out to their house for dinner.”

“And she apparently worried that we might be thirsty,” Carla said, pulling out a cold bottle of wine as she balanced on one crutch.

Davy grinned. “Looks like she thought of everything.”

Suddenly she wasn’t hungry, even though the food stocked in the refrigerator looked delicious. There was only one thing she wanted. She started to close the refrigerator door.

The back door exploded, flying open with the shriek of splintering wood and breaking metal. The first shot was deafening in the small kitchen. Behind her, she heard the bullet hit the wall, burying itself in the Sheetrock. An instant later, the second shot hit the china cabinet in the corner, glass shattering before the bullet made a thwack sound as it burrowed into the wood at the back of the display case.

Carla dropped the bottle of wine in her hand. It hit the tile floor and shattered like a gunshot, sending glass and wine flying. She started to move back, but was shoved into the open refrigerator as Davy dove for the back

door. A bullet lodged itself in the refrigerator door she was holding open.

She fell back, dropping one of her crutches as she tried not to come down on her casted leg. She clutched at the refrigerator shelves and screamed, “No!” at Davy. But her cry was drowned out by the fourth shot in the seconds since the back door had been smashed open.

Those terrifying few moments though were nothing compared to the silence that followed. Carla could feel the aching cold of the night coming through the open back door. But over the thumping of her pulse, she heard nothing.

“Davy?” Fear made her voice break and tears rush to her eyes. She reached down and picked up the fallen crutch and awkwardly moved out from behind the refrigerator door, through the spilled wine and glass, terrified of what she would find.

The back door stood open to the night. She could see snow melting just inside it where the man had stood. Past it, she saw two sets of tracks that disappeared into the darkness.

“No!” she cried again and launched herself at the door, only to find that she could see nothing beyond the tracks in the light coming from the kitchen. Nor could she hear anything.

She spun around, searching the floor for a moment, praying she wouldn’t find it. But there it was. Blood. Three drops of it, all leading to the back door.

Stumbling into the living room, she searched frantically for her purse and cell phone. She remembered that Davy had brought it in. She looked around, praying that any moment Davy would come through that back door.

Fighting tears of fear and frustration, she spotted her purse and moved quickly on the crutches toward it. She had to toss them aside to get to her purse and the phone inside.

As she was digging for her cell, she heard a noise and looked up. In that instant, she would have done anything to see Davy standing there. Instead, what she saw turned her insides to liquid. To her horror, the blade of the large knife in the hooded figure’s hand caught the light as the hood was thrown back and the blonde aide from the hospital rushed at her.

* * *

DAVY FELT THE searing pain in his shoulder—but not until he’d run through the fallen snow, chasing the man who’d shot him. He became aware of the

cold along with his ragged breaths as he ran. He followed the sound of branches brushing clothing ahead of him and tried to ignore the pain.

The clouds were low, the night black. He couldn't see movement ahead of him, but he knew he was gaining on the killer. Ahead, he saw a faint light through the pines and realized that the man had veered off to the right—toward the river.

Davy had no idea how far he'd run. It had happened so fast that he hadn't had time to think when he'd rushed the man, only to have him fire a final shot and turn and run. Davy had felt something smack hard into his left shoulder, but hadn't let it stop him. This time, he wouldn't let the bank robber turned killer get away. He was determined to catch this man if it killed him.

He was breathing hard, so at first he didn't realize that he could no longer hear the man crashing through the pines ahead of him. He pulled up for a moment to listen. That's when he heard a cry of surprise, followed by a scream that ended abruptly in silence.

Rushing toward the sound, he came out of the pines into the open and stopped as he saw where he was—standing on the cliff above the river. He listened, hearing nothing but his own blood rushing through his veins. He stepped closer to the edge of the cliff, aware of the trampled snow at his feet.

Even in the darkness he could see the sheen of the water's surface below him and, at its edge, something dark crumpled down there in the rocks. He waited for what he knew was the hooded figure who'd tried to kill them to move as he pulled his cell phone from his pocket and hit 911. The figure didn't move.

As he turned back toward the house, following his own footsteps through the snow, he realized that his shirt was covered in blood. He began to move steadily, anxious to get back to Carla. An engine revved somewhere in the distance. Surely Carla would stay at the house and call the cops.

He began to move quicker, suddenly afraid, suddenly having doubts. J, whoever he was, was dead, lying at the edge of the river. There was no way the man could have doubled back. But what if the man had had an accomplice at the hospital? Davy began to run. He heard an engine rev. He ran harder. Finally, he heard sirens headed this way.

By the time he reached Carla's house, he saw the flashing lights of SUV patrol cars pulling into the drive. The back door still stood open and he charged through it. He could hear the sheriff's deputies knocking on the front door.

Through the doorway, he could see into the living room. His pulse jumped. He saw evidence of a struggle. A lamp lay broken on the floor next to one of Carla's crutches.

"Carla!" He was calling her name, his voice cracking with fear, as he rushed through the house. "Carla!" Her purse was on the floor by the couch, the contents—including her cell phone—scattered across the floor. The deputies were pounding harder at the front door. He rushed to it, facing his greatest fear.

Carla was gone.

Someone had taken her.

J? But if true, then who was that lying dead at the edge of the river?

The second *J*.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Davy felt as if he were in shock—from the loss of blood, from the loss of so much more. He'd been taken to the hospital, where the bullet had been removed from his upper arm and the wound bandaged.

He was anxious to be released. While his brothers and most of the sheriff's department were looking for Carla, he had to get out of the hospital so he could find her. Not that he had any idea where to look.

But right now there was a sheriff's deputy outside his hospital room door, apparently to keep him there. Federal agents were on the way to question him.

The moment Grover walked in, Davy could tell he was angry, demanding to hear what had happened in detail from the beginning.

"This is a waste of time," Davy had snapped after he told the agents everything that had occurred. "Now can we please find Carla?"

"I'm sure she's long gone," Grover said and seemed surprised that Davy was still anxious to leave to look for her. "You don't get it, do you? The robbery? Judson Bruckner had inside information from someone working at the bank. We know that for a fact. We believe that information came from your girlfriend."

"You're wrong. From the very beginning she told you she had nothing to do with it," Davy snapped. "We were almost killed by that man. You found his body lying down on the edge of the river, right?"

Grover nodded. "Which is unfortunate. I really wanted to ask him about the missing money. But apparently, it and Carla Richmond are gone."

"How can you think that? There were obvious signs of a struggle when I got back to the house," Davy said.

"Maybe too obvious," Grover said.

Davy shook his head in irritation. "Someone took her."

"Who do you think that was?" Deeds asked. "You said that you were chasing a man in a hoodie. Was there someone else with him?"

"Just because I didn't see anyone else..." Davy raked a hand through his hair. He felt sick to his stomach. His brothers had warned him, and he hadn't listened. He should never have gone after the man. He should never have left Carla alone. Now someone had her.

“So, who is he, the man at the bottom of the cliff? Have you been able to ID him?” The moment he asked the question, he saw the answer on the agent’s face. “You know already?”

“Samantha Elliot, the tattoo artist who inked him, regained consciousness and gave us his name. I was on my way back here to question him.”

“But if you know who he is, then you should be able to find out who he was working with,” Davy said. “The note on Carla’s tray at the hospital... Does he work at the hospital?”

Grover shook his head. “His name is Judson Bruckner. He worked temporarily for a delivery company.”

“I saw him,” Davy cried. “He was looking in the window of her house. He had a package, but he said it was the wrong address and left before I could question him further.” Davy couldn’t believe he’d been that close to the killer, that close to catching him. If only he had, Carla would be safe now.

The agent looked at the small notebook in his hand. “You and Ms. Richmond, you hadn’t had any contact for how long before the robbery?”

Davy shook his head, confused for a moment as to why the agent was asking him this. “I told you, I saw her the day before—”

“Before the robbery. I’m asking about before that. Had you had any contact with Ms. Richmond?”

“No. I stopped by the bank the day before the robbery to see her. Before that, I hadn’t seen her in months. But what does this have to do with—”

“You have to understand my skepticism, Mr. Colt,” Grover said. “You said Ms. Richmond wasn’t injured during the shooting at the house, but you were.”

“She had the refrigerator open. I shoved her against it, the door blocking any bullets, as I lunged at the shooter.” He groaned. “Agent Grover, could we please quit wasting time? Carla is in trouble. If this Judson Bruckner didn’t work at the hospital, then someone he knew does.”

“Doesn’t this remind you of the truck that hit you? Haven’t you asked yourself how it was that neither of you were hurt?”

“One of us *was* hurt,” he said through gritted teeth. He could feel time running out. They were wasting precious moments here while Carla... Who knew where or what was happening with her? “Carla’s ankle was broken.”

“Still, the way the side of your pickup was crushed, I’m surprised she wasn’t killed.”

“I was slowing down. She’d unbuckled her seat belt and was moving

toward me.”

“So she’s what? Making a move on you, and out of the blue a big truck just happens to crash into your pickup on Ms. Richmond’s side at that exact moment? How lucky that she slid over by you just before that happened.”

“You can’t still think she had anything to do with this,” Davy cried.

“Why not? Tell me...now that you’ve had time to think about this. Doesn’t it seem strange that the shooter fired shots all over the place—except for the one that winged you, Mr. Colt?”

Davy swore. “You didn’t see his face. I did. His eyes were wild and his hand was shaking. But all that aside, I’ve had enough of this. You’re wrong. Carla’s been taken. By someone connected to the killer. Maybe someone even more dangerous. Instead of talking nonsense, you should be trying to find her before it’s too late.” His voice broke at the fear that it might already be too late.

Grover shook his head. “Ms. Richmond knew I was onto her. She needed to disappear. Now she has.” The agent got to his feet. “I’m sorry, Mr. Colt. I can tell that you care about this woman, but you’re kidding yourself if you think she isn’t involved. Why do you think the robber stayed in town this long? He couldn’t leave without her. And he would have—if you hadn’t run him over a cliff.”

He started toward the door only to turn back. “Carla Richmond’s gone and so is the money. She staged it so you’d think someone took her, struggled with her. But don’t worry, we’ll find her. However, you’d be smart to put this little...episode behind you. She used you.” With that he turned and walked out.

* * *

DAVY COULD PRACTICALLY hear the clock ticking as he was finally allowed to leave the hospital. Now at least he knew J’s name. Judson Bruckner.

Apparently, he’d been living in Lonesome for a few years.

But who had taken Carla? All he knew was that she had put up a fight. His gut instinct told him whoever it was had been working with Jud Bruckner. The other *J*? Someone who worked at the hospital?

But when James had gotten the list of employees, that had been a dead end.

Davy thought of the blonde nurse. He still thought there was something about her that bothered him. What if he wasn’t wrong? The answer was here,

he told himself as he went down to the hospital's main office.

"Can I help?" the woman at the desk asked.

"I'm looking for an aide who works here. Debra Watney?"

"I'm sorry, she isn't working tonight. Is there someone else who can help you?"

"Did you say Debra Watney?"

He turned at the deep, coarse female voice, recognizing the sound of it at once. It was the same one that had yelled at him and his brothers for stealing her apples from the tree near both of their properties. Davy groaned inwardly. Cora Brooks had been the bane of their existences for years and the worst neighbor a bunch of wild Colt boys could have. She'd threatened numerous times to shoot them with her shotgun loaded with rock salt.

Cora stood not even five feet tall, but she was a force to be reckoned with. He saw that her right wrist had been bandaged, which he realized might explain what she was doing here. "Why are you asking about Debra Watney?" Cora demanded.

He had to bite his tongue for a moment. Nosy old busybody. "She's an aide who works here."

"Not likely," Cora said with a scoff. "She's dead."

Davy didn't have time for this. He started past her, but she grabbed his arm with her free hand. "Cora, I have to find this woman—"

"You aren't looking for Debra Watney," Cora said, dropping her voice and pulling him away from the nurse's station. "Her name's Jesse. Jesse Watney. I knew she was back in town, but I had no idea that she'd stolen her twin's name and profession." She clucked in disgust.

He'd frozen at the name—*Jesse*. Cora had to be wrong, and yet hadn't he been suspicious of the aide from the get-go? "How can you be sure her name is Jesse and not Debra?"

"I know, so just leave it at that. Debra disappeared a while back and hasn't been seen since getting into a car with Jesse. Jesse's the devil incarnate."

"Where can I find her?" he asked, telling himself that if he was right about the blonde aide, then what Cora was telling him just might be true.

"She's been living with Judson Bruckner in a house they rent on the edge of town."

He felt his heart kick up and then drop. Maybe Cora did know what she was talking about—but the aide wouldn't take Carla there. Too obvious. "Is there somewhere she'd go if she didn't want anyone to find her?"

“Probably back to the family hovel in the mountains.”

“Around here?” he asked in surprise, and Cora nodded. “Can you draw me a map of how to get there?”

“I can do you one better. I’ll show you.” She must have seen him hesitate. “That’s the deal. I go with you, or you don’t get the information. I want to see her face when retribution comes knocking.”

“Cora, it’s going to be dangerous. You don’t want to—”

“Of course it’s going to be dangerous,” the elderly woman snapped. “Jesse would just as soon kill you as spit in your eye. You underestimate her evil and you’ll be dead as a doornail. I’m going.” She started for the door. “We’ll take my rig. I keep my stinger in it.”

Davy wanted to argue, but he’d left the pickup he’d borrowed out at Carla’s. He climbed into Cora’s small pickup, as she pulled her shotgun off the rack on the rear window.

“Let’s go get her,” Cora said with obvious delight. “On the way, you can tell me why Jesse has your girlfriend.” He started to tell her that Carla wasn’t his girlfriend, but of course she didn’t give him a chance. “What were you thinking not marrying her a long time ago anyway?”

* * *

CARLA SURFACED AS if from the bottom of a lake. She opened her eyes slowly, fighting to focus. Her brain felt foggy. For a moment, all she wanted to do was close her eyes and go back to the darkness.

But then her brain snapped in. Her eyes flew open, and she bolted upright to quickly take in her surroundings. The smelly, lumpy mattress she’d been lying on. The worn wooden floor. The log walls. The cloudy dust-coated old window. The snowy pines beyond it.

At the sound of something popping and cracking, she turned her head and saw the ancient rock fireplace, its face dark with layers of soot. A small fire burned at the back of it, sending out puffs of heat into the cold room.

“You’re finally awake.”

She started at the female voice, her head swiveling around to see the woman standing in the doorway. It all came back in a flash at the sight of the blonde aide. A gun dangled from the woman’s right hand as she moved into the room and dragged over what was left of an old cloth recliner. She sat and leaned forward, balancing the gun on one thigh.

“Where are we?” Carla asked, her mouth dry and her tongue feeling too large for her mouth. Their conversation earlier tonight had been short, punctuated by the needle the woman had jammed into her arm as they’d struggled on the couch. Carla had been at a distinct disadvantage, given the cast on her leg. She vaguely remembered being half dragged out to the woman’s vehicle. After that, nothing.

“Does it matter where we are?” the blonde asked.

She guessed not and tried to clear the fog still drifting around in her head. “You’re the aide from the hospital.” Carla frowned as she tried to remember the name James had told her. “Debra.”

“You can call me Jesse,” she said with a smile.

“Jesse?” She felt her pulse jump. “The other *J*. Of course.”

“Jud and that stupid tattoo,” Jesse said with a rueful shake of her head. “He’s had his uses, I’ll give him that, but let’s face it—he’s a dim bulb.”

Carla gathered that Jud, the other *J*, wasn’t here with them. She supposed that was something. “Why have you brought me here?”

“Why?” Jesse laughed. “You don’t like the place? I grew up here.” She glanced around, all humor erased from her face. “I swore I’d never come back here.” Her gaze returned to Carla. “Because of you, here I am and here you are.” Her face hardened. “You shouldn’t have told the feds about the tattoo. I told you not to talk to them. You should have listened.”

“You wrote the note.” Her mind was taking its time clearing. Not that it helped. She had a cast on her leg and Jesse had a gun. The odds of getting out of here alive weren’t good.

Jesse rose and began to pace the small room. “I spent my life being disrespected because of my family, my perfect twin, everyone—” She spun to face her. “People just like you who thought they were better than me.”

“I don’t even know you.”

“You should have given Jud a loan.”

She blinked. “He never applied for one.” At least, not under the name Jud.

Jesse let out a rude sound. “Don’t pretend you would have given him one if he had.”

“I guess we’ll never know.” Carla looked around the room, afraid to ask what happened next. She had a bad feeling she already knew. But a small bubble of hope rose in her as she wondered why she was still alive. Jesse could have killed her back at the house. So why hadn’t she?

The thought of the house brought a heart-dropping memory. “The last I

saw my friend Davy, he was chasing a man out the back door of my house. I assume it was Jud.” Since Jud wasn’t here, Carla hoped that meant that Davy had caught up to him and was fine. “Do you know what—”

“Happened? Your guess is as good as mine. They might both be dead.” Jesse shrugged. “It doesn’t matter.”

It did to Carla. She felt her eyes burn with tears. Wasn’t this what she’d feared? That Davy would get injured or killed trying to protect her? But Jud could have gotten away, she realized. He could be headed up to this cabin right now. And Davy...? He had to be alive.

She realized Jesse was studying her intently, frowning as she did, as if surprised that she wasn’t more terrified. If the woman only knew. But Carla was doing her best not to panic. It was her nature to keep control over her emotions. Except for when she thought of Davy.

“What? You aren’t going to ask?” Jesse smiled as she sat back down on the edge of the recliner. Carla shook her head, pretending she didn’t know what it was the woman was getting at. “Come on, don’t you want to know what I’m going to do with you?”

“I would imagine you plan to kill me.”

Jesse smiled, then cocked her head as if to listen before sending a glance toward the window and the darkness outside.

Carla realized that she was expecting someone. Jud? Of course. Her heart sank. She was waiting for Jud before she killed her. Or was it Jud who would be pulling the trigger?

Listening, she didn’t hear anything. The deep snow was like thick cotton insulation, swallowing up sound. She was on her own with a gun-toting Jesse and possibly her even more dangerous boyfriend. If she had any hope of getting away from the Js, she had better come up with a plan.

She thought of Davy and her heart ached. Her life couldn’t end here in this cabin deep in the mountains. If he was alive, he would blame himself. She couldn’t bear the thought.

Over against the fireplace she saw an old branding iron that was apparently being used as a poker. How ironic, she thought, that the one weapon in the room other than Jesse’s gun was a branding iron.

* * *

AS DAVY RODE SHOTGUN, Cora filled him in on what she knew about Jesse

Watney and he told her what had happened back at the cabin. If Carla was in Jesse Watney's hands, then she was in worse trouble than if she'd been taken by Jud. Jesse had threatened her at the hospital, but that was mild compared to the stories Cora told him about the woman.

He was wishing he didn't know, fearing that he would be too late, that Carla was already dead. That is, if this woman named Jesse Watney had her.

When his cell rang, he quickly picked up, seeing that it was James.

"I just spoke with Agent Grover. What a... Where are you?"

"Probably on a wild-goose chase." He heard Cora grunt in the driver's seat. "Judson Bruckner was living with a woman named Jesse Watney. We're on our way to Jesse's family cabin in the mountains right now."

"We're?"

"Cora's with me." The road was getting worse. "Got to go."

After he disconnected, he could feel the elderly woman's gaze on him. "You didn't ask how I hurt my wrist," Cora said as they left the county road and headed up into the mountains.

He glanced over at her. His first thought was that she'd been spying on someone. Everyone in the county knew that she kept binoculars handy and had even bought herself some night-vision ones. If the grapevine could be believed, she loved learning people's secrets and then cashing in on them. That highly illegal quirk had almost gotten her killed last year, but Davy doubted it had stopped her.

"Gardening?" he asked, clearly joking.

She cackled. "Yep, winter gardening." She was still chuckling when she said, "The road is going to get a lot worse, I'll warn you right now. Best hang on. The cabin's all hell and gone back in here. Place has been empty for years. I figure she'll go there like an animal returns to its den."

Even though she'd been right about Jesse working as Debra Watney at the hospital, he still wasn't sure that she wasn't leading him on a fool's errand back up here in the mountains. He could feel time slipping away.

"It's not far now," Cora said, sitting up to strain to see into the glow of the headlights.

At first he didn't even see the road. But then he saw the fresh tire tracks in the snow. Only one set. Pine trees stood like towering snow-covered walls on each side as the road narrowed to a Jeep trail.

"I'm trying to decide if we should walk the last part or drive right up to the cabin," Cora said as she shifted into four-wheel drive. "Not sure it makes a

difference, since if I know Jesse, she'll be expecting us."

He shot her a look. "What are you saying?"

"If she wants your girlfriend dead..." Again he thought about correcting her. They weren't boyfriend and girlfriend. He wasn't sure what they were. "Then she would have killed her at your house. Why bring her up here unless she was waiting for someone?"

"Jud isn't going to show up, but she might not know that," Davy said. He could feel Cora's gaze swing to him.

"Probably won't make a difference to Jesse which man shows up. I suspect she was planning to kill that boyfriend of hers anyway. He was the kind she would eventually squish beneath her boot. She'd much rather you see her kill Carla."

Davy felt his stomach roil. He was beginning to wonder about Cora and if she even knew what she was talking about, when a cabin came into view in the headlights.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Carla realized that Jesse had heard something. She had her head cocked, listening, and didn't seem surprised when headlights cut through the grime-coated glass of the front window. "Stay here!" she ordered and moved to the door.

Carla knew she didn't have long. She slid across the mattress, then reached over to grab the branding iron from the edge of the fireplace. She had just enough time to hide the iron next to her before Jesse turned.

The blonde's face hardened to stone. "You moved."

"I'm freezing. I moved closer to the fire."

Jesse studied her for a moment before glancing at the fire.

Carla held her breath, afraid she would see that the branding iron was no longer leaning against the soot-coated rocks.

At the sound of boots on the porch, both of their gazes were drawn toward the front door. Jesse quickly came back over to her to point the gun at Carla's head.

"I figured someone would come looking for you," Jesse said. "Hope it's your cowboy. If his PI brothers are worth their salt, then they know about me by now—and that I had family up here in the mountains. Thing is," she said, frowning, "the place isn't that easy to find."

* * *

CORA PARKED AND turned off the engine. There was no sneaking up on the cabin. Anyone inside would know that they had company. The headlights went off, pitching them into darkness.

The only light that flickered inside the structure was from a fire. Davy couldn't see anyone through the grime-covered window, but he felt as if they were being watched. No one, however, had come to the door.

He wondered if Carla was here with the woman Cora called Jesse. If so, who was Jesse expecting to come driving up? Jud? "You should stay in the truck," he said to Cora.

The elderly woman harrumphed and was out the pickup door before he could stop her, taking her shotgun with her. He hurried after her. As they

reached the porch, he stopped to listen, afraid he'd hear a gunshot.

Cora scaled the rickety porch steps and was almost to the door when Davy heard a female voice call, "Come in!"

Davy recognized it as that of the blonde aide from the hospital, the same one Cora swore was actually Jesse Watney—an alleged killer, and the woman who he knew in his gut had Carla. He reached past Cora, grabbed the door handle, turned it and pushed. The old door groaned and creaked as it swung slowly open.

The fire in the room illuminated the scene before him. Carla sat on an old mattress a few feet from the fireplace, and the blonde stood over her with a gun pointed at Carla's head.

He met Carla's gaze and saw strength and determination in those blue eyes. He hadn't expected anything less. He gave her a small nod—not sure how to get her out of this unharmed, but willing to risk his own life to make it happen.

Cora set her shotgun aside and pushed past him and into the room. Davy could feel his gun where he'd tucked it into the back waistband of his jeans as he was getting out of the pickup. Cora was a loose cannon, but if not for her, he wouldn't have known where to find this place. He just worried about what she would do next and knew he had to be ready.

"Hope you aren't planning to go back to your job at the hospital," Cora was saying, taking obvious delight in the news she was about to impart. "They know you lied about who you are. I would imagine they have already called the sheriff."

"What did you bring this old bat for?" Jesse demanded, seemingly unfazed by the news. "I wasn't going back to that job anyway." Her gaze moved to Davy. "Where's Jud?"

"He had an accident."

"Dead?" she asked. He nodded and she smiled. "One thing less to take care of before I leave town."

"You actually think you're going to get away this time?" Cora demanded, hands on her skinny hips. "The feds are involved. This time you're going down for your crimes. Finally, Debra is going to get what she deserves. Payback for what you did to her."

Jesse frowned, tilting her head as she stared at the older woman. "Why do you care so much?"

"I knew your grandfather and I remember your sister as a child. She was

good to her soul,” Cora said, her voice breaking. “She deserved better than she got, especially from her twin sister.”

Jesse’s eyes blazed for a moment and Davy feared she might start shooting—starting with Carla. He swore under his breath, wishing he had insisted on Cora staying in the pickup. He knew he would have had to hog-tie her though.

To his relief, Jesse seemed to tamp down her anger. She shook her head, dismissing Cora as she shifted her gaze to him. “Let’s get this over with. I know you have a weapon on you. Toss it over by the fire.”

“You need to let Carla go, and we’ll all walk out of here,” he said. “Carla has nothing to do with this.”

Jesse laughed. “She has *everything* to do with this. If it wasn’t for her...” She shook her head. “She should have kept her mouth shut about what she saw during the robbery. I warned her. She didn’t listen. Her mistake. Now yours for coming up here to try to save her—and worse for bringing this old hag with you.”

Cora moved with surprising quickness for her age. She charged like a small tank going into battle. Davy had only an instant to react. He half expected Jesse to pull the trigger and kill Carla before turning the gun on Cora. He drew his weapon, knowing he would probably have only one chance for a clear shot.

For years, he and his brothers had competed against each other firing at tin cans. Davy had always been the better shot. He prayed he still was.

As he raised his gun to aim and fire, he saw Carla reach beside her. As Cora charged Jesse, Carla lifted what looked like an old branding iron. In one fluid movement, she swung it high across her body, striking Jesse’s arm with the gun.

The sound of the gunshot was deafening in the small room. Davy had thought the blow with the branding iron would dislodge the gun from Jesse’s hand, but he was wrong. He heard her cry of pain, then one like a war cry as she swung the gun at Cora, who was inches away from tackling her. The blow to the side of Cora’s head sent her headlong into the floor next to Jesse.

Davy saw it all happen in what felt like an instant before he was looking down the barrel of Jesse’s gun, the black hole taking aim at his heart. He fired first. But she still got off a shot before his bullet hit her in the throat. He felt the bullet whiz past his head to lodge in the door behind him.

Blood was spurting from Jesse’s throat, but she was still standing, the gun

still in her hand. Worse, she was starting to turn, to swing the barrel toward Carla, who'd gotten to her knees on the mattress. As he started to fire again, he saw Carla swing the branding iron in both hands like a batter going for a home run.

The makeshift weapon caught Jesse in the knees. She opened her mouth as if to scream, but only emitted a gurgling sound as she crumpled to the floor next to Cora.

Davy lowered his gun as Carla pried the gun from Jesse's grip and tossed it aside. Davy rushed to her and dropped down next to her to take her in his arms. He'd never been more relieved in his life. This could have gone so much worse. Carla clung to him so tightly that he hoped she'd never let him go.

"Cora?" she asked after a few moments.

"I'm too mean to die" came the answer from the floor as the older woman pushed herself up into a sitting position and flinched as she touched the knot on the side of her head. "Is she dead?" Cora asked of Jesse, before prodding her with a boot toe.

The worn wooden floor was bright red with blood. He could see Jesse's eyes, wide open, lifeless. "She's gone."

"Thank goodness," Cora said and sighed.

"I can't believe you found me," Carla said against his chest.

"It was all Cora's doing. If I hadn't run into her at the hospital..." Davy pulled back a little to look at Carla. Her gaze went to his shoulder and his blood-soaked coat sleeve.

"You're shot," she cried.

"That was from Jud back at the house. That's what I was doing at the hospital—getting it bandaged up."

"He'll live," Cora said. "I just texted the cops. Told them to send a wagon for the body and an ambulance for one of the Colt boys who's been winged."

"Davy," he said. "I'm Davy Colt."

The elderly woman shrugged as if it was all the same to her. "I'm just glad you're a decent shot. I used to listen to the lot of you shooting tin cans by the hour." She shook her head. "All you Colt boys, you're all the same to me. Wild and incorrigible." But there was a twinkle in her eye.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Carla's emotions veered off in every direction. She was so thankful to be alive. So thankful that Davy was alive. She would be forever grateful to Cora for helping them. The bank's money had been recovered—at least most of it—from the cabin where Jesse had taken her. Both Jud and Jesse were dead. She didn't know how to feel about that—guilty for being relieved that they were gone, angry that they'd done what they had, guilty for not being sorry that two people were dead and that she might have played a part in it.

She'd met with Agents Grover and Deeds one final time. Grover didn't quite apologize, but at least he'd told her that she was no longer a suspect. A former employee at the bank had finally confessed that she'd given Jesse information while she'd been in labor at the hospital. She said that the woman she knew as Debra Watney had asked a lot of questions after learning that she had worked there. The woman said she had thought the aide was just trying to keep her mind off the labor. She had had no idea she was giving away information that would be used in the robbery—and key the agents to an inside job.

While Carla felt for the woman, she was grateful that she herself was no longer a suspect. Her boss had called to say that her job was waiting for her whenever she felt up to coming back.

For days all she'd wanted was for her life, and Davy's, to return to normal. Normal meant she would go back to the bank, back to her house alone each night, back to spending her days crossing items off her to-do lists.

For Davy it would mean catching up on the rodeo circuit. The holiday was winding down. It was time. Yet neither of them mentioned it. Since coming out of the mountains, they'd spent every minute of the past few days together at her house. One of Davy's brothers fixed the back door with a better lock and dead bolt and cleaned up the place.

If they ignored the bullet holes in the kitchen wall and refrigerator, they could almost pretend that none of it had happened.

But Carla couldn't pretend that things were going to change. Doc Hull had put her in a walking cast and given her a scooter that she could use at work. She was able to get around by herself with little trouble, and it wouldn't be all that long before even the walking cast would come off.

They'd fallen into a pattern over the days. Lying in bed in the morning until they felt like getting up. Having a breakfast one or both of them prepared. Making love. Cooking and going back to bed to make love again. She loved lying with Davy in her double bed together, her head on his shoulder, her cheek pressed against his skin.

"I love you, Carla. I've always loved you." It was the day before he was to leave. He turned to kiss her deeply. "I was so afraid that I'd lost you. I never want to let you go again." His blue gaze met hers and she felt that fire ignite at her center again.

"I love you, Davy. Always you."

"Come with me," he said, his expression brightening as if the idea had just come to him. He leaned on one elbow so he could look at her face. "We're both still young. We have plenty of time to settle down. We can spend the next few years traveling around the country."

She stared at him, unable to believe what he was suggesting—again. He'd suggested this ten years ago. Didn't he remember how that had ended? "Davy, I have a job. A house. A—" She'd almost said *life*. "A...house that's paid for." These days living in this house, the two of them acting like a real married couple, had she let herself dream that he might see the life they could have here? That he might want it?

But from the look on his face, it was the last thing he wanted. He rose from the bed, his face suddenly stiff, his expression cold. "You thought that I would quit the rodeo." He shook his head, the look ripping apart her heart. "I told you. I'm not ready to quit. I thought..."

"I thought since you were talking about only a couple more years..."

"That I would change my mind."

There was no reason to lie. He knew from her disappointed expression that she'd hoped he would change his mind. She should have known better. One last night after making love ten years ago, they'd lain in bed talking. He'd romanticized about the two of them on the rodeo circuit going places she'd never been, seeing country she might never see again, eating food that she would never have in Lonesome, meeting people, being together.

At the time, she'd been tempted to chuck her life here and hit the road with him. But she wasn't that girl from ten years ago and she certainly wasn't going to chuck it all now, she told herself.

"You never considered coming with me, did you?"

She met his gaze and felt her heart shatter. When she spoke, her voice

broke with emotion. “My job, my house... I can’t just pick up and leave like you can. I have *responsibilities*.” She rose from the bed to go to him, snatching up her shirt and pulling it on as she did. “Please.” How could he not see how much this was killing her? How could he walk away from her now? She tried to cup his cheek, but he took a step back. “Davy, I love you.”

“You love me?” he asked as he grabbed up his jeans and pulled them on. “How is that possible, since you want me to be someone I’m not? Or do you love the idea of me? Rodeo cowboy Davy Colt. Because if you loved me, you’d love all of me, whether you agreed with it or not. Hasn’t it always been about you trying to change me, so I fit into this perfect picture you have of marriage and our lives together?”

“I could say the same about you,” she said, drawing back from him. “You want me to give up everything for you. What’s the difference?”

“You’re not your job, Carla. Or are you going to tell me that your dream is to work as an executive loan officer in a bank in Lonesome, Montana?”

She took a step back as if he’d slapped her. “You know how I ended up in Lonesome working at the bank. I had to change my plans because it was the right thing to do.”

He nodded and took a step toward her, taking her shoulders in his hands. “You had to change your plans. How about changing them for us?”

She’d never wanted to say yes more than she did at that moment. “I’m not like you, footloose and fancy-free to go and do whatever you please.”

He shook his head and let go of her to pull on his boots. “You can’t blame your mother, Carla. She’s been gone now for over five years. But you’re still here. Why?”

He made it sound as if she’d chosen the path of least resistance. As if she lacked courage. “I’m not like you.”

“You’re right about that,” he said. “I’ve spent my life taking chances, drawing rank bucking horses that will either put me in the money or the dirt or the hospital. Betting on myself, fighting the odds, testing myself over and over again against eighteen-hundred-pound animals. In all that time, you’ve never taken a chance. Not one. Not on me,” he said. “Not even on yourself.”

She watched him snatch up his Stetson. Their gazes met and held for a moment. She could see him waiting for her to say something. To ask him to stay. But she couldn’t do that any more than she could ten years ago, she told herself.

“I swore I wouldn’t let you break my heart again,” he said, his voice

cracking. “This time, it is all on me. Goodbye, Carla.”

She stood there, shaken to her core. Only minutes ago they’d been locked in each other’s arms, promising to love each other forever. What had happened? She heard him drive away in his new pickup, furious with him and what he’d said, furious with herself and how much of what he said might be true. Either way, her heart was breaking all over again.

It wasn’t until the sound of his pickup engine died off in the distance that she let herself break down and cry.

* * *

DAVY WENT DOWN to the office the next morning. He’d smelled coffee and knew he’d find someone there working.

James was behind their father’s large old desk. He looked up, not seeming surprised. “Packing up to go?” he asked.

Davy helped himself to a cup of coffee from the pot that was usually going—except when something happened that called for them to dip into their father’s blackberry brandy. “You were right.”

James put aside his work to give Davy his full attention. “I’m always right, but you’ll have to enlighten me why this time.” Then he seemed to see his brother’s face. “You and Carla. She didn’t take it well, you returning to the circuit?”

He shook his head. “I actually thought I could talk her into going with me. Just for even a year, and if she hated it, I would have quit and come back here.”

“Did you tell her that?”

“What would be the point? She’s settled. My life isn’t for her even if I quit the rodeo. There was nothing I could say.”

“I’m sorry,” James said. “I know how you feel about her.”

All Davy could do was nod, his chest aching from the heartbreak when he thought about how much he loved her. “These days together... So tell me about Dad’s case,” he said, wanting to change the subject. “Willie thought he could get a copy of the file—or at least get a look at it.”

James shook his head. “It’s missing.”

“You know it’s those Osterman brothers’ doing. Both Osterman sheriffs were crooked as a dog’s hind leg. So there’s nothing we can do?”

“There’s a good chance there wouldn’t have been anything helpful in the

file anyway,” James said.

“Or there could be something someone wanted to stay hidden,” Davy argued. “Why get rid of it otherwise?”

Before James could respond, Willie came in the door, followed quickly by their brother Tommy. One look at Davy and Willie said, “Sorry, bro. I get it, I do. But if after all this you still can’t find a way to be together—”

“You’ve never been in love,” Davy said to Willie as his brothers came in the door on a gust of winter-cold air and snow.

Willie looked as if he wanted to argue, but conceded the point since they all knew it was true. Their older brother guarded his heart closely when it came to women. “If it hurts as bad as you look, then I never want to fall in love.”

“How’s this sheriff’s deputy gig going?” Davy asked him, again anxious to change the subject.

“Good,” Willie said, sounding almost surprised himself. “I like it. I have a lot to learn and I’m definitely a rookie at this point, but...” He smiled. “I’m a fast learner.”

“We were just talking about Dad’s case,” James told them.

“I guess James told you that the file on the accident is missing,” Willie said. “But I did find out something interesting. I think Dad’s pickup might still be in Evidence. I just need to find out where if that’s the case.”

“I’m not sure I want to see his pickup if you find it,” Tommy said with a shudder. “I don’t even want to think about the kind of damage the train did. Anyway, what could you hope to find in it after all this time?”

Willie shook his head. “I don’t know, but if I can find the pickup, I’m definitely going to. So, you’re leaving,” he said to Davy, clapping his brother’s shoulder. “Hope they give you some decent broncs. Do you know who’s supplying the stock for your first ride?”

Davy was grateful that the conversation didn’t return to Carla and his broken heart. Not that he could stop thinking about her. He could still smell her on his skin and ached at the thought that he might never hold her again.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

A few days after Davy walked out of her life, Carla got up, showered, dressed and headed for the bank. She'd cried until there were no more tears. She'd also had a lot of time to think about the robbery and the times she'd escaped death. Mostly she thought about Davy and what he'd said to her before he'd left her house.

Before driving to the bank, she'd looked around her house. She loved what she'd done with the place since she'd moved in. But having Davy live with her there made it feel too empty now. A friend had suggested she get a cat. Carla had laughed, even though she loved cats.

"Life is about choices and consequences," her mother used to say. Carla couldn't agree more as she walked into the bank and went straight toward her office. But she didn't enter it at first. Instead, she stopped in the doorway, taking in the space as if seeing it for the first time.

She'd been proud of this accomplishment because it was a symbol of her hard work and what she'd given up to get here. Back then her office had been a place of comfort and safety. She knew her job and did it efficiently. She'd always thought that one day she might move up and be a branch manager. Maybe it wasn't what she'd set out to do, but she'd accepted it.

Just as she'd accepted that she and Davy Colt would never be together.

Shoving away the thought, she stepped in to walk behind her desk, but she didn't sit down. Instead, she stared at the open doorway, remembering Judson Bruckner standing there the first time he'd come to the bank for money. He'd looked so nervous, so unsure of himself, so scared.

And then him later in the Santa costume.

Her boss suddenly filled the doorway, startling her for a moment.

Appearing uncomfortable, he stepped in and closed the door behind him. "I know I've already tried to talk you out of this, but I have to try one last time," he said. "We have trauma experts you can talk to about your fears."

Carla chuckled. "I'm not afraid of working in the bank or of another robbery." She shook her head. "It's personal, like I told you. All the robbery did was make me realize what I really want out of life."

"If you're sure I can't talk you out of this," he said.

"No, I've made up my mind. It's definitely out of my comfort zone and it

will be the first time that I don't have a plan or know what the future holds. But I'm not scared anymore and that's a really good feeling." She smiled. "I've never felt so free."

"Well, if you change your mind or need a job in the future..." He turned to walk toward the door.

"Thank you. I appreciate that." But she didn't see herself coming back here. She'd put away money for years. With the sale of her house, she would have plenty to live on for a long while, since she'd never lived extravagantly and she didn't really see that changing.

As her boss opened the door to leave, she dragged her gaze to the box she'd brought to clean out her desk. Before Christmas, she couldn't wait to get back here to this job, to the routine, to the comfortable life she'd managed to make for herself here in Lonesome. A safe, secure life. She realized the past few days that keeping Davy in her heart had also been part of her protection from moving on with her life. He'd been safe there, just under the branding iron tattoo. And she'd been happy enough with that.

Then Judson Bruckner had walked into the bank, and everything had changed. He brought Davy—the real live cowboy—back into her life. How had she thought that after everything she could just walk back into her old life that easily? She'd almost been killed—not once, but numerous times—since she'd left this office. But oddly, that wasn't what had jolted her into making a decision about that life.

She'd lived in fear, she'd realized, long before the bank robbery. She'd feared disappointing her mother, feared becoming like her, feared veering off the path she'd set for herself. She'd feared what it would mean loving the rodeo cowboy part of Davy, who would always get on the back of a rank horse and try to ride it.

Her biggest fear had been taking a risk and following her heart.

Carla opened a drawer and began to take out her personal items and put them into the box.

"I'll leave you to it then," her boss said, having stopped in the open doorway. "I wish you all the luck in the world."

Luck? She smiled and thanked him. She was lucky to be alive, but it would take more than luck to get what she wanted. It would take true love, the kind that compromised, that changed dreams, that didn't always give you what you thought you wanted. But gave a woman what she needed soul deep. While that scared her, nothing could hold her back. Not anymore.

* * *

DAVY COULDN'T COUNT how many times he'd almost turned around and gone back to Lonesome. He hated the way he'd left. He regretted the things he'd said to Carla. He felt as if he'd burned their last bridge. There was no going back because they'd reached an impasse—*just like ten years ago*, he told himself as he drove toward Arlington, Texas.

So he'd kept going, even though his heart wasn't in it—even when he'd drawn a horse he'd been wanting to ride for a long time. He told himself that Carla loved the idea of him—but not the man he was. She needed a man who wore a suit to work, who got off every night at five and mowed the lawn on the weekends.

But even as he thought it, his heart broke even worse to think of her with another man. He asked himself if this really had anything to do with the rodeo. Was he being unreasonable? What was another two years on the circuit? What if he didn't want to quit even after that?

He stopped in Cheyenne, Wyoming, for gas. The sun was starting to set. He found himself looking back up the highway toward Montana. Regret seemed to weigh him down even more. He was weary from the miles pulling his horse trailer across the country. Why had he fought so hard to do this? He'd always planned that one day he'd quit rodeo and raise rough stock. He had the land and had saved enough money to make it happen.

But it had always been down the road. He'd wanted a few more years riding bucking horses that were determined to toss him into the dirt more often than not. Man against beast. It was something that, whether Carla liked it or not, was in his genes, he told himself.

So why wasn't he excited like he usually was when he hit the road? He needed these Texas-sanctioned rodeos. He had to earn enough wins to count toward circuit standings. He had wanted desperately to draw a horse named Pearl that weighed close to fifteen hundred pounds and was said to send cowboys to the Pearly Gates. Pearl had never been successfully ridden. He'd told himself he had to try to change that if he got the chance.

Gas tank full, he climbed behind the wheel, determined to make it to Dodge City, Kansas, before he pulled over and climbed into his horse-trailer camper to sleep.

* * *

CARLA WAS PACKING her car for the trip to Arlington, Texas, before the next snowstorm hit. A light dusting of flakes drifted down. She planned to be there when Davy rode and was hurrying to finish when she heard a vehicle pull into her drive. Turning, she blinked.

Through the falling snow, she couldn't see the driver behind the wheel. She didn't have to. She knew this shiny new truck intimately. Carla felt goose bumps race over her. Davy? Her mind whirled. What was he doing back here? Had something happened?

The pickup door swung open, and he stepped out. He adjusted his Stetson and seemed to hesitate, but only for a moment as he started toward her.

Carla realized that she hadn't moved, that she'd barely taken a breath.

"Going somewhere?" he asked. Snow was beginning to collect on his Stetson.

She glanced back at her SUV, now loaded with only what she'd thought she'd need on the road. When she turned back, he was almost to her.

"Thought I'd see what life was like on the open road," she said, surprised that her voice sounded almost normal around the lump in her throat. What was he doing here? "I was going to start in Arlington. Don't you have a ride there?"

He took a step closer. The love she saw in his blue eyes was her undoing. She felt tears rush to her eyes even as snowflakes caught on her lashes. All she got out was his name before she was in his arms. He kissed her like there was no tomorrow.

When he finally drew back, he asked, "You really quit your job?"

"It was just a job." He grinned at that. "Davy—"

He touched a finger to her lips. "There's something I need to say to you first. I got down the road. Almost made it to Dodge City when I realized my heart was no longer in rodeo. I'd left it in Montana with you. Carla, I love you, have for years, always thinking that one day I'd come back and we'd be together."

"But I was coming to you."

He laughed. "I see that." His smile broadened even as he shook his head. "Coming so close to almost losing you made me realize what I really want. What I've always wanted. I said you were afraid to live life? Well, I was the one who was hanging on to what had become familiar as well. So I turned around and I came home. I want a life with you."

"But you can have that and rodeo too," she said, motioning toward her

packed car as snow began to fall harder. “I’ve already talked to a Realtor about selling the house—”

Davy shook his head. “You can’t sell it. We’re going to need somewhere to live until our house is built on the ranch. I’m not going back, Carla. This is where I belong. It’s what I’ve always wanted.” His gaze met hers. “You. This isn’t how probably either of us pictured this...” He dropped down into the snow on one knee. “Will you marry me?”

“Davy.” She was laughing as she dropped down next to him. “Are you sure?”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life,” he said and kissed her. As far as winter kisses went, this was the best one yet.

“Was that a yes?” Davy asked, pulling back from the kiss.

“No, this is a yes,” she said, and cupping his handsome face, she drew him to her for another kiss.

That’s where his brothers found the two of them after James got a call from someone who’d just seen Davy drive past pulling his horse trailer. It didn’t take them long to figure out where Davy was headed—if true.

“What are you two kids doing?” James demanded as he and his brothers climbed out of their rig and walked toward where the two were kneeling in the snow. Snowflakes whirled around them all as Davy and Carla got to their feet, laughing.

“We’re getting married,” Davy announced and put a protective arm around her. “Anyone have a problem with that?”

“About damned time,” James said. The Colt brothers all laughed.

“No problem at all,” Willie said.

“I think this calls for blackberry brandy down at Dad’s office,” Tommy said. It had become a celebration ritual, and now Carla was part of it—and part of this big, rowdy family. She couldn’t believe this was happening, especially since she’d always planned her life down to the minute.

She looked over at Davy. For so long she’d pictured their perfect life together. She laughed now, realizing she had no idea what was ahead for the two of them. More surprising, she’d never felt more free or more excited. All she knew was that with Davy—and this family of his—it would be a wild ride.

* * * * *

Keep reading for an excerpt from Canyon Kidnapping by Cindi Myers.

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Canyon Kidnapping

by Cindi Myers

Chapter One

Climbing walls of rock or ice was all about conquering obstacles, Sheri Stevens thought as she watched competitors in the Eagle Mountain Ice Festival tackle the challenging routes up the walls of Caspar Canyon. The realization that she could face tough things that frightened her and emerge victorious had drawn her to the sport four years ago, and in that time she had grown stronger and more confident than she had ever imagined would be possible. She had learned how to carry the pain of the past without letting it defeat her.

She didn't say these things to the people who stopped by the Picksie Chix booth at the ice festival. They would discover that aspect of the sport soon enough—or not. "Climbing is terrific exercise and a lot of fun," she told the two teenage girls who approached the booth. They wore matching fake-fur-trimmed parkas and Ugg boots against the February chill. "Once you've finished a challenging climb, you'll know you can conquer anything."

"We saw you up there earlier," the taller of the two girls, a high school junior named Monica, said.

"You were amazing," her friend, Lexie, said. "Didn't you win a medal or something?"

"I'm in the running for a medal in the time trials," Sheri said. She had won her class in the annual ice climbing competition last year and hoped to repeat her victory this year. "There is another competitive climb tomorrow and exhibition climbs on Sunday."

"Good luck." Monica picked up one of the Picksie Chix brochures.

"I'm teaching a free women's climbing clinic Sunday at one," Sheri said. "You should both come."

"Maybe we will," Lexie said. "Though I don't know if my mom could handle it. She won't even come watch the other climbers, it freaks her out so much."

"Invite your mom to come with you to my clinic," Sheri said. "She can see all the safety precautions we take, and she can even try climbing herself."

Lexie wrinkled her nose. "Isn't she a little old to take up a sport like

climbing?”

“I was thirty before I ever tried it,” Sheri said. “And there are people in their sixties and seventies who are still climbing.”

The girls looked as if they didn’t believe her, but were polite enough not to say so. “Maybe we’ll see you tomorrow,” Monica said, and the two wandered off.

Kim Lazaro arrived to take over manning the booth. “I saw your climb earlier,” she said. “You looked great up there.”

“Thanks,” Sheri said. “I haven’t had as much time to practice as I’d like, but I was pleased with how things went this morning.”

“All that climbing you do for Search and Rescue has to help,” Kim said. “From what I read in the paper, you folks have been busy this winter.”

“It hasn’t slowed down all year,” Sheri said.

“Honestly, woman, I couldn’t keep up with your schedule,” Kim said. “When do you sleep?”

Sheri laughed. “I guess I’m just someone who likes to keep busy.” She checked her watch. “And in a few minutes I’m due over at the Search and Rescue booth.” In addition to answering questions about search and rescue, the booth volunteers handed out applications to potential volunteers and sold T-shirts to raise money for the group, which always operated on a shoestring.

She said goodbye to Kim and headed across the open area at the entrance to the canyon, where various local organizations and businesses had set up booths. She passed the booth for the local barbecue place, a big iron smoker on a trailer filling the canyon with the scent of cooking ribs and brisket. Hundreds of people filled the area, mingling among the booths or gathering closer to the base of the cliffs to watch the climbers make their way up and down the canyon walls, over flows of ice tinted pink and green and blue and orange by minerals in the water.

Sheri paused as a familiar figure—fellow SAR volunteer Eldon Ramsey—started up a route dubbed Free Style. Though relatively new to the sport, he was a good climber, and making a terrific start.

“Mommy!”

The child’s shout stopped Sheri’s breath and she looked around, heart pounding. A little girl raced toward her, dark hair flying out behind her. *It isn’t Claire*, Sheri reminded herself, and tried to bring her breathing back under control. But this little girl was about the age Claire would be now, and seeing her sent a sharp ache through Sheri.

The little girl stopped short just a few feet from Sheri and looked up at her in obvious confusion. "I was looking for my mom," she said. She was about eight years old, with straight dark hair that hung past her shoulders, and big brown eyes fringed with black lashes.

"What's your mom's name?" Sheri asked. She looked around, hoping to spot a woman who was obviously searching for a lost child. "I'll help you find her."

"It's okay." A man hurried up and took the little girl's hand. He was about forty, with thinning brown hair and a narrow face. He wore dark aviator glasses and a blue windbreaker over tan chinos and scuffed hiking boots.

"I want my mom!" the little girl insisted, and tried to pull out of the man's grasp.

"Dawn, you need to calm down," the man said. "I told you I'd take you to your mother, but you have to behave." He glanced up at Sheri. "Sorry about that." Then he scooped the child into his arms and walked away.

The little girl watched Sheri over the man's shoulders, her eyes brimming with tears. Sheri's own eyes burned, but she blinked rapidly to clear them. This kind of thing had happened before, but it always shook her. When she was fifty, she would probably still be seeing young women and automatically calculating if they were the same age her daughter, Claire, would have been if she had lived. She would never stop wondering what Claire would have been like at eight or eighteen or twenty-eight or forty-eight. There would come a day when no one else on earth would remember her daughter, but Sheri would never forget.

She watched the man and the girl until they disappeared in the crowd, then gathered herself and continued toward the Eagle Mountain Search and Rescue booth. She was waylaid twice, once by a fellow teacher at Eagle Mountain High School, and once by two of her students, who wanted to talk about her climb this morning. By the time she broke free she was already late for her shift at the booth, but consoled herself that the volunteer schedules were staggered, so even if the person ahead of her on the roster had to leave, someone would be there.

"I'm sorry I'm late," she said, as soon as she approached the booth, which was manned by SAR Lieutenant Carrie Andrews and trainee Austen Morrissey. "I kept getting stopped by people who wanted to talk."

"No problem," Carrie said. "We've sold six T-shirts this morning."

"It's going to take a lot more to pay for the new vehicle the captain wants,"

Austen said.

“It all adds up. Plus, every one we sell is one less I have to pack up and take back to headquarters when the festival is over.” Carrie looked past Sheri and smiled. “Good morning, Sheriff,” she said. “Sergeant Walker.”

Sheri turned to see Sheriff Travis Walker and his brother, Gage, closing in on the booth. Both men were in uniform, apparently patrolling the festival. But neither returned Carrie’s smile. “How many volunteers do you have here today?” Travis asked.

Carrie looked around. “There’s me and Sheri and Austen. Eldon is climbing right now and Tony is spotting for him. I think I saw Danny and Ted around somewhere. Why?”

“We’ve had a report of a missing little girl,” Travis said. “I left the parents with Deputy Douglas and thought we could organize a search.”

“Of course,” Carrie said. “We can shut the booth down and I can radio whoever is here.” She picked up a radio from the corner of the booth.

“Tell them the little girl is eight years old, fifty-five pounds, about fifty inches tall, with long brown hair and brown eyes,” the sheriff said. “Her name is Dawn Sheffield.”

The name jolted Sheri. “I think I just saw her,” she said.

“Where?” Gage asked. “When?”

Sheri checked her watch. “About half an hour ago. Halfway between this booth and the one for Picksie Chix. I stopped to watch Eldon begin his climb and this little girl came running up to me. She thought I was her mom, but realized her mistake as she got closer. A man came up and promised to take her to her mother. He called her Dawn.” Her stomach twisted. “I thought he was her father. He certainly acted as if he knew her, and she didn’t seem afraid of him.” Not afraid, just unhappy. Sheri had thought she was a typical tired kid, having a bit of a temper tantrum. Why hadn’t she seen there was more to the girl’s mood than that?

“What did this man look like?” Travis asked.

Sheri considered, wanting to give a clear, accurate description. “He was about forty, maybe five-ten or five-eleven, medium build, thinning brown hair. He was wearing dark glasses—aviator style—a blue windbreaker, tan chinos and hiking boots.”

“Dawn’s father is blond, and six-three,” Gage said.

“I’ve already sent deputies to man the festival entrance and exits,” Travis said. “But if you saw him half an hour ago, there’s a good chance he’s

already left. In the meantime, get some of your people circulating among the crowds, looking for Dawn or the man she was with.” He looked at Sheri. “I’d like you to come with me and talk to the parents. I want to find out if they know anyone who fits the description of the man you saw. Particularly anyone who might want to harm their daughter.”

Sheri nodded, her mouth dry. She didn’t want anything to happen to that little girl.

She especially didn’t want to be the person who could have saved her, and didn’t.

* * *

DETECTIVE ERIK LESTER, Colorado Bureau of Investigation, had lost all patience with Carl Westover. He had dealt with tougher crooks than Westover. He had apprehended men who were smarter than Carl, and those who were more devious. Carl wasn’t tough or smart or devious—he was just annoying. He was the type of person who thought he deserved a lot more than he had ever earned. Carl thought life wasn’t fair and wasted most of his time trying to shift the odds in his favor. He did this by manipulating and taking advantage of other people. He had embezzled several hundred thousand dollars from the corporation he worked for, blown the money on fancy cars and vacations, then whined to anyone who would listen about how unfairly he had been treated when he was arrested for his crimes.

Now Carl had skipped town instead of showing up for his court date and Erik had to go after him. As far as Erik was concerned, Carl was wasting his time. The man hadn’t even made his pursuit very challenging. He used his credit card to purchase gas and had made a beeline for the one place he was probably sure he would find refuge—his sister’s second home in Eagle Mountain, Colorado. Erik fully expected to find Carl taking it easy on his sister’s sofa.

Erik didn’t want to be in Eagle Mountain dealing with Carl’s whiny self. But he had a job to do and he was determined to do it well. So he had made the drive from Denver over several snowy mountain passes. He would have enjoyed the winter scenery if he had been headed out on vacation, but right now the trip was one more thing to add to the list of the ways Carl had annoyed him. Midmorning on a Friday in late February found him ringing the doorbell at Melissa and Brandon Sheffield’s mountain getaway, a six-

thousand-square-foot chalet with breathtaking views.

No one answered the bell, so Erik knocked. Then he knocked harder. No sound of movement within the house. He moved over to a large picture window and peered inside. The massive great room appeared to be empty. A child's doll lay on the leather sofa, next to a blanket, and a coffee mug sat on the top of the wooden trunk in front of the sofa, but no fire burned in the fireplace and everything gave the appearance of being unoccupied.

Frowning, Erik turned away from the door and headed back to his car. He'd look up the number for the Sheffields and give them a call. "Are you looking for Mel and Brand?" A slim woman dressed in leggings and a puffy jacket, a yoga mat tucked under one arm, paused next to the SUV in her driveway next door. "I think they went to the ice festival. I saw them leave a little while ago."

"Do you know if Melissa's brother is visiting?" Erik asked. "I was hoping to talk to him."

The woman shook her head, blond ponytail swaying. "I don't think so. It was just the two of them and their little girl when they left this morning."

"Thanks." Erik got into his car and pulled away before the woman could ask who he was and what he wanted with Melissa's brother. Not that he couldn't lie with the best of them but it was easier to avoid awkward questions in the first place.

He was wondering how he'd find out where the ice festival was when he spotted a large banner hanging over the street as he entered Eagle Mountain. "Welcome to the thirtieth annual Ice Festival," it proclaimed. "Caspar Canyon, February 25-27." His Toyota's GPS obligingly provided directions to Caspar Canyon.

He saw the crowd for the festival long before he saw the canyon itself. The road was lined with cars, and adjacent fields had been turned into parking lots. The turnoff to the canyon was closed, and a uniformed officer directed him to turn around and park in a lot. Erik thought of flashing his badge and announcing that he was looking for a fugitive, but that was a good way to panic people needlessly. The last thing he wanted was for Carl to have any warning that Erik was here. With luck, the two of them would have a quiet conversation and Erik would lead Carl back to his vehicle and they'd be on their way. He had handcuffs if he needed to use them, but it would be easier on everyone if he didn't have to. Carl had no history of violence. He was a dishonest man, but he had never physically hurt anyone, so Erik didn't expect

trouble.

Metal gates blocked off the entrance to the canyon and people were lined up waiting to enter. Beyond the entrance, he could see vendors' booths and a glimpse of high rock walls coated in ice, ropes dangling from the ice, and people dangling from the ropes. He estimated the crowd in his view at a couple of hundred people, with more farther into the canyon. He hoped he wouldn't have too much trouble tracking down the Sheffields, and after that, locating Carl.

The line he was in wasn't moving. "What's going on?" a man behind him asked.

"They're not letting people in," a woman beside him answered. "The cops have closed it down."

Erik made his way to the front of the line, ignoring disgruntled remarks from a few people he passed. He approached a man in a sheriff's department uniform and held up his badge. "What's going on, Deputy?" he asked.

"A little girl has gone missing," the man, whose name badge identified him as Deputy Doyle, said. "We're not letting anyone in or out while we search for her and the man who may have taken her."

"How old a child?" Erik asked. "What does she look like?"

"She's eight. Long dark hair and brown eyes. Her name is Dawn Sheffield."

Erik felt cold all over. He didn't believe it was a coincidence that the Sheffields' daughter had gone missing at the same time Melissa Sheffield's brother was fleeing criminal charges and known to be headed this way. In his experience, crimes like this were always connected. "I might have information that could help," Erik said. "Could someone take me to the Sheffields?"

He had thought Carl was too dumb to be a real danger to anyone, but maybe Erik was the one who wasn't so smart. He, of all people, ought to know that danger could lurk in the most unexpected places, and not realizing that could lead to the worst of all consequences.

* * *

SHERIFF WALKER AND Gage escorted Sheri to the first aid tent, where a couple sat with Deputy Jamie Douglas. The woman, her dark hair cut in an asymmetrical style that set off her elfin features, stood when they entered the

tent. “Have you found her?” she asked.

Travis shook his head. “This is Sheri Stevens,” he said. “She saw a girl we think may be Dawn. Sheri, this is Brandon and Melissa Sheffield.”

“Where was this?” Brandon Sheffield, a tall, broad-shouldered blond who looked as if he’d be more at home in a logging camp than a boardroom, turned eagerly to Sheri. “Was she all right? Was she afraid?”

“The child I saw was asking for her mother, but otherwise she seemed fine.” Sheri chose her words carefully. She wanted to tell the truth, but she didn’t want to upset this mother and father any more than she could help. “She was a very pretty little girl, with long dark hair, parted in the middle, and big brown eyes. She was with a man with thinning brown hair. He called her Dawn and she seemed to know him, though I never heard her address him by name.”

“That sounds like Dawn,” Brandon said. “And Carl.” He turned to his wife. “Don’t you think that sounds like Carl?”

“Who is Carl?” Gage asked.

“My wife’s brother,” Brandon said. “Dawn wouldn’t be afraid of him. To her, he’s just her uncle.”

“Why would your brother take Dawn without your knowing about it?” Travis asked Melissa.

“He wouldn’t.” She looked up at her husband. “Brand, I’m sure you’re wrong. Carl wouldn’t do something like that.”

Brandon ignored her protest and turned to the officers. “Carl is in trouble for embezzling money from his former employer,” he said. “He asked me for one hundred thousand dollars to pay his legal fees and when I refused, he got angry. Maybe he took Dawn to get back at me.”

“No. My brother wouldn’t do something like that,” Melissa said. “And the whole business with the money—it was just a misunderstanding. I don’t know why you wouldn’t give him the money he needed. He would have paid me back.”

“Right. Like he paid back the money I lent him to buy his last house, or the loan you gave him before we were married.”

Watching these two argue made Sheri’s stomach hurt. They were both afraid and hurting, but instead of coming together to present a united front, they were already pulling away. She wanted to tell them to stop it—they didn’t realize the damage they were doing. She knew too well how easy it was to blame the person you were closest to for all the pain you were feeling

—and how the damage hurtful words inflicted could never be undone.

But she was a stranger to these people. The last thing they wanted was advice from her, especially when the counsel came in the form of “don’t make the same mistake I did.”

“Do you have a picture of your brother?” Travis asked.

“Not with me,” Melissa said.

“I think I do.” Brandon took out his phone. “I took a lot of pictures when we were all together at Melissa’s parents’ place last Christmas.” He swiped through several photos, then angled the phone toward them. “Carl is the one in the middle, next to Melissa.”

Sheri stared at the man in the photo. He was smiling, and looked a little younger, but it was the same man. “That’s the man I saw with the little girl,” she said.

Brandon turned the phone toward himself and scrolled once more. “Is this the little girl you saw?” he asked, and showed her a photograph of a smiling child, her long dark hair whipped by a breeze, dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, on the deck of a boat.

Sheri nodded. “Yes, that’s her.”

Melissa Sheffield began to cry, and sank into a chair. Brandon hesitated, then put his arm around his wife. “It’s going to be okay,” he said. “Now that we know who has Melissa, we can find him. He can’t have gone far in such a short time.”

“I’m sure Carl would never hurt Dawn,” Melissa said. “He loves her.”

“I don’t think Carl is violent,” Brandon said. “He’s greedy and manipulative, but he’s not violent. And he does love Dawn.”

Melissa pulled away from her husband. “Carl is not greedy and manipulative,” she said. “He hasn’t had the same advantages you’ve had and people always underestimate him.”

“Do you have any idea where your brother might have taken Dawn?” Travis asked. “A friend’s house? Someplace else he’s frequented?”

“We’re the only people he knows here,” Melissa said.

The sheriff turned to Sheri. “What, exactly, did he say when you saw him?” he asked.

She relayed as much as she could remember of the brief exchange. “He told the little girl he was going to take her to her mother. But he didn’t say where or when.”

“What kind of vehicle does your brother drive?” Gage asked.

“The last time I saw him, he had a Lexus, I think?” Melissa looked to her husband for confirmation.

“He drives a Lexus LS. Black,” Brandon said. “Or he did last month. He leases vehicles and switches them out pretty often.”

“When was the last time you spoke to your brother, Mrs. Sheffield?” Travis asked.

“A few days ago. We talk and text regularly. He was getting ready for his trial and he seemed in good spirits.”

“He was out on bail and was upset I wouldn’t give him the money he wanted,” Brandon said. “Apparently, he’d already blown the money he stole on fancy vacations and new suits and no telling what else.”

“He didn’t steal any money!” Melissa protested.

“Did he make any threats to you or your wife, when you refused to give him the money?” Travis asked.

“No!” Melissa jumped up again. “You’re making him sound like some hardened criminal and he isn’t. If Dawn is with Carl, I’m sure he’ll bring her back to us soon.”

“He whined about me not having any faith in him, but he didn’t make threats,” Brandon said. He looked at his wife. “I hope you’re right. All I want is for Dawn to be safe.”

“I don’t believe he did this,” Melissa said. She turned to Sheri. “You may have seen Dawn with Carl, but that doesn’t mean Carl took her anywhere. Maybe he really was taking her to me, but before he could find me, someone else intercepted them. Or maybe Dawn ran away, Carl lost track of her in the crowd and someone else took her.”

“Then why didn’t he come to us and tell us what happened?” Brandon asked.

“Because he knew you’d accuse him of doing something awful. You’ve never liked him and he knows it.”

“Did your brother mention he was coming to see you?” Gage asked.

Melissa shook her head, and hugged her arms over her chest. “Carl is family. He doesn’t have to wait for an invitation to come see me. He’s always welcome. He probably wanted to surprise me.”

“Have you tried calling him?” Travis asked.

Brandon took out his phone again. “There’s no signal down here in this canyon.”

“When you get to someplace with a signal, I want you to call him,” Travis

said. “If you reach him, please ask him to stop by the sheriff’s department and give a statement.”

“Of course,” Melissa said. “I’m sure he’ll want to do everything he can to help.” She shook her head. “But I can’t believe the man you saw really was Carl. Lots of men have brown hair.”

“Carl Westover is here, all right.”

They all turned to look at the man who spoke—a tall, dark-haired man with olive skin and a strong jaw. Sheri stared at him, dizzy and disoriented.

He stared back, eyes burning into hers. “Sheri!” He didn’t try to hide his shock at seeing her. “What are you doing here?”

“I live here.” The words came out with more force than she intended. She worked to rein in her agitation. “What are you doing here, Erik?”

Erik looked at the others, and fixed on the sheriff. He held out his hand. “Detective Erik Lester, Colorado Bureau of Investigation,” he introduced himself.

“Sheriff Travis Walker.” The sheriff shook Erik’s hand, then examined the credentials he offered.

“I’m here because I’ve been tracking Carl Westover ever since he jumped bail and failed to appear for his trial yesterday,” Erik said. “His credit card receipts showed he was headed to Eagle Mountain, I presumed to visit his sister.” He looked to Melissa. “Carl didn’t tell you he was coming?”

“No. I already told these people that.”

“I stopped by the Sheffields’ house before I came here,” Erik said. “I didn’t see any sign of Carl and the neighbor I talked to hadn’t seen him.”

“He was seen approximately forty-five minutes ago with his niece,” Travis said.

“Who saw him?” Erik said. “I’d like to talk to them.”

“I saw him,” Sheri said. She really couldn’t believe this was happening. Erik was the last person she wanted to talk to.

“Do you two know each other?” Gage asked.

Sheri stood up straighter, her eyes fixed on Erik. “You could say that,” she said. “Erik is my ex-husband.”

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Christmas Ransom

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