



The Cowboy's Miracle Baby

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Category: Romance, Western, Adult

Description: Cami Hardesty might have a problem saying no. Not that she doesn't love her full life teaching school, herding six-year-olds in Christmas pageants, and helping on her family's guest ranch. But finding an abandoned newborn at a pageant rehearsal accompanied by a note asking for Cami's help might just be the thing that breaks her. No one recommends she champion the child. But how can she say no to this infant who needs her and awakens an unexpected want? When the town's temporary vet takes her side, Cami imagines a life she never had.

For years, Gus Claymore has taken temporary vet gigs and carefully avoided entanglements after the passing of his wife. But Christmas in Marietta blindsides him—the baby's plight, his young daughter's hunger for roots and family, and his unexpected and unwanted feelings for Cami. Love? He didn't think that was in the cards for him again. He has a pending job in Denver, and now an impossible choice.

Can this one, lost baby be the Christmas miracle that changes all their lives?

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Prologue

December scuttled along the streets of Marietta with a flurry of snowflakes that melted quickly on the girl's eyelashes and cheeks as she hurried alone toward the bus depot at the outskirts of town. Her thin coat wasn't warm enough, but she pulled it tight around her face and throat. Her argyle beanie had seen better days, too, having been plucked from a lost and found bin at her friend's school. But beggars can't be choosers, so they say.

She did her best to ignore the Christmas lights strung up everywhere with two weeks left until the big day. Giant lit-up snowflakes dangled across Main Street and there was even a flying Santa in his sleigh stretching across the road somewhere back there, too. She didn't want to think about Santa Claus, or Christmas—especially Christmas—or... or anything else right now. Because it wouldn't change anything. It would only remind her that she'd done the unforgiveable.

She brushed away the moisture on her cheeks and lowered her head. The streets were busy with shoppers, but not one of them noticed her.

Invisible. That was her.

Better that way.

In fact, if she could simply drop down in a hole and disappear that would be the absolute best thing for everyone. Not that anyone would notice.

Well, maybe one person would.

She clapped a cold, bare hand over her mouth and sank her teeth into the skin of her palm until the pain chased back tears that threatened.

It was for the best. It was all for the best.

Ahead, she saw the blinking florescent sign for the Greyhound bus station and the heavy grinding of a bus engine as one pulled away from the overhang.

Pushing through the glass doors, she welcomed the heat inside and sucked in a deep breath. The place was mostly empty. Only a few losers like her, huddling inside, probably for the warmth. She ignored them and stepped up to the counter where a middle-aged man with a trim gray beard sat scribbling on some kind of clipboard. His nametag read NICK.

He looked up at her and smiled. “Merry Christmas, young lady! How can I help you?”

She was taken aback by the kindness in his voice. “I... I need a ticket.”

“All righty.” He squinted at her and seemed to be taking in her blotchy, red face. He didn’t say a word about the way she looked, but his smile did lose some of its sparkle. “Where to, my friend?”

Undecided, she looked up at the board posted behind him and the schedule of buses leaving tonight. Buses to faraway places she’d never been. And probably never would. She pushed her fingernail into her palm as she pulled her money out of her other pocket and pushed it toward the man. It wasn’t much. Fifty-four dollars and a handful of change. Everything she’d managed to cobble together since...

“How far will this get me?”

Nick frowned. “Well, now. Let’s see, young lady.” He took his clipboard and studied it. “I guess it would help if you had a destination in mind.”

“Somewhere... somewhere warm?”

“Ah. I see. Marietta winters are not for the faint of heart, that’s for sure. Warm. Well, I’m afraid this won’t get you too far. Boise? Missoula? That’s quite a bit warmer than here. Less bitter wind. Neither of ’em is Miami-warm, but...”

“Boise,” she said. “I’ll take Boise. Please.”

He stared up at her with warm brown eyes. She looked away, unable to bear kindness now. Or ever again probably. She willed him not to say anything more. To not ask any questions or wonder if she had any family there or friends. She didn’t. But it was none of his business. People who worked in a place like this already knew that. Their job was not to wonder.

“Boise.” He scratched his beard thoughtfully. “Well, now.” Checking his clipboard again, he nodded. “That is a coincidence. Somebody just called and canceled their Boise ticket tonight. But since it was nonrefundable, it’s just going to go to waste. I don’t suppose anyone would mind if you took that seat instead.”

He pushed her money back across the counter to her.

She stared at him in shock. “You mean...free?”

“Let’s call it prepaid. Your name?”

She blinked at him for a long heartbeat. “Ta—” She caught herself. “Smith. Mary Smith.”

He nodded, typing in a few things on his computer. A ticket popped up through the little slot on the counter and on the backside, he scribbled something before he handed it to her. “Bus leaves in thirty minutes. Through that door there. You take care now, Mary Smith. And Merry Christmas to you.”

Stuffing her money back in her coat pocket, she looked in the direction he was pointing and swallowed thickly. “Thank you,” she squeaked in a voice she wasn’t sure he’d heard. “Thank you,” she said, clearing her throat.

“You’re most welcome.”

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There were some people who could just comfort you with a smile. He was one of those, and it warmed her, even as she made her way to the bus.

Nick was lying about that ticket, and she didn't deserve such a kindness. But she would take it all the same. What choice did she have?

She glanced at the ticket and turned it over in her hand. There was a name written on it and an address in Boise. But why would he—Confused, she turned back to him, but someone else was already at the counter. So, she stuffed the ticket in her pocket and walked away.

It was dark outside now. Maybe she'd get to Boise by morning. Maybe she could buy another ticket farther south after that. Maybe she'd just keep going until she reached the Pacific Ocean. And maybe, someday, she'd forgive herself.

No, she thought, heading toward the door. After tonight, she never, ever would.

Chapter One

Cami Hardesty could feel a headache coming on watching her assistant director, Trina Parker, steer their Christmas pageant's littlest angel by the shoulder away from the wailing going on in the wings on the opposite side of the stage. Oh no. If she wasn't mistaken, that was—

"Harrison Deitmore," Trina said before Cami could finish the thought. "Our wise man." She was holding six-year-old Eloise Claymore on her little shoulder. "Apparently, Eloise here hit him in the nose. And... there's, um... blood."

Eloise, wearing the little cardboard sign around her neck that identified her as one of the pageant's angels, looked anything but at the moment. Defiant was more like it, as she lifted her asthma inhaler to her mouth and pushed the button.

Harrison, the wise man in question, was in second grade at Marietta Elementary where Cami worked as a third-grade teacher. He already had a reputation as a bit of a bully, and she had been careful to keep an eye on his interactions with the others. His overbearing mother had insisted on him getting a part in this pageant and Cami had made room for all the children who wanted to participate. But she was only one person and couldn't be in all places at once.

She glanced at her watch. Seven fifteen. Rehearsal was officially over, and parents had already begun trickling in for pickup, gathering up their kids' winter coats and mittens.

Cami leaned into Trina. "And we were this close to a clean getaway."

Trina grinned, then forced a frown as Eloise caught her amusement. "I wasn't smiling. That wasn't a smile. Hitting our friends is not good." She tossed a helpless look at Cami. "Okay. Going to find ice now."

After Trina left, Eloise choked back a little cough. "He's not my friend. He's mean. And he called me Ella-wheezy—" She offered up her inhaler as evidence. "And he pushed me first."

"Still. Eloise," Cami said, leaning down to the little girl with wounded blue eyes and hair the color of roasted chestnuts. "Are you having trouble breathing? Who's picking you up? Your mom?"

Eloise shook her head.

“Your dad then?” She glanced around at the parents coming through the chapel doors. She’d seen several people attached to Eloise and had no clear idea of which one was her father.

“If he finishes delivering Chloe’s baby in time,” the child said.

Delivering a baby? If her father was a doctor, then at least she guessed he’d be reasonable—

“If he’s not done yet,” Eloise said, “it’ll be Rebecca. If not Rebecca, it’ll be—”

“Hey-ho!” called a handsome, youngish man with a mop of curly blond hair breezing in from the back of the chapel. There was a dusting of snow in his hair and his eyes were a pretty sky blue. “What’s up, li’l Jyn-gerbread?” he said, unwrapping a colorful scarf from his neck as he high-fived the child.

“Gingerbread?” Cami repeated with a smile as Eloise hugged him fiercely.

“He means Jyn from Star Wars,” Eloise said. “She was a rebel fighter. Right, Luke?”

“That’s right. You ready to go?” he asked against her hair.

She nodded and turned back a little teary-eyed.

“Hey, what’s this?” he asked her gently. “You crying?”

“Um...” Cami stepped forward. “Hi. You’re...”

“Oh!” He thrust his hand out to her. “I’m Luke Claymore. Her uncle. Ella’s my niece.”

“Oh. Nice to meet you,” Cami said. “Could-could we have a word?”

Eloise frowned. “She’s going to tell you that I hit Harrison in the nose.”

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“Whoa!” he said with a surfer-boy inflection. His gaze instantly found the wailing Harrison and his clearly upset mother on the other side of the chapel. “You socked him? Did he deserve it?”

She nodded emphatically.

“Well, then.” He bent down and high-fived her again. Then to Cami, he said, “Yeah. The Force is strong in this one.”

Cami cleared her throat. “Actually, no, it’s... it’s not okay to hit our... um... classmates. We need to use our words, right, Eloise?”

Luke straightened, sobering. “Oh. Right. Using words is good. Unless he was being—”

“Hewas,” Eloise said. “And anyway, I didn’t exactly punch him. I kind of hit him with my elbow. On accident.”

At which point, Harrison’s mother, Claire Deitmore, stormed over with her son, clutching a bloody tissue against his nose. Cami knew her from the local PTA. She was one of those moms who wore the trendiest clothes, drove the coolest car, and always managed to snag the only private parental parking spot at school through the annual silent auction. And she was fiercely protective of her son.

“Excuse me, is this your child?” Claire asked Luke. “Did you see what she did to my son? She gave him a bloody nose!”

“Mrs. Deitmore. Harrison.” Cami stepped between them. “I’m so sorry that happened. I’m sure it must have been an accident and he’ll be fine. Trina just went to get some ice for you.”

“An accident? He said she punched him.”

“Elbowed,” Luke said, with his arm around his niece. “Accidentally.”

“And what are you going to do about it?” Mrs. Deitmore asked Luke. “A child like that is a danger to...”

Luke’s sky-blue eyes narrowed. “Just hold on there—”

“Eloise is certainly not a danger,” Cami said. “I’m sure this whole thing is a misunderstanding and she’ll apologize.”

“No, I won’t,” Eloise said unequivocally. “I’m not the only one he’s mean to either. It’s the principle of the thing.”

Cami blinked at her, wondering how Eloise Claymore had managed to fly under her radar this long. The principle of the thing? How old was she again?

“You see there? She won’t apologize,” Claire Deitmore said. “What kind of a parent are you that you allow your child to—”

“Sorry I’m late,” came another breathless voice from behind them.

Cami turned to find a man who closely resembled Eloise’s uncle, but with darker hair and a cold-whipped handsome face. “I wasn’t sure if you were going to make it in time, Luke.”

“Daddy!” Eloise launched herself at her father and buried her face against his chest.

Oh, this was seriously spinning out of her control. Cami tried to remember why she had agreed to direct this Christmas pageant in the first place. Oh, right. Saying now was not part of her vocabulary.

Eloise’s father frowned at Luke, looking for an explanation. Luke scratched his chin and turned to Cami.

“So,” Harrison’s mother said. “You’re this little terror’s father.”

“Excuse me?”

She dangled the bloody tissue at him. “She did this to my son. And I believe he’s owed an apology and, I think, she deserves some disciplinary action.”

“Uh, to be fair,” Luke said, “according to Ella, he pushed her first.”

Mrs. Deitmore gaped at him. “He most certainly did not. My little Harrison is an angel. He would never—”

“It’s... actually not the first time, Mrs. Deitmore,” Cami said.

“Wh-what are you saying? That he’s—that my son is a bully?”

“Maybe,” Eloise’s father said. “Yeah.”

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“No...” Cami said quickly. “I’m—we’re not saying anything of the kind. It’s just that this unfortunate incident wasn’t one sided and perhaps they can just shake hands and move past this.”

Several of the other parents skirted around their little cluster of disputes, sending Cami sympathetic looks of support on their way out the door.

“She may have broken my son’s nose!”

“Oh, I’m sure it’s not—” Eloise’s father began.

“What? Are you a doctor?” Mrs. Deitmore asked.

Cami bit her lip.

“He actually is,” Luke said, pointing at his brother. “A doctor.”

All eyes turned to his brother. A frown replaced the bewilderment on his face. “No, I—I am, but I’m a—”

The woman shoved her son close to him. “Here, then you can tell. Is his nose broken?”

With a frown, Eloise’s father checked the boy’s nose and gave it a quick gentle feel. “I don’t believe so, but you should check with your own physician in the—”

“Oh, we will be,” she said, as Trina reappeared with the ice.

She gently placed it against the boy's nose.

"And we'll be expecting that apology." She turned and sent a searing look in Cami's direction before stalking off with her son out the church doors.

A pregnant pause followed as Cami and Eloise's father and uncle turned back to one another. "She'll be writing an apology note tonight."

"But—" Eloise began to protest.

"No buts. You can tell me your side on the way home. But you're writing it regardless."

"I really am sorry about all this," Cami said, holding out her hand to him. "I'm Cami Hardesty. I don't believe we've actually met."

"August Claymore. Gus to most."

"Wait." Cami blinked. "As in... Gus Claymore the large animal vet my brother keeps raving about?"

He looked surprised. "The same. And you're Liam's sister, Cami." This wasn't a question. He seemed to already know who she was.

"Guilty. And so," she went on, "theChloeEloise mentioned who was having a baby is actually a—"

"Cow."

She bit back a laugh, imagining Claire Deitmore's reaction when she figured it out. "I see. So little boys' noses are not actually up your alley."

“Give me a good horse or cow muzzle any day.” One corner of his mouth went up. “Chloe’s one of Bing Driscoll’s—you might know him—one of his prized Scottish Highland cows. She was having a bit of trouble this afternoon, but it all worked out. She’s got herself a pretty little heifer calf.”

Which would explain the speckles of blood on his shirt collar and the way his slightly long hair was sticking out at the back.

Well, well. Gus Claymore.

Liam had never said anything about him being gorgeous. A little Justin Hartley-ish, with a side of deep, brown eyes and an intriguing dimple that came and went on his left cheek when he wasn’t paying attention to his scowl.

She turned to watch Eloise wander down the church aisle in an apparent deliberate attempt to avoid any more discussion on the topic of Harrison. “Look,” Cami said, “I’m sure Harrison will be fine. The whole thing was not entirely Eloise’s fault.”

“She’s a good kid. With lots of opinions.” He grinned at that admission.

“A girl with opinions is a girl who’s going places. In my opinion.”

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“I’d have to agree with that,” he said, softening a bit. “Still, she’s been a little at loose ends since we moved this time. But she’s really loved coming here, doing the pageant. She’s talked about you nonstop.”

“Really?” Heat crept up her cheeks.

At six, Eloise was a few grades lower than her own students at Marietta Elementary, but she’d seen her at school, most often alone.

“Ya’ll are kind of new to town, aren’t you?”

“We’ve been here about five months. Working with Dr. Anders at his clinic.” He glanced in his daughter’s direction as she wandered through the pews. “You’re not going to kick her out over this, are you?”

“What? Of course not. Don’t worry. This will all work itself out. It always does.”

He shifted uncomfortably as Luke sent a curious look between them. “Well, if you guys don’t mind, since you’re here for Ella, I’m gonna take off. I’m gonna stop for a coffee on the way home. You good?” he asked Gus.

He nodded. “Thanks for showing up.”

“Always. See you at home.”

As Luke headed back out into the cold, Gus turned back to Cami. “We’d better get going, too. She must be hungry for dinner, and I’ve got to-go food in the car. It was

nice to meet you.”

“And you, too. Finally.”

But as he turned to go, Eloise appeared behind him holding an armful of blankets.

“Daddy, look. Somebody left it near Ms. Hardesty’s stuff.”

Cami frowned. “Blankets?”

“No,” Eloise said, her eyes full of wonder as something in the blankets made a mewling sound. “This.” She tugged the pink blankets aside to reveal a baby.

A small, practically newborn baby.

Cami and Gus gasped at once “Oh, my—!” Cami reached for the bundle, carefully taking it out of Eloise’s arms.

“Where did you find it?” Frantically, they both searched the church to see who was missing a child. But there was practically no one left inside the chapel.

Eloise pointed to a pew at the back of the church. “She was all alone. Can we keep her?”

Gus wrapped a protective arm around his daughter. “Show us where you found her.”

The child promptly pointed out the very pew where the baby had been, and not only was there no one looking for the child, there was no baby carrier or any other sign that connected it with any parent nearby.

She turned in circles, hoping to see someone she hadn’t seen before, but no. Eloise

was right. Someone had left this child here alone.

Her eyes met Gus Claymore's in something of a panic. "Who could do this?"

He shook his head as bewildered as she was. She pried the blankets aside to get a better look at the baby. A frown furled the baby's tiny mouth as she cranked up a weak cry. She didn't look more than a few days old, but already she was a beautiful baby. There was no mistaking her for anything but female. Her hair was faintly blonde, and her tiny, dark lashes were damp with tears. As Cami pulled the blankets aside, she heard the crinkle of paper and pulled a folded sheet of lined school paper out from beneath the blanket.

And in pencil, in shaky handwriting, the note began, DEARMS. HARDESTY.

Chapter Two

Cami's hand began to shake as she read the note.

DEARMS. HARDESTY, it read. I'M SORRY. IF I HAD A CHOICE, I WOULD KEEP HER, BUT I CAN'T. SHE'S BETTER OFF WITHOUT ME. I KNOW YOU'LL DO WHAT'S BEST FOR HER. I TRUST YOU. HER NAME IS LOLLY. AT LEAST THAT'S MY NAME FOR HER. THE BRACELET IS FROM ME WITH HER NAME ON IT. MAKE SURE SHE KNOWS IT WAS FROM ME. PLEASE TELL HER I LOVED HER AND THAT IT WASN'T HER FAULT.

There was no signature. She looked up at Gus Claymore who looked every bit as shocked as she felt. "Oh, no," she whispered to no one in particular. "No."

Why me? Who would leave a baby alone like this? And for me?

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“Do you have any idea who wrote that?”

“No...” Shaken, Cami stared down at the child, who balled her tiny fist against her mouth. “Wh-what am I supposed to do with her?”

“Keep her!” Eloise shouted, tugging at her father’s coat.

“She’s not a doll, darlin’. We can’t just... keep her. We... should probably call the authorities. Abandoned child. This is a matter for child services, I’d guess.”

“Child services? You mean a social worker? Foster care?” Cami shuddered. “And it’s almost seven thirty. I’m sure the closest social services offices up in Billings are long closed. And the local sheriff... what’s he going to do with her? Stick her in a... a jail cell? Let her sleep it off?”

Gus was staring at the baby seemingly as bothered by all of this as she was. “I don’t think we have much—”

“The note said you should take her,” Eloise interjected, her distressed gaze traveling back and forth between them. “And I found her. So, she’s our baby, too.”

Gus wrapped an arm around his daughter. “This baby isn’t Ms. Hardesty’s responsibility. Or ours. At least she won’t be after we turn her over to the proper authorities.”

Turn her over. Just like that? Like one would take a lost shoe to the lost and found? To be mixed up with all the other lost things. And that would be that. This child

would no longer be her problem, or his.

But... she was her problem because they'd found her. Whether the universe had deemed it so, or the child's mother, it had become Cami's immediate, very urgent problem.

Fleetinglly, Cami thought of all the lost animals she'd chased, rescued, and cared for over the years. Abandoned kittens or stray dogs in need of care. Like the two pups her sister, Shay, and Cooper Lane had found up in the mountains and brought home only a few months ago, Poppy and Pippa, who were now blissfully integrated into their ranch family.

But ababy.

A mystery child. That was different. Totally different.

The words from the note rang in her ears. I know you'll do what's best for her. I trust you.

Why? Who left that note and what made her think thatshewould know what to do with this baby? Was it someone she knew or had known years ago? A student? A friend? She couldn't fathom anyone she knew abandoning a child this way.

But she also knew the times were hard and there were a million reasons why something like this could happen. Still, she felt angry for this child for what she was about to go through because she was now alone in the world.

For her very first Christmas.

"Maybe whoever left her knew I had a big family; knew I'd have help if I took her home. It's too late tonight to make any decisions. I'm gonna take her home and we'll

figure something else out in the morning.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“Maybe not. But this isn’t her fault. Look, I’m... It’s the end of a very long week—semester—and I’m probably not thinking clearly about any of this, but I know one thing. I can’t just ditch this baby tonight. She’s already been left once, and I won’t do that to her again. At least not tonight.”

“You sure about this?”

Gus Claymore seemed to have a serious resting face, even when he wasn’t looking at her like she was crazy. Which randomly made her wonder how often he smiled.

“Do you have a better idea?” she asked.

His gaze flicked to his daughter who seemed to be, of the three of them, the surest of the right thing to do. “I’ll drive you,” he said. “There’s no car seat and you can’t do that alone. Especially in this weather. We’ll stop at the store for some supplies, then I’ll drive you back home to the Hard Eight. Someone can come back for your car in the morning.”

Tightening her arms around the baby, she smiled at him. “Thank you, Mr. Claymore.”

“It’s just Gus. I’d say this night is grounds for us to be on a first-name basis, wouldn’t you?”

She swallowed thickly. “To be honest, I’m very grateful I wasn’t alone here to find her.”

Eloise slipped her hand into her father’s. “So, we’re keeping her?”

“Ms. Hardesty is. Just for tonight, though. She’s not ours to keep, darlin’.”

“Maybe she’s not anybody’s anymore,” Eloise said. “That’s so sad.”

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Over the child's head, Cami met Gus's eyes. There were no good answers on a night like this. There were only questions.

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After stopping at the store on the way back to the Hard Eight, Gus drove Cami and the baby back home. In the middle of a cold snow flurry, they pulled into the ranch house and unloaded the armload of supplies they'd bought.

He'd been to the Hard Eight multiple times to treat one of their horses or cattle but never inside the house. It was a classic Montana ranch house half-built of logs and half of more modern additions with a big front porch and rockers facing east toward the sunrise.

Inside was every bit as warm as it looked from the outside with a river rock fireplace crackling with a fragrant piñon fire against one long wall and a spruce Christmas tree propped in one corner awaiting decorations. The house was a mix of old and new, warm and rich with a collection of a lifetime of memories and books and coziness.

Cami's entire family was gathered around the long, pine table in the dining room deep in an animated discussion about the ranch development. There was Shay Hardesty, Cami's older sister and her new boyfriend, horse trainer Cooper Lane. Liam, Cami's older brother was there alongside his older brother, Will Hardesty and his fiancée Izzy. And at the head of the table, Sarah, Cami's mother. When they entered the room, the sight of the baby in Cami's arms stopped whatever discussion they'd been having in its tracks and ushered in a stunned silence alongside the cold outside air.

Cami's mother Sarah was the first to notice them. An uncanny slightly older version of her daughter Cami, Sarah was still a pretty woman in her late fifties.

"Is... is that a... a—" she began.

"Baby?" Liam finished.

"Why, yes. Yes, it is. A baby," Cami said, scanning the faces of her family. "She is."

"But... whose?" Cami's older sister, Shay, said.

"I can explain..."

"Is there something you've been meaning to tell us, baby sister?" her brother, Liam teased. "Or are we bringing in ringers now to fill our guest reservations?"

"Not funny," Cami informed him, "and she's not mine. We don't know exactly who she belongs to—"

"What?" Sarah said, alarmed.

"Someone left her in the church. For me. Apparently."

A stunned silence followed that statement.

Gus leaned into the impasse. "There was a note."

"For Ms. Hardesty," Eloise said. "From the baby's mommy."

Sarah got to her feet and hurried to Cami's side, pulling the blanket aside to reveal the baby. "For you? Oh, my heavens. How old is—?"

“I don’t know,” Cami said. “But judging from her size, maybe a couple of days? Maybe a week?”

Shay and Cooper’s rescue puppies Pippa and Poppy galloped into the room at the sound of visitors and gleefully greeted Eloise, who sat fearlessly down on the floor to pet them.

“May I?” Sarah asked, holding out her arms.

“You have more experience than me.” Cami handed the baby over to her mother who proceeded to unwrap her from the bundle of blankets. Vintage-looking blankets with baby patterns of yellow ducks and pink elephants. Threadbare blankets over those of faded white. But carefully, lovingly tucked around the child against the cold.

Unfurled, the child lay dressed in a clean onesie and diaper, a skinny little thing, but as Cami had first noticed, beautiful. Her bright blue eyes blinked up at Sarah and her tiny fist opened and closed around thin air. A too-big silver bracelet dangled from her little bicep and caught Sarah’s eye immediately. She fingered the bracelet, then looked questioningly at Cami.

She shrugged and shook her head. “I know. We bought formula,” Cami said. “Well, Gus did. And diapers. At least enough for the weekend. If... we have her that long.”

Sarah’s gaze came up to Cami’s. “Who would leave a child to you? Who could leave this precious little thing behind?”

Cami bit her lip. “Someone desperate. Who needs help, I imagine. They could have left her at the fire station. There’s a Safe Haven drop there. But—”

“But they left her for you instead? You said there was a note?”

Cami pulled it out of her pocket and handed it to her mother who read it quickly. “I can’t explain it. I have no idea who wrote it. Or why she would think I’m the best person to take care of this baby.”

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Sarah laid a hand on Cami's arm. "That's really no mystery to the rest of us, dear. You, who care for twenty-five children a day, every day. And treat them like your own."

"I'm just a teacher," Cami said. "Not a mother. For heaven's sake. Some days I don't even know what I'm doing."

Cami met Gus's gaze as he was watching her. "Welcome to my world."

Cami grinned back. She had a nice smile. Warm. He could see why her kids all seemed smitten by her.

"Before we get ahead of ourselves," Shay said, brushing a finger along the silky hair on the baby's head, "maybe we should think about calling the authorities. I mean, you can't just keep a found baby. Can you?"

His feeling exactly. Gus wasn't about to step into this fray and offer his opinion, but he had a sense that Liam's baby sister had no clue what she was actually up against here. Not just caring for this newborn but fighting a system that generally didn't care about notes or tender feelings. Something to which he could attest personally.

"Of course, we're—I'm—going to call the authorities in the morning. Or... on Monday. But it's late Friday night. No one's around and there's no need to rush into anything. She's just a baby for heaven's sake. We can do a baby for a night, can't we? Or a couple of nights?"

"And the real mother?" Cooper put in. "What about her?"

“I don’t know,” Cami said, clearly frustrated at all the questions she couldn’t answer. “But that’s beside the point right now, isn’t it?” She shook her head. “I’m going to make up a bottle before she realizes she’s starving and in a roomful of doubters.”

As she left for the kitchen with the bag full of groceries, the others exchanged looks. Definitely doubtful looks, at that.

“Oh, dear,” Sarah said softly.

“Yeah, you can say that again.” Liam ran a hand through his too-long dark hair. “I don’t suppose you tried to talk her out of this, did you?” he asked Gus.

“I did, actually. But... as you can see, she wasn’t having any of it. I feel part of this, too, as it was Ella who found the baby, lying there all by her lonesome. Let’s just say it was definitely a tough call.”

“Poor thing,” Shay murmured, brushing the baby’s soft hair. “And at Christmastime, too. But we know she can’t keep it. Right? I mean she definitely can’t keep it.”

They all silently acknowledged that such a thing had no hope of happening. Not that Gus had any clue whether Cami intended to do so. All he could say for sure was that her instincts to protect that child were familiar and, he had to admit, admirable. But protecting a child of your own was one thing. Protecting a stranger’s child from a predictable and most likely sad future was another battle altogether.

With a last look at the tiny baby in Sarah’s arms, Gus rubbed his still-cold hands together. “Look, I’ve gotta get Ella home. It’s past her bedtime. I’m just gonna say good night to Cami,” he told the others before heading toward the kitchen. “If you’ll excuse me?” He scratched Pippa on the head before walking through the door to the kitchen where he found Cami measuring out powdered formula into a clean baby bottle.

She was closely reading the instructions on the side of the baby formula can when he walked in. She glanced up at him and flicked a smile his way. “Don’t say it. I’m sure you think I’m crazy, too.”

“Nothing of the kind,” he said, pulling the box of diapers out of the plastic shopping bag and putting it on the counter. “You’re only doing what you feel is right. This whole thing, I mean, who’d have imagined finding a kid, abandoned, on a night like this? I do feel bad leaving all of this to you. We did find her together, after all.”

“And you don’t think keeping her here over the weekend is the right thing?”

“I didn’t say that.” He sighed. “Just don’t get too attached. She’s gonna end up in the system one way or another and there’s nothing you can do to stop it.”

She poured filtered water into the bottle and twisted on the cap, giving the whole thing a good shake. “You know, they say that to me every year about my students. Don’t get too attached. And I try not to. I really do. But kids... they find a way inside you, don’t they? There are some—a few—that will always have a piece of my heart. And if the worst that happens is that this little baby manages to be one of those? Then so be it. I’m not going to let her fall through the cracks. Without her mom, she needs someone on her side. It might as well be me.”

“That’s a lot to take on.”

“Maybe. Or maybe it’s just who I am. I don’t even know where this is going right now. At any rate, you’re absolved of any responsibility for this. It’s my choice. So don’t worry.” She put the bottle in the bottle warmer Gus had bought and set the timer.

A frown tugged at his brow. “Yeah. Okay. I’ll check back in tomorrow.”

That drew her gaze again. “Not really necessary.”

“Right. I’ll see you then.”

She tilted a curious look at him, and it was then he noticed how pretty her gray-green eyes were, limned by dark lashes.

“In all this... it was nice to meet you, Gus Claymore. An inauspicious meeting to be sure. But still, bloody noses and lost babies aside? A pleasure.”

A grin edged the worry on his face. “Oh, right. Bloody noses aside. And with an apology still to be written. Nice to meet you, too.” He started to offer his hand, but that was just too awkward. What he really wanted to do was give her the hug she obviously needed. But that was out of the question, too. “Good night, Cami.”

“Night, Gus.”

*

On the drivehome, that moment remained seared in his thoughts. There was something about her, about Cami Hardesty, that... intrigued him. No, intrigued was the wrong word. Captivated was more accurate. Against his will, he found himself attracted to her. Not that he should find that so surprising. He imagined he wasn't alone in that. Aside from being beautiful, it was her strength, the unflappable way she had about her that had drawn him. He tried to imagine any other woman he knew in that situation who might have done what she was about to do and he came up with only one name. Lissa.

His wife. His late wife—Lissa Redmond-Claymore—would have done exactly what Cami did. He knew that down to his bones. And even if the whole thing was futile. Even if—when—that child wound up tangled in the system, Lissa wouldn't have regretted doing what she did for an instant. She was an optimist in all things, including her own mortality. Especially where Ella was concerned. And even him.

Sometimes, he believed her optimism about him was misplaced. Since she'd passed—it had been almost four years now—he'd lost sight of such things. If it weren't for Ella needing him, he would have been lost. Ella, too, had her mother's optimism. Maybe it was a gene he'd missed out on. He couldn't say. But Ella had kept him in the game.

And if Cami could do that for this little child, then who was he to argue?

In the back seat of his truck, Ella was chattering away about the Hardesty dogs, and how they'd been found alone in the mountains as Gus pondered how life seemed to

turn on a dime. One turn this way or that and he wouldn't have been there tonight to pick Ella up, never would have been there to find that child or to help Cami with it. Had that cow taken her sweet time delivering that baby, he'd still be out at Bing Driscoll's and Ella would probably be home in bed, unaware of the cruelties of this world. Then the conversation took a turn toward something closer to home.

"I'm glad my mommy didn't leave me in a church. Even though she went to heaven," she repeated, a story they'd gone over time and again since she'd been old enough to realize she had no mother. "She didn't want to go."

"That's right, darlin'. She didn't want to go. She loved you so much."

"But that baby's mommy didn't love her that much?"

"I'm sure she did," he said. "It's just... complicated. I don't know her whole story or why she did what she did. She must have been very scared for her baby. I just know that little one was very lucky you found her."

Ella stared out the window at the dark landscape speeding past. "Daddy?"

"Mmm-hmm?"

"You wouldn't ever leave me like that, right?"

Her question hit him like a sledgehammer to the chest. It was a question he'd always dreaded, because it meant she was old enough to be missing the piece of them that was no longer here. "No. Of course not, honey. You know I never, ever would. You're my girl."

"Even if you have to work so hard and it's... complicated?"

He looked at her in his rearview mirror and, even in the dark, could see her eyes glistening. “Even then. I promise you. I will never, ever leave you. It’s you and me, El. You don’t have to worry about that. Ever.”

But she’d already lost a mother whom she had no memory of, and life was full of uncertainty. Eloise was a smart little cookie, and he could almost hear all those thoughts spinning through her mind right now taking her down unknown roads. It broke his heart a little for her. It always had. She was too young to deal with such things. But that was her life.

“Hey,” he said. “What do you say we go into Marietta tomorrow to look for a Christmas present for Miss Rebecca? And maybe for Luke, too. And if we do that quickly, we can stop at the Copper Mountain chocolate shop for some hot chocolate?”

She perked up. “With marshmallows? And caramel sauce? And whipped cream?”

“The whole works.”

“Okay, Daddy.” She rested her forehead tiredly against the window jamb. “Are we almost home yet?”

“In just a minute, baby. In just a minute. It’s been a long day. You just close your eyes.”

But she already had.

Gus tightened his fingers around the steering wheel, watching the snow fall against his wipers. Maybe hot chocolate wasn’t the answer to all the world’s problems, or even his, but damned if it wasn’t a good start.

*

By morning, as the sun peeked over the horizon, Cami was the one questioning her sanity in taking in this child. She'd been up half the night with Lolly between feedings and diaper changes and fussing that she assumed was normal for a baby this young. But where natural parents braced themselves for this kind of night chaos for months, she found herself unprepared.

She was exhausted, teary-eyed, and scared. But holding Lolly against her shoulder in the middle of the night, calming her, promising her everything would be all right and feeling her relax against her was perhaps the most delicious feeling she'd ever had. To feel her burrow against her neck, her warm skin against Cami's own, the baby smell of her... triggered something unexpected in her.

Don't get too attached, Eloise's father had warned.

Right. She knew better. But that knowledge did nothing to change those feelings that rose up in her like quicksilver. Some called it baby fever. Many of her fellow teachers had talked about it over the years—that urge to beat the clock and have a child before it was too late. Somehow, she'd missed that feeling. Perhaps it was because they were coupled off and she wasn't. She hadn't had a serious boyfriend for a couple of years and even then, Patrick had assured her that he had no intention of having children.

Ironically, that wasn't even what had broken them up. She'd convinced herself that teaching dozens—maybe hundreds—of children over the years would suffice for her.

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No, she'd walked away from Patrick for lots of other reasons, all of which had made her gun-shy about dating again at all. His consuming ambition, determination to live halfway across the country in some big city, but mostly the fact that there were moments—awful moments—when he reminded her of her father. Territory she'd sworn never to wander into with any man.

It was a miracle, in fact, that her brothers, Will and Liam, had managed to become the good men they were, despite their father's ham-fisted fathering. And given all the other stuff they'd uncovered since his passing, it was indeed a miracle their family was still intact at all. No, she wasn't in the market for a man at all. She was too busy for all that. And now, with Lolly, that went double for singledom.

Except that...

Several times during the night, her thoughts strayed to Gus Claymore, and the gentle way he had with Eloise in the middle of all that chaos. The way he'd stuck by Cami after finding the baby without a question. Even saying he'd check in on her later today. Well, maybe it was only words. But there was a moment in the kitchen when she'd stopped ignoring his quiet charm and actually allowed herself to take it in.

Yes, he was handsome with chiseled features and sandy-brown hair—hair that wasn't even thinking about receding yet. And the way smiles found his mouth in a reluctant sort of way, as if smiles and Gus Claymore were uneasy friends. And his eyes... a deep brown with a tinge of sadness.

She gave herself a mental shake. Looks aside, under the circumstances she supposed he was only doing what would be expected of any decent human in that situation.

Maybe. On the other hand, no. She could think of a handful of men right off the top of her head who would have made a quick exit to stage right at the mere sight of a complication like a lost baby. And he hadn't strong-armed her into calling the sheriff. Not at all, even though she suspected he disagreed with her choice. She had to give him props for that.

Not for the first time tonight, she wondered about Eloise's mother. Where was she? Were they divorced? Had he always had custody of Eloise? Raised her on his own? And how did his brother Luke and that other woman named Rebecca figure into their living arrangement? Eloise had referred to her as Rebecca, not Mom or Dad's girlfriend. But she had seen the woman once or twice picking up Eloise. She was maybe in her late thirties, blonde, pretty and definitely in charge when it came to Eloise.

The baby stirred and blinked up at her.

Cami smiled. "Well, hello," she murmured, leaning over her. "Good morning." She picked her up and tucked her against her shoulder.

Lolly bunched up against her, then stretched.

"I guess we might as well call it for this night. Are you hungry? Let's go get you changed and get something to eat. What d'ya say?"

Downstairs, Cami found her mother already making coffee with Saturday morning cinnamon rolls in the oven.

The sweet fragrance made Cami's stomach growl. "Oh, that smells so good."

Wiping down the island countertop, Sarah grinned. "I figured you'd need a little sweet fortification after the night you had."

“You heard?”

“Pretty sure the whole house heard.”

She groaned. “Shay and Ryan, too?”

“Well, it’s only one night. We can survive that. It is only for one night, right?”

Cami shrugged and reached for the bottle fixings. “Probably. I mean, sure. Most likely.”

“That sounds a little less certain than yes.” She reached for the baby and Cami handed her over to free her hands up for the bottle.

After mixing the formula together, Cami popped it in the bottle warmer. “I’m just trying to figure out what’s the right thing to do here. What if the mother comes back? What if she changed her mind and she shows up today? Then what? I’ve already given the baby up to the system and maybe she never gets her back?”

“But none of that is up to you, Cami. It was the mother’s choice to leave her, not yours.”

“You’re saying I should just... brush my hands together and let the pieces fall where they may?”

“I’m saying there are protocols for this sort of thing. For a reason.”

“I know. And on Monday, I’ll... probably... call the powers that be and turn her over. I mean, I’m the last person who’s ready for a responsibility like... like her.”

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far,” Sarah allowed, staring down at the child in her arms.

“She is pretty adorable, isn’t she?”

Cami arched a brow. “Oh, what’s that?”

Lolly grabbed her mother’s fingers in her tiny fist and clung tight.

Sarah’s words devolved into baby talk. “Oh, yes, you are. Yes, you are pretty adorable.”

Cami tested the bottle temperature on her wrist and handed it to her mother with a hopeful look.

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“What? You want me to feed her?” She grinned and snatched the bottle out of Cami’s hands. “Well, we’ll just have to feed you then, won’t we? Yes, we will. Because babies need to eat. All the time. Yes, they do.”

Ryan wandered into the kitchen, fully dressed for the cold outside, still rubbing his eyes. “Is that cinnamon buns I smell?”

“Yes, dear,” Sarah said. “And by the time you’re done with the horses, they’ll be here waiting for you.”

He moaned, obviously hungry as he grabbed his coat off the rack near the door. “Starving.”

“That’s what the horses are thinking right about now, too.” She laughed, and Cami knew Sarah loved teasing him. Ryan never needed prodding to take care of the animals, despite the cold and the early hour. Today’s temperatures would mean breaking the ice on the water troughs as well as feeding the stabled horses. “Uncle Liam’s already out feeding the cattle.”

Cami glanced out the window. There was little snow yet, but the landscape looked like a tundra with an icy wind scuttling across the open pasture. Brrr.

She thought of Lolly’s mother and wondered where she was right now and if she was somewhere warm and safe.

“How’s the baby?” Ryan asked, taking a peek as he wrapped a scarf around his neck. “She staying or going?”

A man of few words, he got right to the point.

Sarah and Cami both spoke at once.

“Going.”

“Staying.”

Cami shot a look at Sarah. “I mean for today... then who knows?”

At this Ryan lifted a sardonic brow. “Somebody better figure it out.” He headed out into the cold, shutting the door behind him.

The chill invaded the warm kitchen for a moment.

“He isn’t wrong about that.” Sarah sighed, feeding the baby in her favorite chair near the window. “So, what is your plan? If you mean to not turn her in, that is.”

“I didn’t say that I wouldn’t.” Cami dipped her finger into the icing waiting on the cinnamon buns and popped it in her mouth. “Hey. Didn’t Izzy volunteer as a child advocate in the Dallas courts before she met Will?”

“That’s right. She did. So?”

“So maybe she’d have a good take on what I should do here.”

“What do you want to do?”

“I want to find Lolly’s mother and find out why she felt she had to do this. Help her.”

“Help her? You don’t even know who she is.”

“I don’t. At least I don’t yet. But she knew me. Somehow.”

Sarah stared down at the baby who was now milk-drunk and nearly falling asleep.

“Could she have been one of your students?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. I’d hate to think that one of my students could end up this desperate.”

“Izzy is coming over later this morning to go over decorations for their wedding.”

Which was happening, Cami remembered, two weeks from today.

Sarah went on. “Maybe she’ll have some insight about little Lolly here.”

Cami nodded. “Maybe. Mom, I hate to ask this, but I left my car at the church last night and I need to go pick it up. Could you watch her after I put her down for a nap if I can get Shay to drive me in?”

“Oh, I think we can manage.” She grinned at Lolly. “Can’t we? Yes, we can...”

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Cami smiled. Apparently, she wasn't the only one who was smitten.

Chapter Three

From across MainStreet, a few minutes later, Cami spotted Gus and Eloise, hands full of shopping bags, heading toward Sage's Copper Mountain Chocolates as she and Shay walked toward the church parking lot. She felt an unwanted flutter at the sight of him and was still processing that reaction when Shay elbowed her.

"Don't look now, but there's Gus Claymore."

At almost the same moment, he looked up and noticed them, too. Hesitantly, he lifted his arm in a wave. Cami waved back, but they both stood on opposite sides of the street indecisively wondering if they should trek across it.

"Don't be weird. Go say hi," Shay said. "Look at him. All gorgeous and interested."

Cami made a face as she pulled her arm back. "Clearly, you're delusional. He's just being polite."

But he took Eloise's hand and steered her across the street in their direction.

"Uh—Oh. Uh-huh—" Shay said. "Here he comes."

Gus and his daughter dodged traffic as they jaywalked across Main toward them. In the background, like the soundtrack to some Nancy Meyers movie, the music from Wham's "Last Christmas" drifted from a shop speaker out onto the street.

“Stop,” she whispered to Shay. “Seriously. Don’t try to matchmake m—”

“Hey, Gus. What a coincidence,” Shay said as they neared, and she gently shoved Cami forward. “We were just talking about you. Weren’t we, Cami?”

Cami shot a dagger-y look at Shay, then furiously blushed at the two of them. “Hi, Gus. Eloise.”

He shifted his shopping bags and extended a hand. Cami took it awkwardly. His fingers closed around hers with an unexpected warmth.

Flustered, she pulled back her hand. “We were... saying how nice it was of you to drive me home last night.”

“The least I could do. You survived the night, I see.”

“Where’s the baby? Where’s Lolly?” Eloise said. “You didn’t lose her, did you?”

“No. Definitely not. She’s sleeping at home, thankfully. My mom is watching her so I could come and get my car. And yes, I survived.” Barely. “She’s doing well, all things considered. And what’s all this?” she asked, pointing to the shopping bags. “Christmas shopping?” Ugh. Brilliant repartee, Cami.

Gus smiled. “Hard to avoid when everything is so festive in town. Is it always like this?”

“Festive? At Christmastime? Oh. Yes. Absolutely. Isn’t it, Shay?”

“Mmm-hmm. Festive. Very Christmasy.” An-nndshe dropped the ball back in Cami’s court with a look.

Cami bit her lip for a moment. “Yes, and since this is your first Christmas here, you’re probably discovering all the fun things to do here at this time of year.”

Gus nodded. “Like—”

Shay directed a pointed look at her.

“Oh. Like ice-skating on Miracle Lake? Sledding when there’s enough snow. Christmas tree cutting over at the Gallagher Tree Farm. Do you have a tree yet?”

“Not yet.” He met Eloise’s worried look with a frown. “I guess we’ll have to do that soon.”

“Can we today?” Eloise said. “Please?”

He rubbed a hand on her head. “Sure. We can. Maybe after hot chocolate.”

“Maybe Ms. Hardesty can come, too?”

Gus lifted an uncertain look at her.

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“Oh, no,” she stammered. “That’s okay. You two should—”

“What a great idea,” Shay told Eloise. “Cami can show you where the lot is. She’s the best at picking out trees. The champion, really. Every year.”

Cami widened her eyes at Shay with warning.

“Well, that’d be great,” Gus said. “But we wouldn’t want to put you out.”

“Put her out?” Shay said. “Pshaw! And don’t worry, Cami. I’ll be there if the baby wakes up. I can find my way around a bottle. You should go.”

“My sister is being a little pushy,” Cami said, standing up for herself. “But I’m happy to show you the lot—”

“And help pick out a tree?” Eloise said.

Cami nodded. “Sure. Whenever you’re ready.”

“After hot chocolate?”

Gus grinned. “You a hot chocolate fan?” he asked Cami. “We were just headed to Sage’s.”

“I—Uh—”

“Okay!” Shay brushed her hands together. “I’m gonna head back home then. I’ve got

a million things to do this morning. At the ranch. With the upcoming wedding and all. But don't worry. I'll still have time for Lolly. So, I'll see you at home later, Cami?"

When she got home, she was officially going to murder Shay for railroading Gus into spending time with her. "You sure you're okay with Lolly for a little?"

She patted her hand. "Ryan survived me, didn't he? Leave Lolly to me. Go. Have somefun."

It wasn't that she didn't trust Shay with Lolly, far from it. Just that Lolly was Cami's responsibility, not anybody else's. Shay said her goodbyes and Cami watched her sister hurry off toward her SUV, knowing she was right about the million things back at the ranch. With Izzy and Will's wedding happening up at the round barn the weekend before Christmas they had lots of loose ends to tie up. Even though they'd been planning since this summer, all the last-minute details were closing in. She should be helping her. She should be home with the baby.

Eloise put her hand in Cami's, tugging her toward the street. "Let's go, Ms. Hardesty. We're going to get the works with caramel sauce and whipped cream and everything. Do you like hot chocolate?"

Gus was standing close now and the look he sent her was part sympathy, part curiosity. Probably nothing more. Even though she could feel that look deep down in her chest.

"I do," she said. "I love hot chocolate. And Sage makes the best."

*

Cami was right about the hot chocolate at Copper Mountain Chocolates. It was the best Gus had ever had. He sat across from her at the small bistro table in the shop's

window, watching her interact with his daughter, who sat blissfully unaware of the whipped cream mustache she wore as she laughed along with Cami. Ella had been talking about her nonstop for a couple of weeks now, ever since they'd started rehearsals for the pageant. He could see the attraction.

Cami was not only pretty, but she was also...shiny. Like she had a light around her. She seemed to be just one of those people who attracted everyone. And when other customers—people she knew, probably parents from her school—came up to say hi, she seemed easy with them—unlike she was with him. With him—she seemed unsure what to make of him. Of this... whatever this was. They'd both been bamboozled into this, but he wasn't sorry. It was good to have some company with Eloise. Some female company. Ella missed having a woman in her life. It was mostly just him and Luke, and Ella's regular babysitter, Rebecca.

But there was something about Cami that struck him, too. It tugged at him, like iron ore to a lodestone. A feeling as foreign to him as living in this small town. Yet, he knew better than to let that attraction be anything more than what it was. It was just a friendly outing. For Ella. That was all it was.

During a lull in the girls' chatter, Gus smiled at the two of them, sipping his hot chocolate.

"What?" Cami sent him a curious look.

"Nothing," he said. "Just enjoying this."

Ella beamed at him. "See? I told you she was nice."

Cami blushed. "I didn't mean to do a take-over of your morning together."

"You didn't. You just gave us some direction. And hot chocolate was always on the

menu. Speaking of take-overs... how's the kid?"

"Lolly did well, considering." Cami brushed her fingers along the side of her mug. "I still haven't called anyone."

"Like the sheriff? I figured."

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Cami glanced around to make sure no one was listening. “I just keep thinking the mom will appear somehow and know that I’ve got her and that she’s safe with me.”

“You really think that will happen?”

She shook her head. “But maybe... maybe we could find her. I. Maybe I can find her.”

Ella’s curious gaze ping-ponged back and forth between them.

“How?” Gus asked. “You think she’s here somewhere? In town?”

“Why not? Maybe no one knew she was pregnant. Or she hid it somehow. But that baby is at least a week old. Not hours. Someone must have seen her with a baby. Don’t you think?”

“Maybe she went to a doctor?” Ella said.

The two of them turned to her, surprised. “Maybe,” Cami said. “We should be able to narrow it down if she did.”

“And if you should find her, then what?” Gus said. “She clearly doesn’t want to be found. No signature on the note. No clue, really.”

Cami shrugged. “I... I have no idea what would happen if we found her. But nothing will be better if Lolly’s been disappeared into the foster system.”

“Disappeared?” Ella’s eyes widened in alarm.

“No, no,” Cami said, covering Ella’s hand gently with hers. “I didn’t mean it that way. That’s not what would happen. She’ll be totally fine.”

But he knew from personal experience that she was right about kids disappearing into the system. Once in, it was very hard to get out. But the idea that she was even contemplating taking on that system for a stranger’s child... seemed—on its face—like a crazy idea. Yet, there was also some beautiful logic to it. The even crazier thing was... he was beginning to warm to the idea for her.

Cami wrinkled her nose at Ella. “Anyway, what do you say we go look for that tree? And maybe I can pick up one for our house, too. You can’t ever have enough Christmas trees, right?”

She high-fived his daughter and Ella giggled. “Did you know that in the old days, people in Poland used to hang their Christmas trees upside down and put fruit and nuts on them for decorations?”

“Really?” Cami asked in all seriousness. “How did you know that?”

“I read it. In a book. In the library.”

Cami met Gus’s look.

“She’s been reading since she was four,” Gus said. “I can’t take credit. She sort of taught herself.”

Cami blinked in surprise as Eloise slurped her hot chocolate at the bottom of the cup. “Well. That is—”

“No, Daddy taught me. He read me the same book so many times, I learned the words.”

“Did he?”

“Oh, yes,” Gus said, grinning. “Blueberries for Sal. Many, many...manytimes.”

“I know that book,” Cami said. “It was one of my favorites.”

“Are there any bears at the Christmas tree place where you cut down your tree?”
Eloise asked.

“I’ve never seen one,” Cami said. “I think it’s a little too crowded with humans up on the tree farm for the bears’ taste.”

“Darn,” Eloise sighed.

Cami laughed. “If it’s any help, there are plenty of bears in the mountains around here and lots of huckleberries and blueberries to go around. But hopefully—as far as I’m concerned—we won’t run into any of them.”

“That would make the ranchers around here very happy,” Gus said. “C’mon. Let’s go find a tree.”

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Cami took them to the Gallagher Tree Farm and they spent the next half hour hiking up the gentle hillside to find the perfect specimen. The fragrance of pine filled the air and somehow boosted Cami's mood. It was cold and they walked through a few inches of snow still covering the ground, but it was also sunny, and the crisp, blue sky overhead seemed to go on forever. Perfectly December in Montana.

"Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" echoed up from speakers below at the check-out stand as they wove through the nursery of pine trees. Though she'd come here many times in the past to cut down a Christmas tree with her family, it felt distinctively different to be here with Gus and Eloise.

Christmas had always been her favorite season, filled with scents and sounds as familiar as her family. This year, for some reason, she'd felt too overwhelmed to truly enjoy its approach. What with the guest ranch business, helping to plan Will and Izzy's wedding, teaching and the Christmas pageant, it felt as though she was living in the middle of a storm. And that was all before the baby showed up. Now, her life had seemed to cross some threshold of unmanageable.

Still, some crazy voice inside her said she could handle it. Handle it all. Maybe she was deluding herself, but it had always been her experience that her capacity to embrace life had always expanded with the arrival of need. And that baby needed her.

They scrambled up the hillside, Ella slipping and sliding in the snow. She started a snowball fight with Gus and before long they were all involved, all of them laughing and ignoring the judgy looks they got from the serious tree shoppers until they were all covered with snow and chilled to the bone. They looked and looked, with Ella discounting all the ones Gus pointed to, the perfect six-foot tall ones, with cone

shapes and thick, full branches.

“She has a mind of her own,” he said out of her earshot to Cami, who agreed with a smile.

“She’s great,” Cami said. “Smart as a whip. Did she really teach herself to read?”

“Yup. One day, she brought me that book and read the whole thing to me. I thought at first she’d just memorized it. And maybe she did in the beginning, but when I pointed at the words individually, she knew them.”

“Impressive.” Cami studied him as he walked beside her. He was a good seven inches taller than she was with an athletic build that was regrettably hidden by his thick winter coat. But her gaze fell to his strong hands. A doctor’s hands, she thought. Long fingers, hands strong enough to coax stubborn calves from their mothers’ bellies and gentle and skilled enough to do surgery on the smallest baby goat, if she didn’t miss her mark. Illicitly, and without preamble, she wondered what else such skilled hands could do.

Gus looked up to find her watching him and a flush of color climbed his neck. “Oh, don’t get me wrong. She got all that fire from her mom.”

There was no ring on his left hand. But for all she knew, he could be one of those who shunned jewelry. But the look on his face when he spoke about Eloise’s mother told her that probably wasn’t the case. But she didn’t want to ask. She didn’t have to.

“My wife... died two years after Ella was born. Cancer. It’s okay. Most people wonder.”

“I—” she began. “I’m so sorry.”

He gave a quick nod, staring out after his daughter. “And Ella’s got a string of people, including me, who love her. My brother, Luke, who you met last night. Rebecca White, a local woman who babysits when I need her. When we lived back East, Luke stood in for me when I had my hands full at work. What they say about it taking a village? That’s very true.”

“Just the same... it couldn’t have been easy, raising her on your own. While you were...” While he was grieving.

“No. But my late, great-aunt who raised me used to always say nothing that’s good ever comes easy. And Ella’s the best thing in my life.”

She smiled as they walked together up the hill, following his daughter who was hopping around the trees after a bunny she’d spotted. “And you must love what you do,” Cami said. “Liam says you’re the best large animal vet he’s ever worked with.”

“Well, that’s kind of him. I do love it. To be honest, I prefer animals to most people. Present company excepted, of course.”

“Well. That’s a relief. I mean, on a scale of one to Angus cow.”

He laughed. “And aside from taking in lost babies and wrangling children in a Christmas pageant, Ella says you’re also a teacher at her school.”

“That’s me. The crazy, overcommitted one. But I love it all. I really do. Now... the baby... that’s another level of crazy, I guess.”

“You don’t really think the mother is going to come back, do you? Sounded pretty final to me in that note.”

“I don’t know. You can never underestimate the power of motherhood. Who knows

why she did it? But if I can track her down, somehow, maybe this isn't a lost cause. She could be anywhere. She could be here in town still. She could be someone we know. And it's just a matter of finding her and sorting it out. Which is why I hesitate to call social services. What'll happen to that baby then? She entrusted her to me. I have no idea why."

He brushed his fingers along the pine needles of a noble fir and the pine scent was strong. "I didn't sleep much last night either."

Surprised, she turned to him. "You didn't?"

"No. I kept thinking about that bracelet she came with. The one with her name engraved on it."

"What about it?"

"Well," he said. "Unless it belonged to the mother or was handed down, she had to have gotten it engraved somewhere pretty recently. Probably here in town."

Cami stopped dead. "You're right. There can't be that many places that do engraving here. I can think of one or two off the top of my head."

"And if you check there, maybe they'll have some kind of record of it."

“That’s brilliant!”

His grin, that completely unaffected Hollywood-level grin, did something to her insides. As if he’d suddenly become a coconspirator with her in this baby caper. But more than that, he stirred some long dormant awareness in her... awareness not only that it had been eons since she’d felt any kind of flutter around a man, but that this man, in particular, was someone she wanted to get to know.

“What do you think of this one?” he asked, pulling her out of her thoughts.

He stood beside a perfectly sad little Charlie Brown tree with a crooked top and bare spots in the branches. He straightened the top for Eloise, whose eyes widened with delight.

“That’s it! That’s the one!” she said.

“Okay then. This tree it is.” It only took a few minutes to cut the little tree down and he handed the saw to Cami and lifted the tree up on his shoulder.

Eloise ran down the hill in front of them, intent on petting the goats and special reindeer penned near the entrance of the lot.

“Thanks for coming along,” he said, walking beside Cami down the hill. They passed dozens of other tree hunters wandering through the nursery in search of their own perfect tree. “You really made Ella’s day.”

“I have to admit, this is the first Christmasy thing I’ve done this year, outside of the

pageant—which is sometimes more like cat-wrangling than directing a play. So, thank you for inviting me. Even though Shay did kind of foist me on you.”

“There was no foisting involved. And we probably would have had to settle for a puny grocery store tree if you hadn’t shown us this lot. It’s amazing.” Down the hill, Eloise already had her fingers sunk into the nearest goat’s fur and was talking to it through the fence.

“She must have inherited her love of animals from you,” Cami said.

He nodded. “I’ve been an animal person all my life. People…”

“Which makes you the vet I’ve heard you are. But you can’t have one without the other. Humans are inextricably attached to their animals.”

“Yeah.” He shifted the tree on his shoulder. “I do my best to work around them. That’s probably TMI about me.”

She gave him a sideways look. “Hmm. Which hardly explains how Liam and all the clients gushing at you at Sage’s seem to really, really like you. I’m pretty sure you’re underestimating your people skills.”

“It’s all a ruse.”

She laughed, watching Eloise cuddle a goat through the fence, trying to avoid allowing her gaze to linger on him as he carried the tree down the hill. He had a naturally sexy walk. Maybe it was because of his tall, athletic build but she guessed it was just something innate. Maybe it was a veterinarian thing.

She cleared her throat. “So, Liam says you’re from back East.”

“You asked him about me?” A grin tipped his mouth.

“No. Well... your name came up in conversation.”

He nodded. “Originally? Virginia. But I specialized in large animals at Cornell and ended up practicing in Upstate New York for a few years. Lots of dairy farms. Lots of horses. Left there a couple of years ago and Ella and I have moved around a few times, doing what I’m doing here.”

“Working with Dr. Anders.”

“Well, filling in for Dr. Anders while he’s on medical leave. Knee replacement.”

Disappointment threaded through her like an unexpected jab. “So... you’re not here to stay then?”

“No. That was never the plan.”

“Ah.” A silent sigh escaped her. Why had she even imagined—

Ella came running toward them. “Daddy! Did you see the reindeer? He let me pet him!”

“He’s a beaut.”

Cami blinked and shook off her thoughts with a wink at Ella. “He must be one of Santa’s reindeer, don’t you think?”

Eloise slid a look at her father. “Santa Claus isn’t real. He’s just a story parents tell their kids.”

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Cami pressed her lips together to keep from letting her mouth fall open. Eloise was only six. “Wait. You... you don’t believe in Santa Claus?”

“No. It’s okay,” Eloise said. “I don’t tell the other kids. It’s a secret.”

Gus flicked a guilty look at Cami. “Library,” he said.

“Well, sometimes even libraries can be wrong.” Cami leaned close to the little girl.

“You know, I used to think that, too... about Santa. But I’ve changed my mind.”

“You have?”

“Oh, yes. I think he’s absolutely real.”

Eloise made a face. “No, he’s not. That’d be a miracle. Right, Daddy?”

Gus opened his mouth to answer, but she couldn’t help herself.

“Well, Santa Claus does kind of fall into the miracle category, doesn’t he? I mean, making it around the world in one night with toys for everyone? And if you ask me, miracles are not so uncommon. In fact, I think they happen all the time.”

Gus dropped the tree off his shoulder, and it landed with a thud on the ground between them. “A cow giving birth to a perfect calf? A foal getting to its feet for the first time? Yeah. Those I’d call the real miracles. Miracles we can see. Ella and me? We keep things on the up and up. She knows.”

How had this conversation taken such a weird turn? It really was none of her business what Gus told Ella about Santa. But she was so little.

“I’m sorry. I... I didn’t mean to step on your toes.”

“My toes are just fine. We should find someone to ring up this tree though.”

Ugh. She’d said the wrong thing. And he was not happy with her. Of course she did. Why couldn’t she learn to leave well enough alone?

“They’ll ring you up over there. I’m going to go find another little tree real quick to take home from the cut ones over there. Ella, do you want to help me pick one out?”

“Okay! I’ll find one!” She bolted ahead, running toward the lot full of pre-cut Douglas firs and nobles.

Cami lingered beside Gus for a moment, trying to think of how to remove her foot from her mouth. But he spoke first.

“She’s too smart for her own good sometimes,” he said when Ella was out of earshot. “But I don’t like to lie to her. If I did, she’d find out the truth eventually anyway. And then what?”

She had no answer for that, except that by then Ella would be eight or nine and she’d know the secret of Santa was something he’d shared with her because he loved her. But it wasn’t her place to say it. So, she said, “You’re an amazing dad. And she’s a darling girl. Don’t mind me. I have zero children to raise. Well... except momentarily.”

“Yeah, you’ll probably want to be getting back to her. And figure out what you’re going to do.”

She rubbed her forehead. “I could actually use one of those miracles right now. See any on the horizon?”

“Nope. Just blue sky.”

Gus Claymore was as pragmatic as he was handsome. But underneath all that pragmatism was some quiet river that made her wonder about him and his just-the-facts-ma’am attitude about life. Maybe it was the scientist in him.

It was probably the elementary school teacher in her that perpetuated all this Christmasy optimism in her. But Santa and Christmas had always been big on the ranch when they were young, and her older siblings had dutifully kept that secret from her for years as she grew up, faithfully visiting Kris Kringle, the Graff Hotel’s long-time Santa. It hadn’t hurt her one bit to know her siblings had kept that secret from her in the end. Nor did it color her belief in the spirit of Santa being alive and well. It had only made them all closer with the joy of Christmas mornings together.

For just a few minutes, she’d nearly forgotten that baby who’d fallen into her life like a little miracle herself. The baby her entire family was now looking after. She hadn’t made any decisions at all about her, but putting all that off by distracting herself with Gus and Eloise wasn’t going to make her choices any easier.

“Blue skies it is,” she said and headed off to join Eloise in the tree hunt.

Chapter Four

Gus followed her over to the Hard Eight with her Christmas tree still in the back of his truck and Eloise excited to see the baby again. But as they pulled onto the long drive of the ranch, Cami’s heart fell at the sight of the sheriff’s car parked in front of their house.

“Oh, no,” she breathed. “No.”

She wanted to stop right there, back up the car, try to come up with a good reason why she hadn't called them herself. But she didn't have one. Or a good reason why she shouldn't simply let the sheriff take her, disappear her into the system.

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She was out of the car and running to the door before Gus and Eloise had even come to a stop. Inside, the deputy, Dominic Braehill, who had been out to their place before, stood with her mother, Shay and Izzy, who was holding the baby fiercely.

“Ah. Here she is now,” Sarah said as Cami barged in breathlessly. Her mom made help-me! eyes at her.

“What?” Cami said, heading for Lolly. “What is this?” But she knew. She already knew why he was here.

Braehill, all decked out in his official winter gear, complete with a holstered gun at his hip and lots of leather accoutrement under his thick jacket, uncrossed his arms and took a step in her direction. “Maybe you should tell me, Cami,” he said. “Your mama, here, has been trying to explain exactly why this foundling child is here at the Hard Eight instead of in the custody of child protective services, as she should be. Considering her circumstances.”

Cami took the baby from Izzy, holding her protectively. “I can explain.”

“I certainly hope so.”

Gus and Eloise walked in the door at that point and the expression on Gus’s face was a perfect reflection of the sinking feeling in her chest. The sheriff nodded to Gus but didn’t look at all intimidated by the growing size of the crowd surrounding him.

“I was going to call on Monday. After the weekend. It was a Friday night, after hours. I didn’t want to just—it didn’t feel right to just dump her with—” Her shoulders

sagged. “How did you even know I had her?”

“Phone call from an... anonymous party. Said you found that child on a church pew last night and just took her?”

Who would have called—

Her stomach knotted. There was only one person in that crowd last night she could think of who would go so far as to report her. Claire Deitmore. Harrison’s mother. Of course it would be her. She’d been sitting in her car outside the church on her cell as they’d walked out. If not for that darned bloody nose...

“I was there when the baby was found,” Gus said, stepping into the fray. “I’m just as guilty as Cami is in this. But, frankly, I think she did the right thing, taking the child home.”

Cami’s heart squeezed at his kindness.

Dominic slid a look Gus’s way.

“Can we just consider the alternative? With nowhere for her to go? Or a last-minute foster care situation. But aside from all that, there’s a note from the baby’s mother.”

Eloise chimed in. “It was for Ms. Hardesty.”

Cami tipped her chin up. “Look, I know this whole thing is totally irregular. It’s not like I planned for any of this to happen or that I wanted to break the law. But she’s just a tiny baby who’s lost her mother, who, for whatever reason, found it impossible to keep her.”

“It’s against the law to abandon a child. We have safe drops for unwanted children.”

“No one said she was unwanted. I believe her birth mother wanted her very much.”

“We want her!” Eloise said.

Dominic sighed. “That seems beside the point as she did, in fact, abandon her.”

“She left me a note. Specifically, for me, asking me to take care of her and... well, I can’t just ignore that. Whoever she is, she must have been in a terrible circumstance to have left her baby to me. But she was warm and safe at that church. Well fed. She was left behind, but not exactly abandoned.”

“Sounds like semantics to me,” Dominic said, looking considerably less sure of himself than he had a moment ago.

Cami bounced the baby who had started to fuss, against her shoulder. “Maybe to you, it does. But she isn’t a... a stolen car or a lost pair of pearl earrings. She’s a tiny human being who’s just had all the odds stacked up against her.”

“I’m well aware,” the deputy said, shifting his feet on her mother’s kitchen floor. “But the sheriff sent me over to—”

“Once she goes into the system, it’s almost impossible to get her out. Even you must know that.”

“But you know that’s where she belongs,” he told her.

“No, I don’t,” Cami said. “I-I don’t. I don’t have an end game here, Dominic, really, I don’t. Not yet anyway. But I think a little pause is in order for this child. I think if we had a little time, we could find Lolly’s real mother and try to help her. I know she loves her daughter. And she didn’t want to do this. But somehow must have felt she had no choice.”

“And you know all that how?”

Cami set her purse down on the table and pulled out the note that had come with the child. “Because of her own words.”

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Reluctantly, Dominic read the note with a frown.

Izzy spoke up. “Have you heard of a thing called kinship care, Deputy?”

“Uh, no. But—”

“It’s where family members or... or friends of the family step up to care for children whose only other alternative is the foster care system. Kinship care is something that’s being utilized more and more, when possible, with the courts in every state as its often much better for the child than an overburdened foster situation.”

“But you’re not kin. Any of you. Isn’t that right?”

“Technically,” Izzy said, “that’s true. But she does have the request of the birth mother.”

“And what exactly do you know about this business?” he asked Izzy. “This kinship business?”

“Before I moved to Montana, I worked as a child advocate in the Texas court system. I don’t think the situation is any less burdened here.”

Cami hoped that Izzy’s experience in the Texas courts would one day come in handy. But she wasn’t sure Izzy’s intervention would change Dominic’s mind about what she’d done last night.

“Look, Deputy, I know you have a job to do, but there has to be a different way to

look at this. It's Christmas. Families are getting ready for the holidays. Fosters are probably full up and we are all here, more than willing to look after this child until at least after the holidays or until we can make some kind of a plan. You know us. You know our family. We'll take good care of her. Isn't there any way to make this work for her?"

"It's not actually up to me," the deputy said. "But... let me make a phone call. See what can be possible."

Relief leaked into her. Surely reasonable people would see what was best for Lolly, and it wasn't taking her away from the Hard Eight today.

Gus moved beside her. "None of this is fair."

Silently, she agreed. "Thank you for standing up for me. You didn't have to get involved in this."

"Tell that to Eloise." The little girl was on the floor petting Shay's puppies who had rolled over on their backs for belly rubs. "In case you hadn't noticed, I am already in pretty deep. And I don't want to see Lolly go into a bad situation any more than you do. But you know there are great foster families out there. Families that would take her in happily and work toward adoption even."

"I know. But how long before she finds that? What if she's unlucky? And why did her mother choose me? Somehow, she trusted me to work things out for her."

"But even if they let you keep her temporarily, she'll need a long-term plan. The court will need that, too."

"I know." A headache was working its way up the back of her neck. "One step at a time. That's all I can manage."

Sarah wrapped an arm around her shoulder. "I know the sheriff well. He's a reasonable man. If we need to, I'll talk to him myself."

Cami hugged her. Somehow, in the last twelve hours, her mom had apparently come over to her side on this issue. But her choices here affected all of them. And right in the middle of a huge upheaval in the workings of the ranch, as well. Was she asking too much to take this on?

Liam walked in the door returning from his chores with the cattle with an eye on the deputy in the yard. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Yes," they all said in a grim chorus.

"Damn." Liam bent near the baby and ran a finger over her silky hair. "I was just getting used to the little munchkin's chaos."

"Yeah, well, we might just have him on the rails," Cami said. "And we outnumber him."

The baby fussed again on her shoulder and began to cry. Sarah pulled a bottle from the fridge and warmed it.

"I would think twice before taking on law enforcement," Liam said. "Even ol' Dominic out there. He may be a rookie, but he's a by-the-book kind of guy."

Lolly's cry suddenly had that newborn desperation to it. "Do you think she's wet?" Cami asked.

"Just changed her," Izzy said. "She's just hungry."

Sarah pulled the bottle out of the warmer and Cami sat down in the overstuffed chair

near the fire to feed her. Almost instantly, she began chugging the formula and calming down. “She’s a good eater. That’s a good sign, isn’t it? I mean, even a baby this small must be a little traumatized without her mama.”

“Maybe she’s too young to know,” Liam said.

“No,” Shay said. “No, she’s not.”

“Yeah, she’s not,” Gus agreed as Eloise tucked herself against Cami’s chair to stare down at the baby eating. “No doubt, she’ll feel the loss for a while. It’ll just take time.”

Cami followed his gaze to his own daughter, who had suffered her own loss at the beginning of her life. Four years without his wife. Four years raising his daughter alone. She had to admire that, not only because he was working full-time as a vet, but that he’d managed to raise such a special little girl as Eloise. Even as her own choices about Lolly loomed before her, it gave her some hope that such a thing was possible. Then again, Eloise was his. Would a court allow a single woman like her to take in a child like Lolly? And did she even want to? Maybe if her hands would stop shaking at the thought of losing her today, she could think rationally about all of it.

All eyes turned to the deputy who walked back in the door, slid off his hat and set an infant car seat down on the kitchen floor. Cami’s heart sank. He meant to take her. Her arms tightened around the baby.

“Well... I spoke with the sheriff,” he said. “And I made your case to him. It’s all fairly uncharted territory for him. One thing about being a small town and all, well, there are some... advantages for this baby. He agrees that special circumstances with the holiday and all, your good family bein’ here to support her, care for her temporarily... he said he’ll wait until after the holiday to bring CPS into the picture and since it’s up in Billings anyway, and you have that note, a few days here or there won’t hurt anything. He says you’re likely correct about availability right now. So... you can keep her here for now, but after the holidays, she’ll be in the hands of the

courts. And he's opening a quiet investigation into finding the birth mother as of today, and when he tracks her down, he means to arrest her for child abandonment."

That pronouncement was met with a thick silence.

And... a Merry Christmas to all...

Cami got to her feet with the baby. "I understand. Thank you, Dom. Really. Thank you so much for everything. We'll take very good care of her. I promise."

He slid his hat back on. "I know you will. Just my personal opinion, but she's better off here, for sure. I just want to make sure it all doesn't come back to bite you folks, legally."

She agreed with that wholeheartedly.

"Here's a car seat for your use until then. Good luck." Dom gave the baby a last look and headed back outside as everyone gave a collective sigh of relief.

There was an air of celebration for a brief moment, but just as quickly they all realized that none of this was settled. Not really.

"We need to find Lolly's mother before they do," Cami said.

"That won't be easy." Sarah took Lolly's little foot between her fingers. "We're outmanned, out resourced, and he's got the courts on his side."

"We'll just need a Christmas miracle. That's all," Cami said.

"After all," Izzy said brightly, "'tis the season of Santa and all those kinds of—"

Cami shook her head warningly, urging her off the topic of Santa entirely.

“Uh... right,” Izzy continued confused. “I-I meant, good cheer. People are full of Christmas spirit and feeling helpful.” She wrinkled her brow curiously at Cami.

“What about using Trey Reyes?” Liam suggested.

“Who?” Gus asked.

“A private investigator friend of Shay and Cooper’s. Maybe he can give us some ideas on where to start in trying to find her.”

It had been Trey who’d helped bring closure to a mystery involving Cooper’s father over a miscarriage of justice. A mystery that had unfortunately, involved their own family, as well.

“Cooper’s just running an errand in town. He’s on his way over,” Shay said. “I’ll ask him. If it comes to that, maybe we will have to call Trey.”

Eloise was hanging by Cami’s side, trying to get a better look at the baby. Cami leaned down to her. “I bet Lolly would love it if someone closer to her size gave her a cuddle. Would you like to hold her?”

“Could I?” Eloise’s eyes widened with surprise.

“Here. Let’s sit you down on the couch and you can hold her for a minute. If that’s okay with your dad.”

Gus grinned with a nod. Once she’d settled Lolly into his daughter’s arms, Gus stood beside Cami looking uncharacteristically emotional. “Ella has always wanted to be a big sister in the worst way. Thanks for letting her hold her. She’s in hog heaven right

now.”

“I’m happy to make her an honorary big sister—at least for as long as we have Lolly.”

“Yeah,” he said. “That’ll have to do.”

She was grateful to him for standing up for her to the deputy, but it was more than that. Somehow it felt like they were in this together, for better or worse.

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But she was probably wrong.

Gus's cell buzzed with a text. "I've got to go. There's an emergency with a foaling mare over at the Canaday's place. Ella? You've gotta come with me."

Sarah reached for Lolly as Ella pleaded. "But can't I stay? Just look at how little her little fingers are."

He shook his head. "These nice people have their hands full, Ella. Do you want to go on a call with me or should I drop you with Luke?"

She looked mournfully at the baby. "I'll go with you."

"She's welcome to stay here for a while," Cami said, not ready for this connection to end.

"I have no idea how long I'll be on this call. No, but thanks anyway. C'mon, Ella. Come help me get Ms. Hardesty's tree out of the truck."

Cami had almost forgotten in all the drama. Gus, Liam, and Ella unloaded the truck and Liam carried it inside.

"Thanks again for helping with our tree," Gus said, turning to her. "It meant a lot to Ella. I've got to run but let me know if there's anything I can do."

"I don't want you to feel obligated to—"

“I don’t. I want to. Look, I know you’ve got a big family to help you, and you and I are practically strangers, but if... there’s anything...”

“Thanks. Thank you. Really.”

He stared at her for a minute, as if he was gauging whether to say more about her choices today.

But instead, he said, “You okay?”

She slapped on a bright smile. “I’m fine.”

“It’s a lot,” he said simply. “Taking this on. It’s a lot.”

That might have been the understatement of the year. “I’m just a little tired today. And a little scared.”

“Rule of thumb? Sleep when she sleeps. Speaking from personal experience here. Or she’ll wear you down to a nub.”

“Sleeping seems... unlikely and, during naps, out of the question with everything that’s happening. But, promise, I’ll give it my best shot.”

“Fair enough.”

A pang of something unfamiliar zinged through her as they pulled down their ranch drive and disappeared. Unfamiliar, and surprising. She was more than intrigued, she was attracted to him. It was strange how finding one tiny baby could shift one’s life in such a dramatic way, bringing a man like Gus into her life in a very unconventional way. Maybe it would come to nothing. But what she knew for sure was that this child, who’d appeared like a gift in this season of gifts, was going to

change both their lives in ways she couldn't yet fathom.

Chapter Five

That night, after a late dinner, Gus sat with Ella listening to her read from a chapter book she'd found at the library. Ella loved reading to him, and he enjoyed this quiet time they almost always managed to share at bedtime. Tonight, she'd had to use her inhaler after dinner when he'd noticed her breathing sounded wrong. The asthma that cropped up now and then, he believed, was stress related. Often, it seemed to be triggered when she got too excited, or nervous, or scared, and seemed rarely triggered by environmental issues like allergies, although they hadn't entirely ruled that out either. The inhaler, combined with some calm time together seemed to help more than anything. He hoped one day, she'd outgrow it, but there were no guarantees.

He leaned his head back against her headboard and closed his eyes, thinking that despite his worry for her, how much he loved this time with her and how fast it was all going.

How much longer would she want him to sit on the bed with her, listening to a story? Was it only weeks, or months away when that wouldn't seem important to her anymore and she'd want her privacy? She was, after all, six going on sixteen, having been raised with nothing but adults around her, moving so often that real friends were only temporary Band-Aids over the loneliness he suspected she felt, where books had become her companions.

Now that she was in first grade—not preschool or even kindergarten anymore—he knew that stability for her was going to become an issue. Maybe it already had become an issue. Maybe he was just trying to ignore what he could hardly bear to look at. Ella was growing up. She had needs, just like he did. And hers were more important than his.

“You’re not listening,” she said, pulling him out of his thoughts.

“Yes, I am.” He jerked a look down at her. “Fezzik is carrying Princess Buttercup up the Cliffs of Insanity.”

She gave him a look. “Three pages ago.”

“Oh. Sorry. I guess I was just thinking...”

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“That Westley was the Dread Pirate Roberts?”

Gus laughed and tickled her, and she shrieked with laughter. “Yes. That’s what I was thinking. And that you’re a lot like Buttercup.”

“I am?” She beamed a smile at him.

“Sure. You’re smart and pretty and adventurous. And someday, some boy named Westley or Brian or Joe is going to fall madly in love with you. Before that, you’ll go away to college and... I’ll miss you. I’ll miss this.” He kissed her on the top of her head.

“I won’t ever leave you, Daddy.” She hugged him tightly.

“Not yet. But someday. And that’s how it’s supposed to be.”

“Then you’d be lonely,” she said, and he could hear a hitch in her voice.

“Nah,” he said. “I’ve got all my animals. All the horses and cattle I take care of. And Luke will be around and—”

“Tell me the story of Mommy again,” she interrupted, making it clear that his brand of gaslighting wasn’t going to work forever. “The one about how you met.”

She’d heard it a hundred times before and he was only now starting to notice that she asked for that story or some other vignette of his old life with Lissa whenever he mentioned loneliness in any form.

“You sure you want to hear that one again?”

She nodded, taking the framed photo of Lissa holding her as a baby off her bedside table to study it.

He leaned his head back against the headboard again. “Okay. The day we met, I was walking across campus on this wide, brick sidewalk that crisscrossed the grassy quad. I was in a big hurry to get to my class because I was late. It was just spring that day and all the trees had started turning green and flowers were blooming everywhere. And up ahead, blocking my way, I saw this big group of people—mostly women—standing on the sidewalk carrying homemade protest signs.”

“What did her sign say?” Ella prodded.

“There were a lot of signs about the movement. The women’s movement. But her sign said, SHENEDEED AHERO, SOSHEBECAMEONE.”

“Why did women need a movement?” Ella asked in all seriousness. This was a new question.

“Sometimes... people need to stand up for the things they believe in. And... women, a lot of women, decided to do just that.”

“Hmm. And then you saw her looking at you,” Ella said, prompting him to go on.

“And then, through this crowd of people that had started to move toward me, I saw her. She was looking right at me and when our eyes met—your mom had the prettiest golden-brown eyes—I suddenly forgot where I was going. About my class and the test I was about to miss. Everything. I nearly got trampled by the protesters as they walked past me. But when she finally reached me, she stopped and said, ‘Hey. Don’t I know you?’”

“And you said, maybe?” Eloise loved to recount this part.

“Right. Even though I knew we’d never met. I told her. ‘My name is Gus.’ And she said, ‘I’m Lissa.’ And she just smiled at me—with a smile just like yours—and she asked if I wanted to join her. And of course, I said yes. How could I not? And, from that moment on, we were together.”

Ella snuggled against his chest. “And you loved her.”

“I loved her,” he said quietly. “And she loved you.”

“And you miss her? Like I miss her?”

“Yes, I do. I do miss her. She misses us, too, I think.” This conversation, they’d also had many times. About how Lissa was watching over Ella, but she was never going to be able to come back to them the way they both wished she could.

It had taken him almost two years just to accept her death himself. He’d quit the practice he’d become a partner in, packed up their lives and fell into this itinerant fill-in practice routine that had eventually brought them here, to Marietta, to fill in for Dr. Anders.

“Daddy,” Ella said after a long pause. “Do you think Mommy would mind very much if you loved someone else?”

Gus turned to stare at her. “What do you mean?”

“So that you wouldn’t be lonely?”

His heart caught. “Do you think I’m lonely?”

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She tossed him an I-may-be-only-six-but-seriously look.

“Kiddo,” he said, getting to his feet and tucking her in. He took the book and carefully closed it. “How can I be lonely? I’ve got you and Luke and my work. And that’s plenty for me. I think it’s time for sleep. You’ve got Sunday school in the morning.”

“I think Ms. Hardesty is nice,” Ella said with a sigh, snuggling down in the covers. “Don’t you?”

Cami’s face flickered through his thoughts as it had often in the last twenty-four hours, causing his gut to tighten. “Sure. Yes. She’s... very nice.”

“I think so, too.” She yawned broadly. “I don’t think Mommy would mind too much if you loved her. And then maybe Lolly could be my very own sister.”

Gus flicked off her light. This child... “G’ night, Ella.”

He could hear the smile in her voice as she said, “G’ night, Daddy.”

Downstairs, Luke sat on the overstuffed chair in the living room, picking out a soft song on his guitar. With his head bent over the instrument, he stopped intermittently to scribble something in the notebook beside him, then repeated the chords.

Gus had heard this particular song for the better part of a week now and he had to admit, he liked it. There were no lyrics yet, but the melody was good. Not that he knew the first thing about music.

“She all set?” Luke asked him, gesturing with a look at the second floor and Ella.

“She wanted to talk about Lissa tonight,” he said, walking to the fridge and opening a beer.

Luke nodded, plucking a few more chords. “You know, she likes it here. I think she’s feeling a little anxious about leaving again. Leaving this place, I mean.”

He tossed a beer to his brother as well.

Luke caught it and cracked it open. “Frankly,” he said, “I can’t say I blame her.”

Taking a long gulp of beer, Gus knew that some kind of ending was coming between them. It had been coming for a long time. But leaving Luke behind in Marietta was the last thing he’d expected when he’d taken this job.

He sat down opposite Luke, silent for a long minute. “What are you saying, exactly?”

“I’m not saying anything... exactly. Just that this is a good place to put down roots. For you and for me and Ella.”

“Dr. Anders is planning to be back at work sometime after the first of the year. My job here will be done. There isn’t room for two large animal vets here. And, I haven’t mentioned it, but I’ve already got a line on a new job in Denver.”

“Denver?”

“Clarissa contacted me a couple of days ago. There’s apparently an extended pregnancy leave for one of the vets in a highly regarded practice there. Large animal practice.”

Clarissa Modar was his agent of sorts, a headhunter for traveling docs and vets. She'd kept him gainfully employed for the past couple of years.

"Gus," Luke said, setting his guitar aside. "That little Jyn-gerbread up there isn't getting any younger. She's wanting friends, ballet lessons, a home—"

"I know," he said, cutting Luke off. "I know that. Maybe... Denver."

"It won't be Denver. Or Albuquerque or Tucson either. Lissa's not at the end of this road, Gus. Not for a long, long time anyway. And Ella... you know she'll go anywhere with you. Until she's eighteen, she will yank up her roots every six months or so and follow you. But every time you move, she starts over. From scratch. That's hard on a kid. You and I both know that."

"You're not telling me anything I don't know. Unless you're saying you want to stay here. Without us."

Luke bent over the guitar again. "Sooner or later. You know I don't want to, but where's the end point? When do you stop? I've been happy to help you and Ella. To be your support. I've needed you as much as you need me. I admit it. Finding you after all those years apart was the best thing that... well, you know."

He did. And the feeling was mutual. Luke was eight years younger than him, and they'd been separated as young boys when their parents had died in a plane crash returning from a business trip. Gus had been taken in by his mother's aunt, who didn't feel equipped to care for a boy as young as Luke. He had disappeared into the foster care system, only to be shuffled around for most of his life between homes. When Gus turned eighteen, he'd begun searching for Luke. A couple of years later, after he'd met and married Lissa, his long search for Luke ended and they were finally reunited. They'd taken Luke in when he was still a teenager and given him a home. And Luke had been there when Lissa died.

There was no other family for either of them. He and Ella had become Luke's family and Luke, theirs. But Gus knew his brother needed to make his own life. And that depending on him to be Ella's other caregiver wasn't fair to him. Especially with their itinerant lifestyle. He knew Luke was right about Ella and Luke was right about him, too. Running from all those things he'd left behind was doing none of them any good. He would talk to Clarissa about the possibility of a more permanent position in Denver when he finished with the next job. Maybe they could find a place to stay put.

He thought of Cami then, and of Ella's words earlier. I don't think Mommy would mind too much if you loved her.

If he loved her? He'd only just met her. On the other hand, Ella had been talking about Ms. Hardesty since the school year began, even though she wasn't her teacher. How Cami would sometimes sit with her or others at lunch when they were alone. And how she'd stop boys like Harrison Deitmore from being mean to her or others when she was nearby.

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The fact that he felt like he'd known her for much longer than a few days already, was a little disorienting. But it wouldn't go any further than that. It couldn't. He wouldn't be here long enough.

An excuse that Luke might rightly claim was less a reason and more a deliberate plan.

Chapter Six

Cami had spent the rest of Saturday gathering up all the things she'd need to take care of this baby, at least for the time being—diapers, bassinette, onesies and warm outerwear. Her favorite was the baby wrap that she tied around her that held the baby close, which seemed to stop Lolly's fussing whenever she was upset.

She'd spent the last twenty-four hours secretly admiring new mothers everywhere who carried on with little or no sleep with a baby this small. But still, in the middle of the night, as Lolly stared up at her with her big, blue eyes, connecting with her in a way no other human being ever had before—as if saying *I trust you*, she knew letting this child go would be hard. She did not belong to Cami. Somewhere, Lolly's mother was probably thinking about her right now. Wishing she was in her arms instead of Cami's. At least, that was what Cami hoped.

Honestly, anything was possible, but the note she'd left behind had colored any judgment Cami had about what Lolly's mother had done. Not that it was right. But having been a teacher for years now, she could say unequivocally, that life was not fair, and things happened in people's lives that didn't make sense. She'd had students who had lost parents, who'd gotten cancer, and other worse things. So, whatever had happened to Lolly's mother, Cami was withholding judgment until she knew for sure

what her reasons were for doing what she did. Maybe she'd never know. And if that happened, at the very least, she'd make sure that Lolly had the best life possible. With her or without her.

While she was in town with Lolly strapped to her chest, she walked into several stores that she knew did engraving. There was an outside chance she'd be able to find the engraver for Lolly's bracelet, but she had to try. She came up empty in the first two stores and headed to the last one, feeling less than hopeful.

A bell jangled above the door of the gift shop as she walked in. They sold all kinds of touristy gifts and trinkets, a whole shelf of Marietta, Montana, baseball caps in a rainbow of colors, mugs and a separate section for finer gifts like crystal paperweights and jewelry. It always smelled amazing in this shop with all the candles and soaps they sold. But today, it smelled like Christmas and the shop was full of holiday trimmings.

Cami knew the young raven-haired woman behind the counter, who smiled at her as she walked in.

"Ms. Hardesty! How are you?" Avery Blakely was a student she'd tutored one summer in college essay writing, something Cami did as a side-gig when school was out.

"Avery! So glad to see you! I thought you were away at college."

"Oh, I am. I'm up at UM, but it's winter break, so I'm helping in my mom's store." Her eyes widened as she took in the baby strapped to Cami's chest. "Oh, wow! I didn't realize you had a baby."

Cami blushed. "She's... she's not mine. I'm... taking care of her for a friend who had to go out of town. Emergency."

Avery peeked at Lolly, who was fast asleep. “What a little doll! How old is she?”

“Uh... two weeks. She’s pretty new.”

Lizzy looked impressed. “She’s so little to be without her mom.”

“It was... unavoidable.” Cami cradled Lolly against her. “Listen, Avery, I was wondering if you could help me. I found this bracelet the other day with a name engraved on it. Obviously, someone lost it and I’d like to get it back to them. I thought, maybe there’s an off chance it was engraved here in Marietta? Maybe here in your store? And that you might remember or have a record of it?” She handed Lolly’s silver bracelet to Avery, who turned it over in her hands.

“It could have been done here. We do have this particular font on our engraving machine, but I’d have to ask my mom. If it was done here, she would have done it. I just got back a couple of nights ago from school.”

“Is she here? Can I speak with her?”

“She’s in the back. Let me get her.” She disappeared into the back room and Cami browsed the store, looking at the jewelry in particular. There was no ID bracelet that looked like Lolly’s and her optimism faded.

Avery’s mom, Hannah Blakely, was smiling as she appeared from the back room. “Cami! How lovely to see you. Avery said you wanted to speak with—” Surprise flattened her smile. “Oh! And who’s this sweet thing? I had no idea...”

“No, no. It’s not what you think.” And Cami explained it all again, along with her quest about the bracelet. Hannah turned the silver thing over in her hands.

“You know, I do remember this bracelet. It wasn’t ours. But the young woman who

brought it in just last week said it was an heirloom she wanted engraved and asked if we could do that.” She turned it over and held it out to show Cami. “See? I remember this small, engraved heart on the back. It was already there.”

Cami’s pulse thrummed in her ears. “So, how old was this young woman, would you say?”

“Oh, under twenty, I’d think. At any rate, she had a baby, too, and she looked too young to have a baby. I suppose that’s judgmental of me to say but—”

Tightening her arms protectively around the baby strapped to her chest, Cami silently agreed.

Avery leaned in. “Anything under twenty-five is definitely too young if you ask me. Though, granted, no one was asking... but I have a couple of friends whose lives got derailed by pregnancy in high school.”

Hannah patted her daughter’s hand. “I’m speaking as a mother, of course. I don’t know. There was just something about this girl. Something... lonely, I guess?”

Lonely. Yes. She must have been so, so lonely. Cami hadn’t really expected to get any answers so quickly in her search. “I don’t suppose you have a record of who she was? This girl who brought this bracelet in? On the off chance I can figure out who she is... I’m just trying to track down the owner so I can return this to her. I’m sure she must be missing it.”

“I... believe she paid in cash. She told me it was a rush and wanted to wait for it. And she did. So, no, I wouldn’t have her name. That’s probably not going to help you find her then. But I might have the receipt here.”

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As she began going through back receipts, adrenaline kicked up Cami's heartbeat. It had to be her. Maybe at least she could get a description of Lolly's mother. Hannah pulled out the receipt and nodded. "Just as I said. She paid in cash. I'm sorry."

"Can you remember what she looked like?"

Hannah glanced at her daughter. "Well. She was a small thing, not more than five two. And she had blonde hair, but I'm not sure it was natural. There was some pink at the ends. But what I remember about her most is her eyes. How sad they were. Blue. Nearly turquoise. Does that help at all?"

"So much," Cami said. "Thank you. I really hope I can find her to return this bracelet. I have a feeling it must have been very precious to her. If she should return, looking for it, will you please tell her to contact me?"

"I sure will," Hannah said. "Say hi to your mama for me, will you? Tell her to stop in and I'll take her to coffee."

"I will."

Cami headed out of the store and the little bell over the door jangled again.

Outside, she stood there for a moment, unsure what to do next. So, she just started walking. Past the Christmasy window displays in the shops, past shoppers loaded down with bags. With less than two weeks left before Christmas the shopping frenzy, both here and in not-so-close Billings would reach a fever pitch and if she didn't get her shopping done soon, there'd be little for her to choose from for her family gifts.

Not to mention a wedding gift for Will and Izzy who were marrying out at the ranch soon. She'd hardly had time to even think of what to give them.

But her thoughts kept returning to Lolly's mother, putting a rush on the engraving of her bracelet. Clearly, she had thought this whole thing through. It hadn't been an impulsive move to leave her on that church pew beside Cami's things. She intended to keep her identity secret, but did she also mean to disappear from Marietta? Where was she now?

As she passed people on the street, it wasn't lost on her that any of the young women who looked passingly like her description could be Lolly's mother and she assessed each one for a random look or telling eye contact. But it was she who was the weirdo staring at people. No one seemed the least bit interested in her.

She passed a man in a Santa costume, ringing a bell for the Salvation Army bucket and she pulled out a five-dollar bill and stuffed it in the red grate and started to walk away.

"Bless you, ma'am," the man in the Santa suit said. "Hope you find what you're looking for."

That stopped her and she turned back to him. He had a gaunt face, under that Santa beard, but kind. He looked too young to play Santa. He was probably in his twenties. "How did you know I was looking for something?"

He shrugged with a smile. "Isn't everybody?"

"I suppose. I've seen you here before haven't I?"

He tugged his Santa cap lower. "I'm here this corner most days of this holiday season."

“I am looking for someone, actually. You wouldn’t have—in your time here—happened to see a young woman about”—she drew her hand just under her chin—“this tall, blonde hair with maybe pink ends? Maybe with a baby or recently pregnant?”

He rubbed his bearded chin. “You must mean Tara.”

Tara?“Youknowher?”

“Don’t reallyknowher. Small town, you know? I’ve seen her around though. Spoke to her a couple of times. I haven’t seen her in a while. Why?”

“I—just need to find her. I have something she lost. Do you know her last name?”

He shook his head. “No. Just Tara. Sorry.” He rang the bell again as another couple walked by and dropped some coins into his bucket. “Bless you,” he called after them. “And Merry Christmas!”

She pulled a card from her purse and handed it to him. “If you see her again, or hear anything, would you call me?”

He studied the card. “Must be something pretty special she lost, huh?”

“Very special, yes. I’m Cami. And your name is—?”

“Coby. Coby Strickland. Yeah. I can ask around but can’t promise anything.”

“Thanks, Coby. I appreciate anything you can do.”

She left him behind as she walked down the street, barely able to contain her excitement, she impulsively dialed Gus’s number on her cell. He picked up on the

second ring.

“You’re not in the middle of birthing a calf, are you?” she asked walking toward the intersection of Main and First Street.

“Uh, not at the moment, no,” he said, and she thought there might be a smile in his voice.

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“Good. You know that goose chase we were trying to talk ourselves out of taking?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, I kind of caught one.”

“A goose?”

“No! Lolly’s mom. I know her name. And kind of what she looks like.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“Her name is Tara and she’s a petite blonde teenager with pink tipped hair.”

“Wow. How in the world did you—Hey. Where are you right now?”

Surprised, she glanced at the intersection. “In town. Standing near the Graff Hotel.”

“Turn around.”

“Excuse me?”

“Turn around,” he repeated.

She did and saw him walking toward her, alone, with his cell phone at his ear. He was wearing a sexy camel-colored overcoat that came down to his mid-thigh, a scarf around his neck and a beanie that nearly covered those heartbreaker eyes of his. He

was smiling at her. Her heart did that little fluttering thing in her chest at the sight of him.

“Hey!” she said into her phone.

“Hey, yourself,” he answered in her ear, still about twenty feet away. “Fancy meeting you here on a Sunday morning.”

“I was about to say the same thing.”

“You’re not in church?”

“Um. Nope. Neither are you.”

“Yeah. Not my thing,” he said, lowering his phone and shutting it off as he reached her. “But I dropped Ella off for Sunday school. She likes it.”

“Ah. I’m playing hooky, trying to get a bead on Lolly’s mother. Priorities.” She shrugged. “I’ll probably hear about it, considering I’m directing the Christmas pageant, huh?”

“Somehow, I’m not worried about you.”

His words warmed her. “I’ll take that as a compliment. I think.”

“As it was meant.”

His cheeks were ruddy with the cold, and he looked sexy as hell in his dark blue denims and square-toed cowboy boots. She wondered how long he’d been walking around Marietta waiting for church to let out? Her next thought caught her off guard.

I think I like him.

“If I’m not pulling you away from something important, want to get a coffee?” he said. “I have a few minutes before I have to go back for Ella. And it’s cold out here.”

“I’d love to. Honestly, I might be wandering aimlessly, trying to think of my next move in the Lolly saga. But I’m game for coffee if you are.”

That deep dimple reappeared in his cheek. “How’s Lolly doing today?”

She cradled the baby’s head and bottom in her baby sling. She was bundled up in a little snowsuit she’d bought her under the sling. “She’s the best thing. She hardly ever cries. Unless it’s two a.m. Or four a.m. Or five. I think she’s asleep now. This sling seems to soothe her.”

“Sorry. C’mon. Sounds like you could use some caffeine.”

“Oh, how right you are.”

They ended up at the Java Café, sitting at the bar by the front window, nursing a couple of cappuccinos. The café wasn’t crowded yet. That would happen later when church let out. But the barista behind the counter was busy on her phone and not paying attention to them at all.

“So, tell me what you learned about Lolly’s mom.”

She described the details she’d learned from Hannah and from the man at the Salvation Army bucket. “The downside is, neither of them seemed to actually know her or has seen her around lately. Or could even point me in a direction to begin looking. But if they had encounters with her, others must have as well.”

“You say she’s a teenager? That’s a place to start. That means she must have been in school somewhere at some point, probably here. And possibly saw a doctor during her pregnancy or delivery? There can’t be that many teenaged girls with the name Tara, I would guess.”

“If,” Cami said, “she was actually from here. But if not, how would she know me? If she’s somewhere between sixteen and eighteen, she’d be too old to have been a student in my third-grade classes. I haven’t been teaching for that long. And besides, I don’t recall a student with her name. Ever.”

“Fair enough. But if she attended school here, there must be a record.”

“Ryan has a yearbook. Maybe I can find her in there. Maybe we can circle in on a last

name, maybe even find an address for her from the school.”

“What if,” he said, “she doesn’t want to be found? My guess is, there are... extenuating circumstances with her family.”

She nodded. “Like no support. Clearly that must be or—”

“None of this would have happened.”

“Right. So, we’ll have to be careful.”

He grinned at her use of the word and took a long sip of his cappuccino.

Cami grimaced. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to include you in all this drama.”

“I’m kind of flattered that you would.”

She considered him for a long moment with surprise. “You are?”

He turned to look out the window. “Aside from pulling calves and inoculating every four-legged ranch animal within in a thirty-mile radius of this town, I’ve been pretty single-mindedly focused on keeping my head down and taking care of Ella. I actually welcome the distraction.”

A flicker of disappointment wafted through her, though she could hardly say why. Maybe she’d hoped for something more personal than being a mere distraction from his job? But who was she to quibble? She took a gulp of coffee.

He rubbed his forehead. “Yeah, that... that didn’t come out exactly as it had sounded in my head,” he said, looking apologetic. “Wh-what I meant to say was... uh—” He broke off, looking lost.

She raised her eyebrows in anticipation.

“I meant to say that it’s been a long time,” he continued, “since I simply shared a coffee with a woman who wasn’t paying me to treat her colicky horse or diagnose her steer’s gimpy leg. It’s mostly me, lying covered in muck on a half-frozen field, trying to make sure Ella gets picked up from school on time. This is more than a distraction. I... enjoy your company.”

Touched, she felt her cheeks go hot. “You, Dr. Claymore,” she said with a chuckle, “need to get out more. But I’m happy to fill that apparent void in your life this morning, if only to introduce a little Hardesty chaos into it.”

He looked relieved that she’d teased him about it. “Chaos, particularly Hardesty chaos, is always welcome.”

Lolly began to fuss, and she stood and rocked her. “I think she’s hungry and I should be getting back anyway. But I think we’re going to decorate that tree we bought yesterday and a couple others, if you and Ella would like to come and help. Luke is welcome, too, of course. Which comes, by the way, with an invitation to stay for the big family dinner tradition that follows. My mom is already smoking a big roast in the smoker. And I think there will be cookies.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to intrude on a family—”

“No intrusion. I mean, welcome to the chaos. I’m fairly certain you and Ella and Luke will not be the only non-Hardestys there, as it’s also a tradition to bring friends.”

“How can I refuse an offer like that?”

“You cannot. See you all around four?”

“Thanks. Yes. See you then.”

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Gus and Ella left the church, with Ella bundled against the cold, holding his hand. Ella looked thoughtful as they walked toward his truck. He tried to strike up a conversation about how Sunday school had gone, but finally she changed the subject.

“One of the boys in my Sunday school class said that there’s a Santa Claus at the Graff Hotel. And he’s giving out candy canes if you tell him what you want for Christmas.”

“I can buy us some candy canes, if you want one,” he said, watching the traffic move across the intersection. Once church let out, the streets of Marietta got crowded at this time of year with shoppers and folks out for lunch.

“Riley Garfield said her parents are taking her there after church, to see Santa,” Ella went on. “She’s my friend.”

He glanced down at her. “You didn’t tell her, did you?”

“That she’s my friend?”

He squeezed her hand affectionately. “No. About Santa, I mean.”

“No!” Ella sounded offended at the suggestion. “But... she said her brothers told her that already. She doesn’t believe it.”

“Ah.”

“I said neither do I.” At Gus’s look, she said, “What? I didn’t want her to feel bad.

And we're friends."

"Okay. That was kind of you."

"And I said I'd ask you if we can go there to the Graff, too."

"To... see Santa?"

"Well, yes," she said, "I'd have to pretend. But at least I'll get a candy cane. And we can make a play date with her mom?"

"We can do that."

"Now?"

"Sure. Let's go."

Gus couldn't help but think of his conversation with Luke the other night, about Ella craving roots. Friends. Stability. He knew Luke was right. If she had to pretend to believe in Santa to fit it, then he was for it. And free candy canes aside, meeting new parents to set a play date with a new friend was a good start.

The line was already forming inside the Graff Hotel's lobby where a large throne had been set up surrounded by Christmas decorations to house Santa. A woman dressed up in an elf costume was taking photos and there was a buzz of excitement coming from the children waiting in line.

He had to admit the old guy sitting on the Santa throne was pretty authentic-looking, with a real white beard and a little extra girth beneath his red-velvet costume. And when he laughed along with a kid on his lap, his laugh did sound pretty genuine. Not at all the ho-ho-ho-most of them attempted. At least the Graff had put out some effort

not to hire some kid with a synthetic beard that looked more like teddy bear stuffing than hair.

Ella ran up beside her friend, Riley, and the two were immediately thick as thieves, whispering together and giggling.

“You must be Eloise’s father,” said a woman nearby, who saw him smiling at the girls. She was young, maybe late twenties with long, blonde hair and a bright smile. He thought he’d seen her before, probably at church alongside the man near her, who smiled at him, too. “I’m Carrie Garfield, and this is my husband, Derek.”

Gus reached out his hand. “Yeah. I’m Gus Claymore. Eloise is my daughter.”

“Riley’s been talking about Eloise for weeks now, begging to get together, but we never seemed to run into you.”

At church, she meant. “Ella made a point of wanting to come here so I could meet you today. She’s anxious for a play date with Riley.”

The line had moved up and Riley was next to talk to Santa.

“We absolutely would love to have Eloise over. Derek, can you give Gus our phone number so we can set it up? If you’ll excuse me for a minute, I’m going to go watch Riley commune with Santa. I really have no idea of her six-year-old heart’s desire. And who knows?” she added ruefully. “This could be our last year of believing.”

“Kids these days,” Derek said, watching his wife go. “They’re a lot more cynical than they used to be, right?”

“I guess so.” He didn’t want to get into an ideological discussion with Derek.

“No, but it’s kind of nice when they’re little like our girls and still believe, isn’t it? It doesn’t last long enough. That’s for sure.”

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“That’s true.” As Riley confided her Christmas list to Santa and the elf snapped her photo, Ella seemed charmed by the whole thing and stood with her hands clasped under her chin, waiting for her turn. Was she actually going to sit on the old guy’s lap for the sake of her friend?

Being a single dad with a kid like Eloise was a real balancing act. Starting back with her mom’s loss, he’d always tried to be honest with her and knew she counted on that. That had brought them closer, he believed. So, when it came to the truth about Santa, it had seemed like an easy call. The truth seemed easier than the lie. But if Lissa was still here, he knew things would be... different.

Derek and Carrie Garfield snapped copious photos of their daughter who gladly accepted the candy cane from the old man in the chair. But it wasn’t until it was Eloise’s turn that she turned and met his eye. She wasn’t asking permission, exactly. But maybe simply his complicity as she approached Santa. Gus moved closer trying to hear their conversation. He might need some help in the present department.

“Well, now, I seem to remember you,” Santa told her. “But it’s been quite a year for you, hasn’t it? Did you like the books I brought you last year?”

Ella’s expression flattened. “You didn’t. I already know.”

“What is it you think you know?” he asked patiently.

She leaned close to Santa and whispered something in his ear. Surprise crossed the old man’s expression. Then a smile.

“That’s all right,” he said, quietly. “A lot of people think that. But you see, I don’t need you to believe in me. Just in the idea of me. Because I know who I am. And I’m as real as you are. Now. Why don’t you tell me what you really want this Christmas?”

She shrugged her shoulders and glanced back at Gus. “I just came for the candy cane,” she whispered, “and ’cause Riley still believes in you.”

“I see.” He pulled one out of his bag. “But as long as you’re here”—he held it out to her and her fingers closed around the plastic wrapped mini-sweet—“you might as well tell me what it is you really, really want, Eloise. And I’m guessing it’s not a skateboard, or a doll, or even a Barbie dream house, is it?”

Now, her eyes widened as she shook her head. “But how did you know my nam—”

“It’s a big request, instead, isn’t it? And you think I can’t do it.”

Ella nodded slowly. “I know you can’t.”

Gus watched the other children in line fidgeting for their turns. What was she talking about?

The bearded old man leaned closer to her. “You can whisper it if you like. We’ll keep it between us.”

She heaved a heavy sigh before leaning close to Santa and whispering something else in his ear.

A wry smile grew on the old man’s face. “Ah. Now. That’s a big wish, my dear. But I’ll see what I can do. You just keep the faith. That’s all I ask. I might just surprise you.”

She nodded a quiet goodbye to him, too shy to say it aloud.

“See you soon,” he promised.

Clutching her candy cane, Ella hurried away from the old man in red and ran to Gus’s side.

“What was that about?” Gus asked. “I thought you didn’t believe in Santa Claus.”

“I don’t.” But she was watching, with a strange look on her face, as the other children climbed happily onto Santa’s lap to tell him all their Christmas wishes.

“What did he say to you?” Gus asked as they walked away.

“He said...” she began. “Oh, never mind.”

He glanced back at the man on the Santa throne who was watching him as well and the old man winked at him as a little boy tugged at his very real beard.

Chapter Seven

Gus, Eloise, and Luke stood in the cold at the Hardesty’s front door holding bottles of wine and a basket full of hot chocolate and marshmallows. His heart skipped a little beat at the sight of her as she opened the door, looking just as pretty as she had in his mind.

“You’re just in time!” she said, welcoming them into the warmth of the house. “Please, come inside. It’s freezing out there!”

She air-kissed Gus on both cheeks in welcome and did the same to Luke who grinned widely.

“It was real nice of you to invite me.Us.” Luke’s gaze scoured the high-ceilinged room with its rough-hewn beams and the fire crackling in the fireplace. There was Christmas music playing, and he seemed to inhale the fragrance of what Sarah had cooking in the oven. “I do a lot of cooking, but nothing I make smells that good.”

“Roast. Mashed potatoes, gravy—”

Luke grinned at Gus, taking in the Christmas decorations and the two noble fir trees that were already up in the high-ceilinged great room, awaiting decorations and Luke leaned down to Ella. “Now this is how Christmas is done, Jyn-gerbread.”

“Oh, we’re only halfway done,” Cami told him. “We haven’t even gotten to the lights outside yet.”

Eloise looked excited and shy at once. “Where’s Lolly?”

“She’s right over there, overseeing all the fun.” Cami showed her the little bouncy seat that Lolly was sitting in, watching the roomful of people in fascination. Her little fists were in the air as Ella leaned down and slipped her fingers around Lolly’s. It was probably just gas, Gus thought, but it seemed like the baby actually smiled at Eloise.

Sarah and Eloise soon went to work completing the popcorn string Sarah had been working on all afternoon while the rest of them spread out with ornaments and lights.

They worked as teams, hanging ornaments on the two trees that bracketed the crackling fireplace. Though he and Ella had gotten Christmas trees over the years, most of them were countertop versions or smallish trees that fit into their current living situation. Most often it was an apartment.

But this... this warm, cozy home, filled with the sights and smells of Christmas, filled with family and laughter—this was something almost foreign to him now. Surely foreign to Luke as well, since his growing up never included family at all. Not until

Lissa.

Shay and her boyfriend, Cooper Lane, and Shay's son, Ryan, were all part of the decorating crew. Cooper's father, Ray Lane was clearly there with Sarah, who made no secret of her feelings for him whenever he passed her—never without a look or the brush of a hand. Gus had met Ray several times this fall when Ray and Cooper were staying out at the Hard Eight. Ray had finished a round of cancer treatment recently and was looking good and healthy. But Gus suspected his good health had a lot to do with Sarah and this family.

Liam's oldest brother, Will was up on a ladder adding tree toppers while his fiancée, Izzy, was in the kitchen, taking something that smelled suspiciously like gingerbread out of the oven. He'd met Will and Izzy here on the ranch a few months ago while treating one of the Hard Eight's ranch horses, and they'd invited him, Luke, and Eloise to their upcoming nuptials here on the ranch. He liked Will a lot and several times, he, Liam and Will had bonded over beers at the Graff Hotel bar.

As he settled into the decorating, he couldn't help but think how the Hardestys were all so different from one another. He and Liam had become friends after he'd delivered a difficult calf alive from one of their cows who was on the brink of losing both the calf and her life. The way Liam talked about his family—Cami in particular—reminded him that he'd always wondered what a big family like this one would be like. A family where there was laughter and opinions and forgiveness. He was the closest Luke had ever come to family and the thought of losing him to geography made his chest ache.

As the tree filled with ornaments, Cami handed Eloise a box filled with candy canes once she and Sarah had finished the last of the popcorn strings. "It's a tradition to put these on the tree, but I won't tell if you eat one while you're decorating."

"Just one," Gus warned with a smile.

As he and Cami watched Ella warm to the task of hanging candy canes on the trees, Lolly started to cry. Immediately, Cami, Sarah, and Liam surrounded the baby bouncer, arguing about who would get to pick her up. Cami won, and cuddled Lolly against her shoulder.

“Lolly has stumbled upon an embarrassment of riches here in the parenting department,” Cami said to Gus, “with everyone wanting to love on her. I hope that helps a little, considering what she’s lost.”

Gus nodded. “Must be why her mother chose you. She must have known you and your family would take good care of her.”

“Do you want to hold her?”

“Oh,” he said, “No, I don’t have to—”

“C’mon. You know you want to.” She held the baby out to him.

Gus reached for her and pulled her up against his shoulder like the pro he was, rocking his hips and rubbing her little back.

He sent Cami a little smile. “I almost forgot how good this feels.”

“You are a natural, Dr. Claymore.”

He inhaled Lolly’s sweet baby scent. “You never think you’ll miss all the late nights when you walked like this for hours with them, but...”

Cami held Lolly’s little foot. “I can imagine you kind of do.”

“Yeah. It goes by quick.”

“I guess,” Cami said, “it has to, or parents would expire of sleep deprivation.”

“You do look a little tired. Are you getting any sleep at all?”

“Some. I am tired, but she’s worth it. She’s such a good baby. I can’t imagine how hard it must have been to part with her. Speaking of which, look what I found.” She walked over to the coffee table where one of Ryan’s high-school yearbooks lay. She opened the page she had marked and pointed to a photo of a pretty young girl with long, blonde hair who looked for all the world, like Lolly. The name beside the photo read TARAHOWARD.

“Wow.” Gus stared at the photo. “You found her. Do you know her?”

Cami shook her head. “Not at all. She was never my student, that’s for sure. But I started thinking, what if she had a younger sibling who had me as a teacher? The name though isn’t familiar. I went back through my old class rosters and couldn’t find a Howard in any of them. I may be trying to walk down the wrong road.”

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“You said you did some tutoring. Any of those students you remember?”

“No. I went through those, too. Maybe she just randomly chose me because I was directing the pageant?”

Liam leaned in. “And she thought, Oh there’s a kind, overcommitted, overachiever who can’t say no. Surely she’ll take the baby,” he teased. “She kind of nailed you there, li’l sis.”

Cami burned a look at him, but Shay said, “He isn’t wrong.”

“Stop you two,” Sarah scolded, shaking her head.

Izzy, who was standing nearby, overheard their conversation. “What if the birth mother goes by a different last name than a younger sibling, who actually knew you? What if Lolly’s mom is a stepsibling or she’s even married?”

“What if—” Luke said as he passed by with a glass blown angel in his hands “She was in the system?”

“What system?” Cooper asked, joining in the conversation.

“The foster care system,” Luke answered. “Kids don’t take on their foster parents’ names. They keep their own. Often, it’s their only real possession, unless they’re adopted.”

Cami blinked. “I hadn’t thought of that. If she was a foster child...”

“Did you have any foster kids in your classes?” Gus asked as Shay held her arms out for the baby.

He handed her over.

“I don’t think so. I feel like I’d remember that.”

“Just from my work in the Dallas courts, I know that kids aging out of the foster care system tend to have a high percentage of unplanned pregnancies. And only a small percent ever make it to college.”

“Makes sense,” Shay said quietly.

Gus glanced at her son, Ryan, who was distracted by his earbuds as he decorated the tree. Ryan had been unplanned, according to Liam, but very wanted nevertheless by Shay. And now that Cooper and Shay were together, it would surprise no one if he actually adopted Ryan.

Sarah paused hanging the popcorn string. “Cami, didn’t you have one of the Simon girls in your class? A couple of years ago? She was having some trouble as I recall.”

“Yes, Adriana Simon. Of course, she was one of my students a few years ago. She was a darling girl. I tutored her in reading. She had a lot of issues in the group setting. Stomach aches. Anxiety. Why do you ask about her?”

“I remember you spent a lot of extra time with her. After school hours, helping her with reading. She adored you. I remember that gift she gave you at the end of the year. That beautiful origami flower she made for you.”

Cami smiled. “I still have that flower.”

“Since the closest child services department is up in Billings, there aren’t too many foster families here in Marietta. But the Simons foster,” Sarah said. “Adriana is their natural daughter along with several others, but I have heard they’ve also had quite a few foster children in their home over the years. What if this girl Tara was one of them?”

Gus met Cami’s look. It couldn’t be that easy, could it? Could Tara have been one of the Simons’s foster children? Tara might have known about Cami through Adriana.

“We’re probably grasping at straws here,” Shay said, rocking the baby as Cooper ran a hand over the baby’s head as she bobbed in Shay’s arms.

“But that was a few years ago,” Cami said. “Adriana must be in middle school by now, with Ryan. Ryan?Ryan?”

He pulled his earbuds out. “What?”

“Do you know Adriana Simons?”

“I did. They moved away,” he said, hanging a bulb on a high branch. “Last year, I think. I heard her father got a job up in Missoula. At the university.”

“You don’t happen to know if she had an older foster sister named Tara?”

He shrugged and shook his head, slipping his earbuds back in.

Gus met Cami’s look of frustration. One step forward and two back. “We don’t even know that she was related to them. At all. But at least it’s somewhere to start. If they did foster her, maybe they know where she is.”

She nodded. “Or why she was here. Alone.”

“Do you think they ever adopted her? The Simons?”

“No idea,” Cami said, “but if not, she must have been close to aging out of the system. I’ll try to track them down tomorrow. Obviously, figuring this out isn’t going to be a straight line. But enough about Tara. I’m sorry for sidelining our decorating! Please. Let’s just enjoy the evening and get these trees done!”

“Good,” Sarah said. “Dinner’s almost ready. Oh, that tree is looking so beautiful.”

Indeed, Gus thought, many hands made quick work of tree trimming. One tree had all the popcorn strings and family ornaments on it, one with relics of Hardesty Christmases past and the other was a collection of hand-blown glass animals, in all different shapes and sizes, representing the ranch and everything on it. There were cattle and horses, chickens and goats, cats, dogs, and even rabbits. All interspersed with delicate ribbon that glistened in the white LED lights.

Eloise was in heaven, finishing up hanging her candy canes as the puppies followed her around the trees, occasionally knocking ornaments off with their wagging tails. She would brush their faces with a gentle pet before rehanging the ornament and then gently lecture them about their miscreant tails.

He’d thought about getting her a dog as a companion for years and had put it off because of their constant traveling. But dogs were technically as portable as children, and he’d put it off for long enough. This Christmas was as good a time as any to find a pup for her. And Lissa would approve. Dog lover that she was, she’d always

planned on having a few dogs to raise alongside what should have been their big family. Now, down to just the two of them. Three if he counted Luke.

The older she got the more Ella looked like her mother. Only recently had that hot, quick sting when he noticed stopped happening. In fact, he was grateful now that so much of her mama still lived inside Ella.

“If I were to guess,” Cami said with a warm smile, “I’d say you were thinking about stealing one of those candy canes.”

“You think anyone would care?” She shook her head as he placed the last ornament in his hand on the tree—a clear, glass-blown goose. “Actually, I was just pondering the perfect present for Ella this year.”

“And did you decide on one?”

“Nailing it is not easy. You know how it is with kids. And after church today, she wanted to go see Santa at the Graff.”

Cami tilted a look at him. “But...really? I thought—”

“No, you’re right. She doesn’t believe. She went for the sake of a friend who does. But the odd thing was what happened once she got there. She actually told the old coot what she wanted. She whispered something in his ear about her Christmas wish, even though she advised him in no uncertain terms that she knew he wasn’t real.”

“Huh. I know that Santa. Don Knowles. He’s really good. He’s been there at the Graff for years.”

“Good, as in authentic-looking?”

“Real beard, twinkle in his eye,” she said. “All that.”

“Yeah. That’s the one.” A disconcerted frown creased his brow. “He actually winked at me.”

“Really?” Cami laughed. “And after Ella told him what she wanted? I don’t suppose he shared that information with you?”

“No. No, I have zero idea what she told him. Some deep, between-them secret. I mean, is that even ethical? And she refused to tell me.”

“But you think you’ve figured out what it was she wished for? I mean, I don’t mean to brag, but I do have a mainline to what little girls her age are playing with these days.” She grinned. “Teacher.”

“Maybe. I think I know something she’d like. Something she’s been asking for a long time.” He turned to look at Ella, who was having a deep conversation with both Lolly and Pippa.

Sarah called them all to dinner then and the group started moving in the direction of the dining room and the long table laden with food.

Cami leaned conspiratorially closer. “TBC. To be continued. Whatever it is, if it’s from you, I’m sure she’ll love it.”

They gathered for a long, unhurried meal that was every bit as delicious as it smelled. Smoked, roasted beef, something called Yorkshire pudding that he’d never had before, mashed potatoes and gravy; vegetables that Sarah claimed to have grown in her kitchen garden last summer. And to top it all off, there was a cinnamony apple crisp and gingerbread cookies for dessert.

The dinner conversation had ranged widely from Izzy and Will's upcoming wedding to Ray's plans to move in with Sarah when Will and Izzy would take over his old ranch house, to the upcoming dress rehearsal for the pageant Cami was directing. And the grown-ups included Ella in the conversation, asking her opinion on the angel costume she would be wearing.

Gus watched her interact with the Hardestys. It felt easy. It was a rare thing she felt this comfortable with strangers. Sitting beside her, Ryan entertained her with the adventures of the puppies and the trouble they inevitably found themselves in.

When everyone had finished eating, Gus moaned, polishing off the last bite of apple crisp. "Let me guess, Sarah. You're going to be doing the cooking for this guest ranch enterprise here on the Hard Eight this spring. I can't imagine you'd find a better cook."

She laughed. "No. A cook is all I am—self-taught at that. And honestly, I love doing it for my family and friends, but as a full-time job? No." She took Ray's hand, and he rubbed his thumb over hers. "I have other plans. But we're looking to hire a real chef to create and execute gourmet menus for the guests. If you hear of any."

"We've got some feelers out," Will told them. "Just a matter of time before the right one comes along."

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“Well, you’ve set the bar high.” Luke sighed with contentment.

“Thank you. But we’re so happy that you all could join us tonight. Even though we’re not quite finished.”

The Hardesty siblings seemed to be winking at each other with everyone else in the dark like he was.

Luke shot a questioning look at Gus. “More trees?”

Shay laughed. “No. A surprise for the uninitiated. A good surprise, I hope. And after, we can indulge in some of that yummy hot cocoa you brought us.”

“I’m sensing some outdoor yardwork coming our way,” Luke said, half-joking. “Firewood chopping? I’m in.”

“Nope. Everyone, get your coats on,” Sarah said, laughing. “I’m staying behind with Lolly because it’s a little too chilly for her, but the rest of you head on out to the big barn.”

Gus couldn’t imagine what was in store for them, but whatever it was, Ella was excited about it. She was dressed and had run out in front of the rest of them. It wasn’t until they had walked around the corner of the house that he saw what the Hardestys were up to. Parked in front of the large barn was a hay-filled flatbed wagon with fat tires hooked up to a pair of draft horses whose steamy breath circled their heads as they waited for the riders. One of their ranch workers stood beside the team he’d readied, looking quite pleased with himself.

Ella's reaction was priceless. She couldn't stop dancing in circles with little high-pitched squeals of happiness. "A hayride! Daddy, look!"

He laughed, thrilled to see her delight. "Wow!" Luckily there was only a dusting of snow left on the ground, nothing those fat tires couldn't cut through on the gravel road that wound through the ranch.

Cami bumped his arm playfully. "Bet you didn't imagine we'd force you into the cold night air as part of our Christmas ritual, did you?"

He turned up the collar of his sheepskin coat, his own breath steamy when he spoke. "Small price to pay for the look on her face," he teased. "Thank you."

She nodded. "I can't think of any little girls who would turn down a chance for a hayride in the dead of Montana winter with these two beauties." She patted the nose of the lighter of the two workhorses harnessed to the wagon.

Gus smoothed a hand down the nose of one of the horses he'd become acquainted with earlier last summer whose long harnesses were entwined with tiny, battery-operated lights and jingle bells. "They'll earn their keep tonight for sure. And Ella won't be forgetting this night any time soon."

For her part, Cami felt Gus's grateful smile down to her toes. She was thrilled watching Ella's face light up at the sight of the wagon and all the Christmas trimmings and was glad they'd come. The feeling that something was happening between them seemed evidenced by the happiness she felt just being around him. Was she just crushing on him? Ugh. Wasn't she too old for that?

Or was it something more?

"Non-Hardestys up first," Liam shouted. "We've got blankets!"

It had been ages since she'd felt this thrumming attraction to a man she really hardly knew. Her cheeks felt hot as he reached a hand down to help her into the hay wagon after Ella. He tugged her up effortlessly and she scooted in beside him on the other side of his daughter. They huddled under the same blanket as the others got up and settled, and the driver gave the jangly harness a shake, signaling the horses to go.

As a family, they'd done this ride dozens of times, every holiday season. It had been a tradition her mother had insisted upon, and it would become a fixture event of their ranch's guest experience as well. Because who could resist a winter hayride, really? With the clip-clop of hooves, and the jangle of bells under the starry Montana sky, awash with pinpricks of light and a half-moon, the air smelled sweet and held the breath of the Absarokas. Even in the dark, the mountains in the distance shone like silvery outlines in the moonlight where snow crested their peaks.

The driver had two small LED lanterns attached to the sides of the wagon to light their way, but the night was clear enough to see the road that wound up between their pastures toward the round barn and back again. In deeper snow, they had a smaller sleigh, but the wagon fit more people and felt perfect for tonight.

"I gotta admit," Gus said quietly leaning toward her, "even as a vet, I've never done a hayride in my life."

"No? You've been missing out. I hope this will be the first of many." More than just polite words, she truly hoped he'd stay in Marietta. Not only because she found herself wanting to get to know him better, but for Ella's sake as well. She seemed like she was just beginning to blossom here.

But from the expression on his face, she wondered if he meant to stay in Marietta much longer. Dr. Alden, for whom Gus was standing in, had to be nearly recovered from his knee replacement surgery by now. But he must be almost seventy and nearing retirement. Then again, Alden was a salt-of-the-earth kind of guy who

subscribed to the idle-hands theory and all that. A widower himself, the doc had been a staple in Marietta forever and might just keep working for another twenty years despite his bad knees.

The wagon rolled along the road and the others on the ride talked quietly amongst themselves and Ella and Luke were busy pointing out constellations in the night sky.

“I guess you’ve finished remodeling that barn,” Gus said quietly to her. “I remember the raw state of it last summer. It must have been quite the job.”

“Truthfully, Will and Liam have slaved over it, but we did bring in some outside contractors for the finish-work. And it was worth all the effort. That’s where Izzy and Will are getting married next week, you know.”

He nodded. “I’m invited, apparently.”

She tried and failed to contain her smile. “And... are you coming?”

“Barring any four-legged medical emergencies, floods, or... super-volcano eruptions.”

She laughed. “Oh, dear. We’re probably safe on at least two counts. You’ll have to save me a dance.”

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“I don’t... I haven’t really danced in years.”

Cami stuck a piece of hay in her mouth, grinning at him. Okay, maybe she was flirting a little. But hey. It was a hayride! “You haven’t danced in years? Which is why you absolutely should at the wedding. Dancing releases endorphins, which is clearly the best reason to do it.”

“Endorphins, huh?”

She nodded, sprawling backward on the hay to stare up at the night sky. “I don’t know about you, but I can use all the endorphins I can get.”

He rolled back beside her, staring up at the stars. “How would your plus-one feel about parting ways for a dance with me?”

“My—Oh, no. I’m a plus-zero for the night. I’m not dating anyone. I don’t date. Honestly, who would put up with me? Between my teaching, the ranch business, the pageant, and now the baby...”

“I find that hard to believe.”

She felt her cheeks color a little more in the cold. “Believe it. Anyway. I’m content. Mostly,” she added. “Lolly coming into my life, though, does put things into perspective.”

“Yeah? In what way?”

“I guess... I’m feeling grateful for what I have. What we can give her. What her mama clearly didn’t have.”

He gave a little snort of agreement. “I know that feeling. Kids do keep you grounded.”

“Oh, they do. And I know twenty-eight third graders who prove that theory to me daily.”

And simultaneously left her feeling wanting.

It wasn’t so much that she felt something was missing from her life. Maybe it was just FOMO. The classic fear of missing out. Watching first Will, then Shay, pair off one at a time and seem ridiculously happy had made her acknowledge that there might be more to life than what she had settled for. More than simply running from one project to the next without allowing herself time to feel her feelings. To explore what would make her really happy. To consider her loneliness.

And she was. Lonely. For companionship, for the kind of love she’d always imagined might be out there for her. Maybe that was why she’d so eagerly, and without thinking too much about the consequences, taken Lolly in. Maybe Lolly was the missing piece in her puzzle, or at the very least, a missing piece.

She glanced over at Gus who was intently watching the night sky, an arm crooked under his head. A twist of longing wound through her. Or maybe it was just lust. Maybe there were other missing pieces she hadn’t considered for a long, long time.

They reached the round barn—lit up with white Christmas lights that they might just leave up all year-round they looked so pretty—then turned the team back toward the house. By then, they were all getting a little cold, and most had scooted close together for warmth. She and Gus were sharing a generous, soft blanket and she could feel his

heat up against her side.

“You never did say if you would save me that dance,” she reminded him. “At the wedding.”

“Ah-hh. And I was this close to a clean getaway.” He turned and smiled at her. “Yes. Absolutely. If you don’t mind the peril facing your toes—”

“Oh, come on. It can’t be that bad.”

He laughed. “I have witnesses.”

“Hmph. We’ll see, Dr. Claymore. But anyone who handles horses and cattle the way you do every day can surely find his way around a dance floor.”

“We’ll see. But then, I also have a favor to ask you.”

She perked up. “A favor? Ask away!”

He leaned closer and for just a moment, she thought he meant to...kiss her. But instead, he said very quietly, “Remember that gift for Ella I was mentioning earlier?”

She nodded. “The one you just figured out?”

“That’s it. I could use some help picking one out.”

She glanced at Ella who was completely distracted by the stars. “One what?”

“One of... what I want to get her.” He held his forefinger to his lips. “I could use your opinion. I know you’re busy, but then at least I’d have the chance to buy you dinner to thank you for tonight. It really means the world to Ella coming here like

this. And me.”

She felt the need to clarify. “So... not adate.”

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His dark brows drew together. “You know, even though that sounds like a trick question, I will venture into that dangerous territory to say, yeah, it’s pretty much an invitation for a date. Unless you’re specifically opposed. You. Me. Dinner and a secret Christmas gift?”

She laughed. “I’d, uh, have to check my schedule.”

“Sure.”

“How’s Wednesday?”

“Done,” he said. “Barring any four-legged medical—”

“Emergencies, floods, or super-volcano eruptions,” she finished. “I know. And pageant disasters or Lolly complications on my end. But let’s just call it a friendly get-together.”

“Deal.”

She shivered, snuggling a tiny bit closer and tugging the blanket up toward her cold nose. “You know, I don’t think the insulation value of hay is all it’s cracked up to be.”

He lifted his arm, inviting her closer. She obliged and he closed his arm around her shoulder.

As the sound of the horse’s hooves against the frozen ground lulled them into quiet,

they listened to Ryan and Ella chat about the stars, pointing at a shooting star that fell into the universe hundreds of light-years away. Perhaps that star even fell thousands of years ago and just now they were able to catch sight of it. In the blink of an eye, it came and went, and Ella and Ryan saw it together. She and Gus saw it, too.

If she were the kind of person who believed in signs—she wasn't—she might have imagined that seeing that shooting star together meant something deeper. That it somehow drew them all together or served as some kind of portent for the future. But, alas, shooting stars were just shooting stars and it meant no more to their lives than the owl hooting across the valley right now, or the way the snow glittered in the moonlight, dusting the boulders that edged the ridge.

But she would take this snuggle for exactly what it was—a kindness from a kind man.

Chapter Eight

In the middle of the night, in the middle of a dream about Gus riding beside her across the ranch on horseback, holding her hand as if they'd done it a thousand times before, Cami heard a sound she couldn't recognize. A wolf's howl, she realized at last, and she looked to find that giant gray and silver canine perched high on a rocky outcrop, staring down at them.

"He won't hurt us." Gus tightened his warm fingers around her cold ones. "I know him."

"But... how can you be sure?" She didn't scare easily. But that wolf scared her. "He's...wild."

"He's just telling us he sees us." Gus's calm in the face of this creature confused her as the wolf howled again and from somewhere in the distance, others joined in.

“So, you speak wolf?” she asked as if that was totally possible.

“I understand him,” he said, and leaned his head back to howl back at the one on the rocks.

Which was when she woke up. To the sound of Lolly crying. Oh, for heaven’s sake.

Rousing herself reluctantly from the pleasure of that dream, she shook it off and stumbled over to the baby where she slept in the new bassinet Cami had bought her. How long had she been crying while she was dreaming about wolves and paranoia?

She seriously needed some sleep.

Lolly’s little howl was hungry. She was a good baby, as newborn babies went, Cami decided. Not that she knew what a newborn should be like. But she cried when she was hungry or wet, and otherwise she seemed... content to sleep or observe the crowd at the Hardesty ranch.

She lifted Lolly from the basinet and cuddled her for a few minutes to soothe her. Almost instantly, she stopped crying, focused on Cami. She spoke to the baby softly as she changed her wet diaper and put on a fresh sleep sack gown. Lolly smiled up at her as she worked to get her fist into her little mouth.

“I know you’re hungry. Let’s warm up a bottle for you.”

Carrying her into the kitchen, she did just that, then settled down in a comfy chair to feed her. Lolly took the bottle eagerly and quieted, working to empty the contents.

Cami rubbed a thumb across the baby’s soft arm, feeling a strange surge of maternal rush pour through her. She spent most of the year being a teacher to dozens of third graders who, while adorable, had never inspired the kinds of hormonal chaos inside

her that holding Lolly did. Did all newborn babies have this effect on women of childbearing age? Was it purely hormonal? Was this suddenly the ticking clock she'd heard about for so long from her teacher friends? The one so many had succumbed to?

Succumbed was a strong word. The wrong word, actually. But she'd always somehow thought she was immune to that ticking clock. Maybe it was because she's spent most of her life trying to fix things in her own family, between her late, difficult father and everyone else; between Liam and Will and being there for Shay as she raised Ryan alone. Not to mention her mother, whose broken heart was only just beginning to heal.

So, the children she taught had seemed enough. Until now.

She ran a finger along Lolly's velvety-soft cheek and felt the baby lean into her touch. As the little buzz of bubbles in the bottle told Cami that she was doing everything right, she was still very aware that everything about this was wrong. It wasn't this baby's fault that everything had gotten messed up in her little life. Or that she'd had no choice in the matter about being held in Cami's arms right now. But since this was where they were at, she was going to be the best surrogate mom she could be—until she'd exhausted all options to keep her.

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Or until Cami found Lolly's real mother.

Lolly finished her bottle, looking milk drunk, and Cami lifted her onto her shoulder for a burp. Her compact little body fit perfectly in the curve of Cami's shoulder and her smell... that baby smell was slightly intoxicating to her, as well. She supposed that was how it worked in nature. A perfect design for mother and child.

Cami stared into the darkened room. Even if she did manage to find Lolly's mom—and the odds were against it—she didn't really have a plan to fix this. Finding her might only lead to Tara—if it was Tara—being arrested. Deep down, Cami couldn't imagine what would have to happen in her own life for her to do what Tara had done. Then again, who knew what she'd been through? What she had left? Who was there to help her?

Cami's guess to all of those questions was that she was alone in the world without help or support. She wished she knew. Tomorrow, she would track down and call the Simons, and find out what they knew.

Meanwhile...

She had two days left of school before the holiday break. Her mom and Shay, who luckily only did part-time freelance accounting off the ranch, had volunteered to watch Lolly until she got home from school in the afternoon. Thank God for them.

She rested her head back against the chair and began thinking about Gus and how his arm had felt around her on the hayride. She was pretty sure it was simply a kind gesture on his part, to keep her warm, but remembering it now sent a whole different

sort of warmth through her. The imagining kind of warmth. In her mind, she traced the outline of his face, lit by moonlight and the little cleft in his chin, the dimple in his cheek, smiling as she did.

Gah! Cami. For heaven's sake! In a minute, you'll be doodling little hearts on a notebook with his initials scribbled on it.

She gave the baby a squeeze. Okay, so it had been a long while since someone—a male someone—had that effect on her. It wasn't like she'd intentionally quit dating after Patrick. She'd just never found anyone who made her feel... like the world just got bigger. Like... there was something on the other side of the little box she'd been living in. Like... if he'd kissed her, she would have wanted more.

Don't get carried away. He's on his way out of town soon. Permanently. Besides, he only asked you to dinner. And to help pick out a gift for Ella. No big deal. But even more embarrassingly, she'd been actively contemplating what to wear on a date three days from now. She glanced at the small clock above the mantel... 2:37a.m.

Make that two days from now.

She pinched the bridge of her nose and yawned. Whether she'd manage to stay awake on a date with Gus Claymore was another matter altogether.

At the front window, Poppy, the half-grown pup who'd been sleeping peacefully on his dog bed, suddenly startled and alerted at the window. A low growl rumbled in his throat, which was unusual for Poppy who didn't usually have a single, guard dog instinct in him. But the hair on the back of Cami's neck went up and she prayed he didn't start barking and wake Lolly.

It could be coyotes, who often frequented their pastures, sometimes in packs, hunting for rabbits or gophers or, occasionally, a newborn foal. The two that had just been

born were still in a stall in the barn with their mamas. But there weren't any newborns in the field. And she didn't hear the telltale yips of the pack.

Poppy was almost five months old now and not full grown, but he was already big enough to intimidate a full-grown man if need be. Not that he'd ever been so inclined. Nor was Pippa, who was fast asleep upstairs in Ryan's room.

Cami stood and moved to the window. "What is it, Pops?" She ran her fingers through Poppy's fur staring out into the moonlit darkness. "What do you see out there?"

The dog's stare was fixed on the road to the bigger of their two barns and something she could not see at all. "It's okay. It's nothing. Let's leave it. Probably just the wind."

But it was several minutes before the dog would leave the window reluctantly and settle back down to sleep. Cami glanced out the window one last time, checked the door lock, and returned to her room with the baby and settled her in her bassinet. It was probably nothing. But something told her it wasn't nothing. Maybe, she thought, with the irrationality that came in the middle of the night... maybe it was a sign.

*

Over the next two days, between teaching the final days before winter break and surviving nearly sleepless nights, Cami did her best to hold everything together. While Shay and her mother watched Lolly during school hours, her students were too excited and preoccupied with the upcoming holiday to do much learning, but there were tests to be taken and papers to be graded. In between, she was determined to wrangle a bit of fun from the last week of school with inside games and lots of art projects.

Two more rehearsals for Sunday's Christmas pageant had been crammed into her already-busy schedule, but the rehearsals went surprisingly well, aside from the fact that a viral cold was raging its way through her cast and two of her shepherds were down for the count. Gus had appeared before the end of the last rehearsal to watch from the back of the church. It made her nervous, seeing him there. But when one of the dogs—who were standing in for the goats who would appear in the real performance—started chasing a cat that had wandered into the sanctuary, Gus was the one who'd caught it and calmed it down, averting disaster with the manger set. Gus to the rescue...

Somehow, on little to no sleep, she'd held it all together.

Later this week there would be the Christmas pageant, then Izzy and Will's wedding this weekend, for which she could hardly wait. Then Christmas.

She was exhausted just thinking about the week to come.

And during lulls in her ridiculous schedule, she managed to track down the Simons, but a phone call to Mrs. Simon was not, in the end, much help. Yes, Tara had been their foster daughter for two years. No, she did not live with them now. At eighteen, she had, in fact, aged out of the foster care system, and they were not in a position to adopt her. She explained that while the goal of most foster situations was to somehow reunite birth parents with their children, Tara's own parents had lost parental rights years ago.

No, Tara hadn't been in touch for months, despite Mrs. Simon's attempts to reach her. It turned out that Tara had fallen for a considerably older boy during her last year of high school and that the Simons—vocally—disapproved of him. But Tara had been stubborn about it.

"Looking back," Mrs. Simon had said in a voice that seemed to hold a mountain of

regret, “that boy must have felt like an anchor to Tara. An anchor to hold onto, grounding her for a future that was, at best, very unclear. He wasn’t good for her. We knew that much. At least we told her as much, but she didn’t believe us. We were maxed out with four other fosters and two of our own when my husband got a new job in Missoula, and we had to move. We told her she could go with us and that we would help her get an apartment, but she said no. She stayed here in Marietta with...him. With Joey.”

“And this was a year ago?”

“Not quite. We moved early last summer.”

“So,” Cami asked, “the older boy? Did she move in with him?”

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“We think so. She wouldn’t share that with us. I think she knew he would be in trouble if the authorities found out he was having sex with a seventeen-year-old. We did our best to help her, but in the end, she wanted to go her own way. She turned eighteen. There was nothing we could do.”

Not all foster care situations end in adoption, even if the birth parents were out of the picture. But many did. Cami wondered how many foster families Tara had been through in her short life and how alone she must have felt. Cami didn’t mention the baby to Mrs. Simon because apparently Tara hadn’t. Maybe she hadn’t wanted her to know, and it wasn’t Cami’s place to tell her now. But as she listened to Tara’s foster mom talk about her in the past tense, it seemed clear she wasn’t ever going to be a part of that family. Not in a real way. Whatever their relationship, it was always meant to be temporary.

“I’m not sure why you’re looking for her now,” Mrs. Simon said, “but if she’s in some kind of trouble, I hope you can help her. She’s a good girl. I wish we could have helped her more.”

As Cami drove home that afternoon, shaken by her conversation with Mrs. Simon, she couldn’t stop thinking about Tara and her situation and wonder what had become of her. Who was the older boy she’d been seeing? Was he Lolly’s father? Where was he and why wasn’t he in the picture?

And when she recalled the problems she’d once thought were overwhelming in her own childhood, they seemed now relatively small. Every family had issues, but to have no family at all... it seemed to put whatever small struggles she’d had in her life into perspective.

And now, Lolly found herself in the very same boat. But Cami was determined not to allow what had happened to Tara happen to her daughter. Cami would fight for Lolly if she had to. There had to be a reason she'd been dropped into her life. Maybe even a reason bigger even than Tara's belief in her. Maybe it was fate, or kismet or the universe intervening. Maybe it was none of those things... or all of them.

*

Gus picked her up for their date Wednesday afternoon, since wherever he was taking her would be closing at dinnertime. She'd spent more than a few spare moments in the last few days wondering what she should wear, mentally considering and discarding wardrobe from teaching and deciding on a sweater dress in navy blue she'd had for a while and some neutral ankle boots that she loved. She took extra care with her makeup, then felt ridiculous for trying too hard. It was a simple thank-you dinner. Unnecessary at that. But she was glad to have the chance to get to know him better.

When he met her at her door, he had cleaned up from a long day of vet work and had a soft, brown leather jacket with its collar turned up and jeans on that made her imagine him on the pages of some magazine instead of mucking around in barns all day.

"You... look amazing," he said, as she opened the door to him, his gaze taking her in.

She gave a breathy laugh and wildly blushed. "Admit it. You're just overwhelmed at the sight of me in an actual dress."

He chuckled. "Overwhelmed?" He looked her up and down with an appreciative smile. "Yeah. You could've worn ripped jeans and it wouldn't have made it less so. In fact, I think I might need to go home and up my game."

She snatched her purse off the side table and threw on a coat. “You absolutely do not. Because I was thinking the same about you in your”—she drew a little circle in the air in the direction of his chest—“hot leather jacket and vet-zone-free denims.”

He laughed. “This is it. My only manure-stain-free pair of jeans and boots. I don’t get out much.”

“I feel a little the same about teaching third graders,” she said, closing the door behind her. “With all the chalk and fingerpaint and permanent marker stains.”

“Look at us. Bonding over the detritus of our work. But really. You do look real pretty.”

“Thank you, sir.” She swallowed hard. “Now. Are you going to tell me about this mystery gift you’re wanting me to help you pick out?”

He sent her a look that sent her stomach flutters into disarray. “I think I should just show you.”

Ten minutes later, they were at the newest local animal rescue called Edna’s Dog Rescue that was run by a woman named Edna Braedenwise and her team of volunteers. Edna was in her sixties, with graying hair and a smile as big as the Montana sky. She’d been doing rescue upstate for years, but now had opened one in Marietta and had a kennel full of dogs like Pippa and Poppy who’d been abandoned on local roads or just given up on. Gus told Cami he volunteered to treat many of the dogs that had come into her facility, and he knew they’d gotten the best care from her.

“Aww! You’re getting a dog? For Ella?” Cami said, staring through the door’s window at the array of dogs penned up in their kennels in the clean, warm facility.

“She’s asked for one every year. I think maybe that’s what she whispered in Santa’s ear last week. But I need a second opinion.”

“Do you have one in mind?”

“He has one on hold,” Edna said, opening the door to the kennels for them. “She’s waiting for you.”

They walked toward that last kennel, passing an array of lovely dogs, both big and small, until they stopped at the pen of a mini-doodle-type mixed breed puppy. She wasn’t more than four months old, blonde and curly haired, and she was pressing herself up against the bars of her kennel to reach them. “I was actually called in to consult on another dog’s case when she came into the rescue. But I kind of fell for her the minute I saw her.”

Cami melted in front of her kennel. “Ohh. She’s adorable. What’s her name?”

“No name. No tags. No chip.”

“Well, that’s just awful. Can we take her out?” Cami curled her fingers around the dog’s paw through the slender bars.

“Let’s.”

They took her to the inside run that was carpeted with artificial turf, used during the cold, Marietta winters so people could interact with the dogs in a comfortable environment. The dog’s personality began to shine as she got more comfortable with them. She was a wiggly lovebug and was more interested in cuddling than running. Her eyes—when she stared up at Gus with the sort of lovestruck awe as only a dog could—were a golden color that matched her coat.

“She’s the color of butterscotch,” Cami mused, running her fingers through the dog’s hair. “Or taffy.”

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“That’s a good name Taffy. Are you Taffy, girl? Yes?” Gus said. “Good dog.” The dog wagged her tail with enthusiasm, making Gus laugh. “But maybe I’d better let Ella choose a name for you.”

“So sweet,” Cami said. “I think you should definitely adopt her. Eloise will adore her. What about you?”

He dug his fingers into the dog’s fur, and she licked his face. “I became a vet because I love animals. All of them. But dogs? I was raised with them. Not having a dog in my life is like not having one of my hands. But the last few years have been... a lot of moving. And I didn’t think I was ready to be responsible for another... soul.”

She loved that he called the dog that. “What changed your mind?”

He scrubbed the dog on top of her head. “Ella. Seeing her with your dogs made me realize how much she was missing out on. And how much she’d love a dog of her own.”

“Dogs are pretty adaptable. Especially this size dog.”

“True. It really was never about the dog. It was me. So, you vote yes?” he said.

She scratched the puppy behind her ears. “I don’t think you really needed my vote. I think you’ve already made up your mind. But yes.”

“I guess I just needed confirmation I wasn’t crazy.”

“Well, I wouldn’t necessarily go that far.”

He smiled up at her. “That’s fair. Let’s do this, then.”

Even though she knew he hadn’t really needed her opinion and his decision was already made, it felt nice being included. His reasons for doing so were less clear. But she decided not to think too hard about it—which went totally against her OTB—her over-thinking brain, as her brother, Liam, liked to refer to it.

Gus completed the paperwork for the dog, for Taffy, and paid the fee. “She’s going to need to be fixed and get all her vaccines so it will still be a couple of days,” he told her. “But the sooner I get her out of here, the better.”

“You’re giving her to Ella before Christmas then?”

“Maybe I can stash her with Dr. Alden, or make her an early Christmas present.” At her side-eye, he added, “Not from Santa.”

She sighed dramatically and shook her head. She was not going to go there tonight.

He laughed and they said goodbye to Taffy, but only until she was ready for pickup again. They headed back out to his truck.

“Is it weird,” she said as he opened the truck’s door for her, “that in the short time we’ve known each other, we’ve both had babies randomly drop into our lives? And that I’m not the only one facing sleepless nights for the foreseeable future?”

“You do have a point.” He walked around the truck and hopped into the driver’s seat.

“And,” she added, “that we happened to be together on both occasions?”

He turned to stare at her for a moment. “Well, I did wrangle you into this one.”

She shrugged. “True, with the bribe of an actual meal out.” Gawd, he was good-looking, with that secret smile of his that always said he had something unspoken on his mind.

Something that might make her uncomfortable if he said it aloud. She couldn’t get a read on him, exactly. Was it still too soon after his wife’s death to think about moving on? And even if he was trying, did he actually have room in his heart for a new person... like her? Which was why it was best to keep this all casual. Not a date. Remember that.

Shaking off the thought, she said, “I can’t remember the last time I did this.”

“Me either, without a six-year-old choosing the restaurant.”

“Where are we going?”

“That’ll be a surprise, too. But I did make reservations.”

That likely narrowed down the choices to someplace with white tablecloths. “I’m usually the one to plan surprises. I’m not generally on the receiving end of them.”

He frowned at that. “Then I’m glad you’ll make an exception for me.” There was a sexy note of hopefulness in his voice.

“I... believe I will.”

“Good.”

They drove for a few minutes outside of town to a restaurant on the river called Beck’s Place where a valet parked his truck, and the waiters wore long white aprons tied over their crisp black trousers and beneath starched white shirts. It was above and beyond anything she’d expected, certainly, in exchange for their little family Christmas gathering. But sitting beside him at the table in the corner near the big, blazing fireplace made her feel sparkly and special.

In the lobby, overlooking the diners, were large driftwood sculptures of running horses beneath a collection of crystal chandeliers. And soft music played in the background, adding to the ambiance. She recognized a few of the patrons in the dining room as local ranchers, shop owners, and even some local politicians. Marietta also attracted lots of tourists during the Christmas season with its quaint shopping, lovely celebrations like the tree lighting and the Stroll that helped support restaurants like this one and grow the business into what it was today. She’d only been here once before to celebrate her mom’s sixtieth birthday with the family.

“Do you like wine?” he asked, perusing the drink menu.

“Do ranchers ranch?”

He smiled. “Red or white?”

“You pick. I’m good with either.”

He ordered red—a good red—and they sipped it casually after ordering some

delicious-sounding food.

“This is definitely more than I was expecting,” she said, leaning back in her chair.

“I like to exceed expectations.”

“Mission accomplished. I bet you were labeled an overachiever in school. Becoming a vet, amazing dad, all the things...”

He winced. “That’s kind of you. Although my brother, Luke, wouldn’t necessarily count that label as a plus.”

“Why’s that?”

“A little healthy brotherly competition? I think... because he’s still trying to find his way. He’s a talented musician, but he keeps that to himself. He’s been a hundred percent there for me and Ella since we lost Ella’s mom. It’s time for him to worry about his own life and not be harnessed to ours.”

“Hmm,” she said. “I didn’t get the impression from Luke that he was harnessed at all. It shows how much he loves you both.”

Gus swallowed hard. “He and I were separated when we were kids. Our parents died suddenly in an accident, and I was lucky enough to land with a family member who couldn’t take on someone as young as Luke. He ended up in foster care and I lost track of him for most of our childhood.”

Cami’s heart squeezed at the thought. Foster care had circled into all of their lives in unexpected ways.

“When I found him finally and my wife died,” Gus continued, “we became all each

other had. And I think he doesn't want to lose that. Neither do I, frankly. But being eight years older than him, I have a little more perspective than he does on how this goes. I want him to do his music, go to school, get a job, or whatever makes him happy and not worry about us."

She took a sip of wine. "Maybe worrying about you and Ella does make him happy. Maybe there's a way he can do both."

"Yeah. My fault, too. Dragging him around with me—with us—for jobs."

"So, you've been doing this a long time? This traveling vet thing?"

The waiter brought them salads and Cami played with it with her fork, waiting for his answer.

He nodded. "I was part of a practice back East and, after my wife passed, I couldn't... stay there. So, I left. And here we are."

"Here you are. And, sorry, but how long ago was this?"

"This... You mean her death?" He looked confused.

"No. I mean, how long have you been... running?"

He sent her a sharp look that softened after a moment. "I-I wouldn't exactly call it running."

"Oh. Okay. Sorry." She blushed, hiding behind her glass of wine.

He blinked. "I mean, I guess I've been looking for..."

She tilted a look at him, waiting.

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“I don’t really know,” he finished, looking up at her through his dark lashes. “Peace? Maybe I have been just... running.”

There were two types of people. Those who turned to close friendships in a storm and those who isolated themselves until it passed. He was type two, she suspected, and while she understood it, she hated that for him, and for Ella and Luke. But it was yet another thing she couldn’t fix.

“What was her name? Your wife?”

“Lissa,” he said, and his eyes got a faraway look.

She was somehow relieved to know her name. “Tell me about her.”

A line formed between his brows. “I don’t think I should—”

“I have a feeling I would have liked her.”

“Yeah. I think you would have.” He took a few sips of his wine. “She was a lot like you. Loved kids. Felt deeply. She was strong, like you, too.”

That caught her off guard. “You think I’m strong?”

“You are. Look at you. Everything you take on.”

“That’s just because I can’t say no.”

“No,” he said. “I think that’s because you always say yes. And that’s different than being unable to say no. You say yes because you love it.”

Maybe that was more right than wrong. “I do like the chaos. I like people and noise and all the mess. Growing up a Hardesty will do that to you. Does that make me weird?”

“In the best way.” He lifted his wineglass to hers and they clinked them together.

Leaning back in her chair, she studied him. “You’re... interesting, Gus Claymore.”

“I hope when you say interesting what you mean is fascinating. Intriguing. Charming. Not boring as hell.”

She laughed. “Anything but boring. You are all of those things and you’re a bit of a puzzle. And maybe I’ll figure you out eventually. I don’t know. What are the odds?”

He thought about that. “Fifty-fifty. Maybe sixty-forty?”

“Is that sixty on my side or yours?”

“Yours.” He grinned at her. “Because... well, you’re a woman. And women are better at... pretty much everything.”

“Oooh. Good answer! Except maybe calf-pulling.”

“Brawn counts for something, I suppose,” he said.

She laughed. His brawn was very, very appealing, but there was so much more about him that she found attractive, not the least of which was his humbleness, despite being the best vet people in these parts had ever seen. And then, there were his eyes.

And that little cleft in his chin...

The waiter interrupted her thoughts, delivering a plate of fresh artisan bread and dipping oil and they both dug in, avoiding going any deeper than they already had.

“Any luck on the search for Lolly’s mother?” he asked finally, breaking the awkward silence.

“Not really. Dead ends mostly.” She caught him up on the Simons and the older boy Tara had been involved with. “All I know is that his name was Joey and that he was twenty-five while she was seeing him.”

“Sounds like a jailbait situation to me.”

She sighed. “Definitely and who knows how involved he was or still is in the whole thing. I don’t know. Maybe this whole search is for nothing. She could be long gone, out of the state by now. I may never find her.”

“She’d have to have transportation. A car? But she must have been in dire straits to have left Lolly as she did. How would a young girl, fresh out of foster care, with little to no money get herself out of Marietta?”

“I doubt she had a car. Bus? There is a bus station here.”

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He nodded. "I can check that for you. You've got your hands full with everything going on."

"Really? That would be so helpful. I have a name and a description. Maybe someone saw her?"

"I'll check there tomorrow."

She was grateful for his help, but in a way, even more grateful that he considered himself part of this with her.

Their dinners came and the food was every bit as wonderful as the wine. He got a filet mignon, and she got the mahi-mahi with an amazing wine sauce, and they shared a few delicious sides. They talked and laughed about everything from the disastrous pageant dress rehearsal to their tradition of ice-skating on Miracle Lake. He'd just ordered a flourless chocolate cake for dessert when his cell phone rang.

He made a face as he pulled it from his pocket to look at the number. "I'm sorry. I told Carrie at the office not to bother me unless it was an emergency. So, I'd better get it."

"Of course."

He walked away from the table for a moment, and she sat alone, sipping her wine and listening to the piano player playing a song that had become famous on social media. It was a gorgeous love song whose lyrics lived in her head. She was still singing them to herself when Gus returned with a serious look.

“I’m really sorry. It is an emergency out at a nearby ranch. They’re going to lose a calf and maybe the cow unless I can get out there pretty quick.” As she stood to gather her purse, he pulled out his wallet as the waiter walked up. He handed him a generous amount of cash for what she imagined was more than the bill, and the waiter thanked him profusely. The waiter offered to box up the cake, but Gus declined. He told her, “We’ll have to skip the dessert, but I’ll drive you home first.”

“No, absolutely not,” she said. “That would be way out of your way over there. And if it’s as bad as all that, you don’t have time. I’ll just come with you.”

“You don’t need to—I can get you a cab.”

“I could get my own. But no. I want to. C’mon. Let’s go.”

“Might be a bad outcome,” he said as they hurried out of the restaurant.

“I was raised on a cattle ranch, remember?”

He slid his strong arm around her back as he ushered her out the door and that touch traveled through her like an electric charge. However this date ended, she was sure of one thing—it had been a long, long time since she’d felt this comfortable with a man. Any man. And she didn’t want this night to end.

Chapter Nine

Gus didn’t waste any time racing to the Deaver ranch. As he drove, he began a mental checklist of all the gear he kept in the truck for emergencies and how long it would take him to get to the calf. Beside him, Cami stared straight ahead at the road, giving him the time to think through what he needed to do once they got there. He always kept a spare medical bag in the truck for times like this when he wasn’t coming from the office.

He glanced over at her, noting how the moonlight played off her pretty profile. She didn't have to smile to keep her lips upturned at the corners. She had an effortless, perpetual happiness to her face that made him want to be near her.

Made him want to... kiss those lips.

Since the day they'd met over a bloody nose and a newborn baby, he'd liked her. The easy way she had about her. The way she teased him but didn't judge him. The way her laughter reminded him of bubbling champagne. He liked seeing her with that baby—with Lolly—and the way she held her as if she was her own, even knowing it probably wouldn't last. The way she cared about Ella and how she included Luke. He had never met anyone quite like her and he wanted to know her better. And not—came the next surprising thought—in a platonic way.

No. He tightened his hands on the steering wheel. Not in a platonic way at all.

No, in fact, he'd spent most of the dinner tonight contemplating kissing her. Imagining more, if he was honest.

But there was only one word that described that kind of thinking. Reckless. His time here in Marietta was nearly up. And he'd spent the last few years strategically avoiding anything that remotely smacked of a romantic entanglement. Because... that had just seemed... impossible. He'd known his heart couldn't afford that. Couldn't risk it.

Despite Lissa explicitly telling him, before she died, that she didn't want him to be alone. That she wanted him to love again. To find someone who would love him back. But those were just words that couldn't find their way into the place that held her memory. Maybe it felt disloyal or just impossible to think about anyone in her place. Maybe he'd just not been ready to think about it. Maybe because, in the beginning, he'd dreamed of her all the time, and now rarely.

In fact, if not for the voicemail he'd saved on his phone all these years of her asking him to stop at the store and pick up a few things, even the sound of her voice was beginning to fade.

No, she was gone. Truly gone. And maybe she needed to go after he'd done the exact opposite of what she'd wanted. So, now, here he was. Still here. And Cami was sitting right beside him.

But maybe even that point was moot. Staying here in his capacity as a vet, wasn't really an option. Marietta wasn't big enough for yet another large animal vet. He needed to move. But he knew well what would happen once he moved to Denver. He and Cami would text a few times. Maybe a phone call now and then, then it would come down to Christmas cards once a year until he slipped off her list. There would be no enticing her to Colorado. No dragging a woman with Cami's full life around the country with him.

She turned to look at him then and sent him a mysterious smile. "I have a good feeling about this."

He wished he had the same feeling. But after his conversation with Deaver, the rancher, he wasn't so confident.

"I'm sorry to drag you all the way out here. This wasn't exactly how I imagined the—"

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“You didn’t drag me. And I’m curious to watch you work. I mean, my job isn’t anywhere near as interesting.”

“Jobsplural, you mean,” he said, really clear that she downplayed her never-ending list of commitments.

“Okay, fine,” she said, staring back at the white line in the center of the road. “Still, I’m not out there saving lives like you.”

“Disagree. You’d be surprised the lives teachers save.” He could speak from personal experience on that subject, having had teachers as mentors throughout his life.

He saw her cheeks flush even in the darkened car. “Maybe, in an abstract, long-term kind of way. But your business is immediate gratification. You save a horse or a cow or a dog. You have that to hold.”

“The cow we’re going to see tonight, she wasn’t due yet. She’s giving birth at least a couple of weeks early which complicates things for the calf and for the mother. I’m hoping for some of that immediate gratification you’re talking about tonight. But sometimes, it’s a crapshoot.”

“I have faith in you,” she said, smiling at him. “And whatever happens, you’ll do your best.”

He would. But he didn’t relish the idea of failing in front of her. It wasn’t often he cared what a woman thought about what he did. He wasn’t out to impress anyone. His job was to save lives. But he wanted to impress her. To justify her faith in him.

At the Deaver ranch, they found that the cow had been brought in out of the weather to a birthing stall in the barn. Cami stood outside the stall, watching as Gus assessed the situation with a glance.

“How long has labor been going on?” he asked Matthew Deaver, the cow’s owner, as Gus tugged off his jacket and unbuttoned the cuffs on his shirt. “Any progress since you called?”

“Found ’er out in the upper pasture, struggling about an hour ago. Not sure how long she’d been laboring already, but we made the decision to bring ’er down to the barn. Settle her in where it’s warm. And no. Nothing to speak of in terms of progress.” Deaver was an older man, gray haired and worn with long years of hard, outdoor work. He took in Gus’s clothes and hers. “Dang it, I pulled you two outta somewhere special, didn’t I?”

“No worries.” Gus pulled on a clean pair of coveralls he always kept in his truck up to his waist. It was only slightly less freezing in the barn than in the bitter outside, but he’d warm up soon enough with the work to come. He handed his jacket and shirt to Cami who was on the other side of the stall, but not before he caught her expression as she took in his naked chest.

“Well.Hello,” she said with a teasing grin.

He held out his arms with a shrug. “It’s the down and dirty part of the job.”

She sighed. “And I have zero complaints about it,” she said as she pulled his clothes against her chest. “Good luck,” she whispered.

He laughed, washing his hands under the water spigot. “Thanks.” He turned back to the laboring cow, still feeling Cami’s eyes on him.

A few minutes later, after handily dodging the well-justified kick of the mama cow, he reached inside her up to his shoulder to search for the calf, his arm covered all the way up with a protective sleeve.

“She’s a springing heifer,” Deaver explained. “This’ll be her first calf.”

It was normal for a first-time mama cow to be scared and confused. She was contracting painfully around his arm, but she was not progressing, and she’d been struggling for who knew how long already? What was clear was that the calf seemed stuck and there were lots of possible reasons for that. A breech presentation, the calf’s head turned the wrong way, the calf coming out back legs first... But this one felt... big. Maybe too big for this cow. He found one hoof and hoped he could get hold of that one and the other and try to drag it out.

“It’s dead, isn’t it? The calf.” Deaver was hovering over his shoulder.

“I don’t know yet. It might be at this point. Might be too big for this cow.”

Often these things happened in the field before anyone noticed labor’d been going on too long. And in that case, often both went down for the count. The bad feeling settling in his nearly numb arm told him this might very well be a bad outcome. He spent the better part of the next twenty minutes between contractions trying to loop a chain around the calf’s hoof and still hadn’t found the other one, which he determined was turned the wrong way.

“I, uh, put in a call for Dr. Alden,” Deaver said after a long, twenty-minute struggle.

Gus turned to the man in surprise. “You what?”

“Figured you could use the help. He should be here any minute.”

“Not necessary. But... fine.” Gus grunted with the effort and glanced at Cami, who bit her lip and had a stranglehold on the stall gate.

“Can I be of any help?” she asked.

“Thanks,” he practically grunted. “But I don’t want you near this cow. It can be dangerous.” He felt the same way about Doc Alden.

Alden was on leave and in no shape to fight with a laboring cow. Not to mention the fact that he could do no more than Gus himself had already done. But these ranchers around here were used to Alden, had used him for years. Somehow, they still thought of him as a miracle worker and in an emergency like this one, he’d ride in on some white horse and save both their cow and their calf.

He reached in a little deeper, feeling one small hoof. He hooked the looped chain barely around it, and with his free hand, thrust the other end of the chain at Deaver. “Pull on that. Not too hard yet—just keep the slack off while I find the other hoof.”

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His fingers brushed against the calf's mouth, and he felt movement. A shock of relief poured through him that the calf was still alive. Good. Good.

Finally, as Deaver gently tugged the first hoof forward, he found the second leg, slightly bent backward. Which explained the stalled labor. Ideally, two legs and the head come out first, in that order, which allowed the rest of the calf to slide right out. But when one leg or the calf's head were facing the wrong way, it spelled trouble for everyone.

"I've just gotta..." He grunted with the effort of turning the second leg. "Gotta get this calf out while it's still got a fighting chance."

The heifer mooed a loud complaint.

Deaver's expression perked up in surprise. "It's alive?"

"For now," Gus said as he managed to snag the other hoof and slowly bring it around. "Keep up the pressure. Don't let this next contraction pull it back. If we need to use the calf-puller, we will."

"I got it, Doc." Deaver braced himself to keep tension on the chain.

Gus grimaced; his arm fully disappeared inside the cow as he tugged the calf's other hoof toward the outside world while making sure its nose followed the hooves out directly. "As soon as this one starts, begin pulling. Hard. Ready? One, two—"

"Three," came a deep voice from behind them.

Gus didn't have to turn to know who was standing behind him, watching his every move. They pulled together and slowly but surely, two hooves emerged from the mama and then a nose, a face, and then the whole calf dropped onto the straw-covered floor in a rush of amniotic fluid.

Gus pulled off the plastic sleeve, then tore the sac away from the calf's mouth and nose and made sure its airway was clear. A little slow to react, the calf took its time drawing breath, but a vigorous rubdown with straw and a little straw poked up its nose seemed to wake the baby up and get it coughing and breathing on its own. It was a little heifer calf. A girl. And Deaver, who generally had the expression of a crack poker player, looked both impressed and pleased, and shook Gus's hand vigorously.

"Good man, good man! Thank you, Dr. Claymore. I surely thought we were done for here. And I was going to lose my cow, too."

He clasped the old man's hand. "So glad it turned out well."

They watched as the cow licked her baby's face, instinctively bonding despite the rough ordeal she'd just been through. The calf lifted her head and squirmed in the straw bedding, already anxious to try her legs. But that would take some time. For a preemie, this calf was fairly good sized and looked like she'd make it just fine. It was the lungs that fully developed last, and they were the only concern.

"You'll have to keep a close eye on her. Watch her breathing. If she has any trouble, give me a call, I'll come back out."

"Thanks, Doc." He turned to Dr. Alden. "Did you see that? This young fella of yours knows what's what."

Behind him, Dr. Alden was watching the whole procedure beside Cami without comment, until Gus stepped away from the calf. He poured bottled water over his

hands and chest to wash them. Deaver handed him a towel to dry off with.

“Seems you didn’t need me after all,” he said while Deaver was preoccupied with the calf.

“No, he didn’t,” Cami said, beaming at him and handing him his shirt and jacket.

“I know that call was from Deaver, not you,” Alden said. “Don’t take offence. Some of these ranchers are slower to trust than others. You did everything right. You did it just as I would have.”

Gus nodded, pulling on his clothes. “Thanks. I’m glad it was a good outcome. For a while there, I wasn’t sure.”

“Cami,” Alden said, “could I borrow him for a minute? I just need a minute or two, if that’s okay with you?”

Cami nodded. “Of course. I’ll just keep my eye on this baby while you talk. She sure is cute. She doesn’t even look that early.”

“She’s a good-sized calf for a preemie, and I think she’ll do fine,” Gus said. “But we’ll keep an eye on her over the next few days. I’ll be right back.”

Gus and Alden walked out together into the cold dark night as Deaver talked Cami’s ear off about the calf. Alden was walking with a cane and still seemed to have a limp.

“How’s the knee doing?” Gus asked.

“Better. Almost there. I’ve been doing therapy three times a week and... well, takes a little longer the older you get. This Montana cold, you know. Doesn’t always agree with me.”

“You’re not alone there. Winters here can be brutal.”

Alden smiled at him as if considering his next words. “I’m glad, actually, that Deaver called me out. First, it got me up out of the house, which has become much too comfortable. And second, it gives me the chance to talk to you about... well, next steps.”

Gus imagined hearing a bell tolling somewhere in the distance, as the boom was about to be lowered on him. “I know your plan is to come back in the new year. I’ve already got an offer from a good office in Denver, so you don’t have to worry that—”

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“Hold up,” Alden said. “Just hold your horses. I know what I said. But I’m just curious. How’ve you liked Marietta? I can tell you my clients have liked you very much. I’ve not gotten a single complaint—well, a few nervous nellies...” He hooked a thumb toward Deaver’s barn. “And that’s not an easy feat with this bunch around here. They get used to somethin’ and want to keep it. So, you, fitting right in here, well... that’s something not many would be able to accomplish.”

“Thank you, Dr. Alden.”

“It’s Joe. And I’m not being gratuitous. I mean it. I can’t think of anyone I’d rather have step in for me.”

“I’ve been happy to do it. Happy for the work. And we’ve enjoyed our time here. All of us.”

Alden laughed as they reached his truck. “That little girl of yours is some little spitfire. Heard she put that Deitmore boy in his place at the pageant rehearsal last week. He deserved it, from what I hear. Rascal that he is.”

Gus grinned. “Ella is a spitfire. She takes after her mama, that’s for sure.”

“So, let me get to the point,” Alden said. “Sometimes things happen that you don’t expect, which was the case with this knee of mine. It came on slow, but you know what it takes to work around these animals at all hours. Getting up and down became hard and surgery was the only option. But even now, knowing the job, what it takes, I’m not sure I’ve got it in me anymore. And on the way, I met a certain therapist while in the rehab place.”

“Oh?”

“You see, Gus, bein’ a widower myself for the last twenty years or so, my future has always looked pretty much the same. Me, birthin’ cows, mares. De-worming and vaccinating all of ’em. Keepin’ ranchers’ herds alive and kicking. Me, by myself. That’s what I thought. But...” He turned to gesture at the middle-aged woman in the front passenger seat of his pickup. “Then in walks Miranda. The physical therapist I mentioned.”

Gus nodded to the woman through the window. She was sort of pretty and looked younger than Alden by a couple of years. But she had an infectious smile as she waved at him through the window.

“What I’m saying is, this and my current situation has caused me to reevaluate that future I spoke of and shifted it rather entirely. You see, Miranda and I, well, we’ve decided we’re going to get married. And we would both like to do some traveling before our time on this earth is up, if you know what I mean. And at a certain point, cows just don’t fill the gap anymore.”

“I—that’s—Congratulations.” Something tightened in Gus’s chest. Was Alden saying what he thought he was saying? “That’s amazing news. Traveling is... good for the soul.”

“But as you know, this job... it rides you like an anvil sometimes. Someone will always have a sick animal. Or an emergency. Don’t get me wrong. I’ve loved doing it all these years and can’t imagine myself doing anything else. But... to everything there is a season, as they say. So, I’m giving you first crack. If you want the practice and we can work out a fair deal, it’s yours.”

For a moment, he forgot to breathe. A whole practice? Ready-made? His to keep? With a place for his daughter, for Luke, and for himself permanently? His next

immediate thought was of Cami. And a cold sweat worked its way up his chest.

“I—uh—” he began, but Alder closed a hand over his arm.

“Take your time. Think about it hard, Gus. It’s a big decision. I wouldn’t make the offer to just anyone. But it’s up to you to decide if you think this place is what you really want.”

Was this place what he really wanted? And just like that, all his excuses, his reasons for going could be gone. “I will. Thanks Dr. Alden. I’m grateful for your offer.”

Alden reached for his hand. “And good work with that calf.”

*

The memory of Gus stripping off his jacket and shirt in that barn kept rustling through her thoughts as he drove her home. She’d had a good long time to peruse him, unapologetically, because he was working. His taut muscles were carved by hard work with animals that outweighed him by hundreds of pounds. And yet, his hands had a doctor’s finesse.

And she had to admit, she felt silly and clichéd that the sight of him—all muscled and fit and... well, kind of perfect—would remind her of how long it had been since she had felt her stomach coil with want at the sight of such maleness and that she was quite distracted by the memory as he drove her down the road toward home. She did her best not to blatantly admire him as he joked about their messed-up dinner date and apologized for leaving her alone to parry with Mr. Deaver.

He’d totally avoided sharing whatever he and Dr. Alden had been talking about so privately after the calf’s birth, which was, of course, none of her business anyway. Maybe it was just her imagination that Gus had seemed a little thrown after that

conversation until he seemed to shake it off. Then they'd talked—she'd babbled—about nothing and everything from his high school football years to her brother Will's NFL career, to the pageant, and Ella. And maybe she'd done a lot of the talking just to avoid the inevitable goodbye that was coming.

But at the same time, all those feelings were steaming through her, some small ancient part of her brain dedicated to self-preservation began to wave its little a red flag. Yes, this night had been good. Better than good. Excellent. Yes, she could feel herself starting to fall for him. Yes, if she were to have a magic wand to find a man who embodied her entire wish list for a potential partner, it would be Gus Claymore.

But.

He was leaving. He'd told her that much. And soon. And how was she supposed to protect herself from that? This was destined for heartbreak. Failure. Disaster even. She knew enough about long-distance relationships to understand that wouldn't work. No, tonight had been fun, but she needed to nip all this angst in the bud before something actually happened.

Gus pulled into the driveway of the Hard Eight and stopped at the big log front porch. Before Cami could get her door open, he was there, opening it for her.

And, dammit, she liked it.

Oh, man. Her feminist constructs were having a crumbling moment, because a warm rush of something good poured through her as he helped her down from his truck, his hand strong under hers.

She found herself dreading the night being over. It had been—despite the freezing cold time in the barn—a night she wouldn't soon forget. And not just because watching him do his thing with skill and patience had been amazing, but because they

felt like they fit together somehow, in a totally impossible way. Like two planets whose orbits accidentally crossed each other, then spun off in their separate directions.

“Sorry again about the chocolate cake,” he said, walking her to the door. “Should we try that again?”

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Her pulse jumped a little. And she hesitated for a second before answering. “I-I would love to,” she said. “Tonight was... more than I even expected and well, thank you. Not only for the wonderful dinner, but for letting me tag along on your emergency. Getting to watch you save that cow and calf, it was amazing. And I like you, Gus. I really like you. But... you’re... you’re leaving soon and I’m staying here. Maybe we should just leave it at one missed chocolate cake?”

A mixture of disappointment and amusement crossed his expression. “So,” he said, leaning closer. “So... you like me?”

“That’s beside the—I mean, ofcourseI like you. But I—”

“I like you, too,” he said. “A lot.”

“Oh.” Cami took a deep breath. She was suddenly conscious of how close he was standing. They’d stopped under the porch light, by the evergreen wreath hung on the door, and red and white string lights that still twinkled, awaiting her return. “That’s... good... at least. Because it would have been super awkward if I was the only one who was—”

“You’re not.” He braced his hand on the doorjamb above her head, leaning closer.

“So,” she said, “I’m just saying we definitely shouldn’t be lured into a huge mistake over chocolate cake.”

“It’s not about the chocolate cake, Cami.”

“No?” She bit her lip.

“No. And that definitely wasn’t what’s been on my mind tonight. And, in fact, since I first met you.”

“And—wh-what’s that?”

He leaned closer, his gaze locked on her mouth, letting her know exactly what he was thinking. Waiting for her.

He lifted his gaze to hers. “Just that life is short. I’ve learned that much. And it’s almost Christmas and I want to kiss you good night.”

He was already kissing her. She could almost feel his lips on hers as he watched her. Her thoughts tilted.

“No?” he asked, with the slow shake of his head.

She did the same without any conviction as steam began fogging up her vision. Heat rocketed through her, making her dizzy. He still smelled... impossibly good, considering the night he’d just had. “I-I mean—”

Amusement curved his lips as he watched indecision scroll across her common sense. “Yes?”

“As long as it’s not just about the chocolate cake...”

“Definitely not.” He dropped his mouth on hers and kissed her—softly at first, tasting her, then kissed her again like he meant it, pressing her back against the wreath on the front door with its fragrant evergreen scent.

It wasn't a good-night kiss. It was more of a pent-up, finally kind of kiss that made her knees nearly buckle. And she kissed him back, opening her mouth to him when he urged her, sending a riot of sensations through her that she had no control over, apparently. Particularly the needy sound that seemed to come from somewhere deep inside her.

He pulled her up against him, his big hands scrolling across her spine and lower back. The top of her hip.

Oh, she loved his kiss. Loved the taste of him. And wanted more.

Somehow, she dredged up enough restraint to keep from wrapping herself around him like a koala, from the long, long lack of such a mind-bending kiss. Instead, she flattened both her hands against his muscled chest in a push-pull sort of motion. Stay. Go. I want you. I shouldn't.

Finally, he broke the kiss, his breath coming as fast and hard as hers, but he stared down at her under the Christmas lights with what might be described as restrained resolve. Or barely leashed hunger.

He pushed a fallen lock of hair off her face. "G' night, Cami." Then, he turned and took her porch steps two at a time, tossing one more look back at her with that grin that made her toes tingle.

"Night," she called after him, pressing her back up against the door for moral support.

He hopped in his truck and pulled down her driveway and was gone.

Good grief, Cami. What in the world have you done?

She stood in the dark another few moments before a sound to her left made her jump,

and Ryan appeared in the darkness, coming from the barn. He looked as startled to see her standing there as she did to see him.

“You just about gave me a heart attack. It’s late,” she said. “What are you doing up? And why are you out here?”

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He looked guilty of something, but she couldn't imagine what. "I was, uh... just putting blankets on Kholá, Lulu and She-Ra. It's cold out tonight."

"I thought they were already blanketed," she said, opening the door to usher him inside.

His cheeks reddened. "Maybe earlier. But... but I just did it and got them settled."

Hmm. "Okay. I'm sure they'll appreciate being a little warmer tonight. It's really cold."

"How was your date?" he asked, shrugging out of his coat.

"It wasn't a date."

He smirked at her. "Whatever you say. See you tomorrow. G' night."

"Night Ry. And it wasn't a date." Except for the good-night kiss part. That part was definitely... the end of a date.

*

Gus bent over his daughter who was sound asleep, brushed her hair back softly and kissed her good night. He would never get over how angelic she looked asleep. How all the troubles and worries in her little world vanished when she closed her eyes.

Sometimes, when she didn't know he was watching, he would catch her staring off

into the distance, her thoughts miles from him. It was a gaze too deep for a six-year-old and full of longing he understood completely. And when she caught him watching, she would simply smile and go on with her day. He, on the other hand, would blame himself for her loneliness and vow to fix it for her. But there were some things that he couldn't fix.

The house was quiet. Luke was asleep already, too, but Gus, feeling conflicted and off-center, decided to pour himself a drink before bed. Tension had him by the neck, and he rubbed a hand over the back of it as he sat down on the living room couch to stare at the ice cubes clattering against the sides of the crystal glass.

Downing a few sips quickly, he set the glass on the coffee table beside him and closed his eyes, thinking of Cami. About that kiss and the need that rose up in him when she kissed him back. He leaned back against the couch cushions feeling inordinately tired.

In his mind, he reviewed the night and the way she'd looked at him. Her arguments against getting involved and how none of that had stopped what had happened between them. How her lips had felt under his kiss and how long it had been since he'd kissed anyone like that.

He draped a forearm over his eyes, blocking out the light from the nearby lamp. She was probably right. They shouldn't go there. He knew that. But they'd been thrown together because of this baby. This miracle baby, who had singlehandedly drawn them together because she needed a family. A home. Help. Otherwise, would he have even met Cami? Talked to her? Gotten to know the Hardestys? It was like Lolly had opened a door to them all.

"Because that's what children do," said a familiar voice from beside him.

Startled, he sat up to find Lissa, stretched out on the couch beside him, wearing those

beat-up old sweats she loved and the tee shirt with the heart painted on the front. She looked strong and healthy as she had when they'd first married, not the way she had in the end. She was herself. And beside her, he felt like himself, too.

His throat clogged. His relief at seeing her again tightened his chest like a cinch. "I-I didn't think I'd see you again. I've missed you, Liss."

She smiled the way she used to when she'd see him first thing in the morning. Like he was better than her first cup of coffee. "I thought it was better. For you. You know? And you see? It was."

It was more than just a comfort to see her again. He couldn't take his eyes off her. She looked good.

"So," he said. "You saw her."

She nodded.

"And you already know. I kissed her."

"She's very pretty, Gus. I like her."

I do, too. He didn't say it out loud, but she heard it all the same.

"That makes me happy," she said.

The tension drained out of him, and he took a long sip of whiskey, spinning the ice in his drink against the sides. "But what if it's more than that?"

"And... that would mean—"

“I don’t know. The end of something. Of us?”

She crossed her feet beside him on the couch and twirled a piece of her long, dark hair with her fingers. “No. There will always be anus. But you can’t be disloyal to a dead wife, Gus. Not forever. Sooner or later, you’ll have to seriously let me go.”

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A muscle jumped in his jaw and his eyes burned.

“Do you remember the day Ella was born?” she said, sitting up and scooting closer to him. “How happy we were? And how she was watching us through that plastic incubator, her eyes all blue and bright and locked in on us both? As if, out of all those people in the room, she knew exactly who we were?”

He nodded. He would never forget that moment.

“Well, that’s because she did. She chose us. You and me. But now, you’re all she has left. Except for Luke. And, well, now the dog.”

Of course, she knew about the dog. “I think she asked Santa for one.”

“Didshe?”

He frowned a little as Lissa laughed softly, then leaned close, close enough that he thought he could catch the sweet fragrance of her. A scent that he’d nearly forgotten except for the few clothes of hers he’d saved and never washed. The ones she was wearing in fact.

“If I could still give her what she needs, you know I would. But that’s all on you now. I wish things were different...”

“I know that.” He rubbed his forehead hard. “She misses you. So much.”

“Children are so resilient, aren’t they? She can love again. Fully and without regret.

As can you, my darling.”

She got up and walked to the back of the couch, brushing her fingers along the back of his neck, like a whisper.

“That’s easy for you to say. I’m on my own here with—”

But when he turned to reach for her hand, she was gone. As if she’d never been there.

And he glanced at the louvered window and saw that morning was just beginning to break.

Chapter Ten

He asked Cami to lunch the next day with Eloise and Luke and they found a small window to take Eloise ice-skating on Miracle Lake, which only revealed how long it had been since Gus had been ice-skating. Still, Eloise had laughed and laughed, and watching her and Luke—who had played ice hockey as a kid—playing together was a joy. Luke held her arm the first few times around, then somehow, she ended up with Gus, while Eloise skated circles around them both.

“I thought you said she didn’t know how to skate,” Cami said, watching Ella with envy.

“I had no idea,” he admitted. “Her babysitter’s apparently been bringing her here now and then when I’m working late in the afternoons. I guess there’s a lot I need to catch up on.”

Cami sighed. “It’s a truth universally acknowledged that children will find a way to make their parents feel inadequate. That goes for teachers, too, by the way.”

“You’re just trying to make me feel better.”

“I am.” She grinned. “But we grown-ups better have each other’s backs or, frankly, we’re doomed.”

“If you put it that way,” he said, taking her hand and pulling her toward him on the ice. She collided with him, and he held her firmly against him. For a long moment, he looked like he might kiss her again. But as Eloise and Luke spun by, he pushed off, tugging her along with him. Eventually, she found her balance and they spent the next hour gliding along the rink together alongside his brother and daughter, talking about Lolly and Christmas and the puppy he was soon to pick up for Eloise that he would keep at Doc Anders’s house until Christmas Eve. Cami wished she could see Eloise’s face when he gave it to her.

Aside from thinking about all the things she’d never get to do with Gus and Eloise after they left, it was a dreamy afternoon when she had a million other things she needed to do. She didn’t care. She wanted to be in the moment with him and with Eloise. Especially when Eloise grabbed her hand and stole her away from Gus for a skate around the small lake.

Miracle Lake had gotten its name a long, long time ago for being responsible for the miracle of a child saved from drowning. But for her, today, this lake had ushered up its own little miracle after years of her imagining she’d never meet someone like Gus who could just hold her like she really mattered. Someone whose heart just clicked with hers. Someone she could fall in love with. She wanted to remember today, without regret, but not just because she was having more fun than she’d had in a long time, but because she could sense an ending coming.

*

It was late afternoon on Thursday when Cami found Sarah standing in the kitchen

with every cabinet open as Cami rushed to get out the door for the pageant that evening. She was holding Lolly, who was wide awake and seemed happy to be held. Cami dipped her nose against the baby's little head and sniffed. There had to be something pheromonal about that baby smell, that instantly made her feel calm and happy. Someone should bottle that fragrance.

Bent over, searching the pantry cupboard, Sarah was muttering to herself and jumped when Cami said, "If it's Liam you're looking for, Mom, you should probably try his house."

"Very funny. I am not looking for your brother."

Taking in the open cupboards, Cami poured herself some afternoon coffee from the carafe into a to-go stainless mug. "I heard the muttering and I assumed..." She swayed with Lolly on her left hip.

"Ha-ha. No, I'm looking for the loaf of bread I picked up yesterday at the store. I put it right here on the counter and now it's gone."

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Cami made a face, stirring milk into her coffee. “Well, then—Liam. You know he’s a bottomless pit. Always has been.”

“I already asked him. And Shay. They both said it wasn’t them. It wasn’t you was it, Lolly?” she asked, reaching to take her out of Cami’s arms.

Lolly blew a bubble in reply.

“I didn’t think so. Did you have a good nap? Look at that little face... so beautiful.”

Cami was falling in more love with her with each passing day. “Isn’t she? I think she just might be perfect.”

Sarah kissed her. “Yes, you are. You are just perfect! Now if only I could find that bread. And also, the block of cheddar cheese that vanished two days ago.”

“I hate to ask anyone to risk looking under teenaged boy’s bed, but the cheese sounds suspiciously like Ryan.”

Sarah shook her head. “He’s denied it, too.”

“I guess that just leaves me, sleep-eating, I suppose,” Cami said, grabbing a tangerine from the counter bowl before changing her mind and tossing it back. “Kidding. It wouldn’t be me. I’d go straight for the Haagen Dazs.”

“I don’t think a whole loaf of bread just up and walks away on its own. Do you?”

She sighed. “Stranger things have happened at the Hard Eight.”

“Well. That’s true. I give up. I’ll just have to take this little ball of happiness to the store with me to get another loaf.” She chuckled Lolly under her chin. “But first, a bottle.”

“Thanks, Mom. She’ll do five ounces, but make sure you bring another bottle to the pageant when you come. In case she gets hungry. You are bringing her, right?”

“Of course! We’re all coming. Wouldn’t miss it. Is… Gus coming?”

She nodded. “I saw him briefly yesterday when he picked up Ella at rehearsal. He’s been swamped with work, but promised he was coming tonight. Ella’s very excited to be an angel.”

“Hmm,” Sarah murmured. “Maybe she’s not the only reason Gus is coming.”

She hadn’t even told anyone about the kiss at the door the other night or even their rendezvous at Miracle Lake, which was just as well. Why add more ammunition to the well-founded arguments against getting involved with someone who was on his way out of town? Her family could be relentless.

But at the same time, that kiss and that afternoon together had only made her want him more. Made her think about him constantly since then. But today, she was forcing herself to let it all go and to focus on the present. The pageant. She had better things to do besides obsessing.

Cami kissed her mom and skillfully changed the subject. “And tell Ryan he has to turn his cell phone off during the pageant. No texting his friends.”

“Go. Don’t worry about anything now. Just focus on getting those kids on their

marks. I'll take care of the Hardesty faction."

"Love you!"

"Love you right back!"

*

In between calls to local ranches, Gus stopped at the bus station at the edge of town as he'd promised Cami he would. There were few enough means of getting out of Marietta without a car, but the bus was one. Even that had been threatened with closure next year as all bus stations around the country struggled to stay afloat. It was a long shot to imagine anyone would remember Tara, even if she had come here but at least they could illuminate the possibility.

There were only a few people sitting in the plastic chaired waiting area and one man behind the counter. Gus approached him. He was an older gentleman, with white hair and beard, and a friendly, familiar smile. The nametag on his grey uniform read NICKCUMMINS.

"Nick, right?" he said by way of breaking the ice.

Nick smiled. "That's me. How can I help you, sir?" he asked, pulling a bus schedule lying beside him to be ready for Gus's question.

"I'm not here for a ticket," Gus said. "I had a couple of questions, if you wouldn't mind."

Nick glanced around at the nearly empty terminal. "That's what I'm here for. What can I help you with?"

“I was wondering if by any chance you could—I’m looking for someone. A young woman, around eighteen, nineteen. She would have come here pretty recently. Maybe she bought a ticket from you? Her name’s Tara. Tara Howard. She’s pretty, blonde with some pink in her hair? Maybe pink-tipped ends?”

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Nick nodded. “That wasn’t the name she gave, but I remember her alright.”

“So, she came in for a ticket?”

“She did.”

Gus’s stomach dropped a little, waiting as Nick pulled up a screen on his computer and scrolled backward until he found what he was looking for.

Turning the screen, he showed Gus. “Here it is. She said her name was... Mary Smith.”

Gus shouldn’t have felt disappointed by this news, but he was. “Not very original.”

“You’d be surprised how often that name pops up. So, Mister—”

“Doctor. Claymore. Gus Claymore.”

“Dr. Claymore. You a relative? Friend?”

“Not exactly. Just concerned for her. And I’m not alone. There’s a bunch of people worried for her.”

“As well they might be.”

“Why do you say that?”

“My job here isn’t to meddle, you see. But she came in looking real upset. Like she’d been crying. Wanted to go anywhere her money—which wasn’t much—wherever it would take her. Not even enough, as a matter of fact, to get her much past Billings. Teenagers...” Nick shook his head. “They’ve got so much lining up against them. I felt for her.”

“So, shedidtake a bus?”

“Well, I gave her a free seat to Boise. It was a canceled ticket that couldn’t be refunded. I was doing her a favor. Looked like she needed it.”

Gus sighed and rubbed his forehead. So that was that. She’d left town, left the baby and her life here behind. This would put a whole new spin on—

“I gave it to her,” Nick said. “Sent her over there to wait for it, but in the end, she didn’t take it.”

Gus blinked. “She didn’t take—”

“That bus. It left without her. I saw her sitting there after it left, still crying. On my break I went out to find her, but by then she’d disappeared.”

Shock rifled through him. So... no bus. No car. No friends to help her. What if she hadn’t left town at all? What if... what if she was still here? Somewhere.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t help you more. Or her,” Nick said.

“No. You helped. Thank you.”

Nick smiled and winked at him.

That was when it hit Gus. “Wait. We’ve met before, haven’t we? Were you... playing Santa over at the Graff?”

The old man chuckled. “I wondered if you’d remember me. I believe I met your little girl. Ella, wasn’t it?”

How the heck had he remembered her name? “Yeah. It’s Eloise. Ella for short.”

“Ah, yes. The doubter.”

“I don’t lie to her,” Gus said, a little defensively.

Nick folded his big hands. “Understood.”

“Right. Well, nice to see you. Again.” He started to leave but turned back and walked close to the counter Nick was behind. “By the way... she whispered something to you that day about what she wanted? At least I think that’s what she told you. Was it?”

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“Oh, yes. I seem to recall she did.”

“She wouldn’t tell me what she told you. I think it was a test or... something like that. For you, obviously. So, it would be useful to know if I’ve gotten it right. I mean I think I did. I got her a puppy. She’s been wanting one for a long time. Was that what she asked you for?”

Nick’s expression softened and he winked at Gus again. “If it’s a test, then perhaps we should see if I pass it?”

“Look, we both know your Santa thing is a cos-play side gig. That’s great, but I’m just trying to make sure she has a good Christmas morning. Okay? So, please, just tell me what she asked for.”

“Gus—can I call you Gus? Children ask me for lots of things, but it’s my opinion that parents always know best what their children need most.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sakes! Ex-cuseme!” said an elderly woman who’d appeared behind him, shoving past Gus with her elbow. “I need to buy a ticket if you don’t mind. Take all day...” she grumbled. “There are other people here who need to catch a bus, you know!”

Nick’s smile was every bit as welcoming to this migraine of a woman as he was to him. “Yes, ma’am. How can I help you?”

“It’s about time. I thought he’d never stop yapping.”

Nick just smiled at Gus who, buffaloeed by the old woman's interruption, held up his hands and backed up. "I apologize," he said. "I didn't see anyone waiting."

"Course you didn't," she said. "So tied up in your own troubles. Young folks these days. Can't see past their own two shoes."

Gus just shook his head. He wasn't about to argue with her, and Nick seemed to have moved on without answering his question. Frustrated by the whole thing, Gus walked out of the terminal and out into the cold afternoon contemplating not only what Nick had said, but what he'd left unsaid.

Parents always know best what their children need most.

Need. Not want.

He shoved his hands in his pockets, thinking of Lissa. If she were here right now, she'd know exactly what Ella needed most. But he felt lost, as he did most of the time, focusing on what was right in front of him and not the bigger picture. Because the bigger picture had actually felt like an anvil pressing down on him. It was how he had gotten through his grief over losing Lissa, one breath at a time. One day. One job.

Her last visit had felt so real and yet so final. Maybe that meant it was time to move forward, see more than his own two feet. It was... remotely possible that the crabby old woman had a point. See, instead, the road before him and not focus on the broken road behind him that had brought him here.

He thought of Cami's sparkle, her laugh, her kiss and how long it had been since he'd even opened himself up to someone like her. And it occurred to him, like an out loud voice saying it, that he could fall for her. He had fallen for her.

He might be in love with her.

Just thinking that caught him off guard.

But what kind of risk would that be for his daughter? What if she got attached to Cami and it didn't work out? What if he—

Damn the voice in his head!

Here he was, judging Tara—practically a child herself—for leaving her baby with Cami and a loving family because her life was falling apart, when he himself was about to walk away from the possibility of love because of what? Fear? When he had so much more going for him than Tara had ever had. And when did his life ever promise him anything? There were no guarantees. There were only options. Take this road and not that. Go here, or don't. Allow your heart to risk being broken again or keep it safe on high ground.

Maybe he'd always done that. Maybe even with Lissa.

Maybe with everyone except Ella.

*

Herding cats must be easier than directing a play full of six-year-olds.

But aside from the shenanigans going on backstage as they released all their pent-up energy, they all mostly knew their roles and as the church filled with families and relatives here to watch the pageant late that afternoon. Cami peeked around the corner to see her family there in the front. All of them... minus Ryan.

She frowned, scanning the room for him, assuming he must be sitting with friends. Heaven forbid he'd be forced to sit with family! But Will and Izzy were there. Liam. Shay and Cooper. And Ray Lane was sitting beside Sarah who was holding little

Lolly, all dressed for Christmas, who looked like she was sleeping. Cami's arms actually ached, watching her.

To the right, she spotted Gus and Luke, who caught sight of her at the same time. Gus smiled and gave her a small wave. She finger-waved back. Their eyes locked for a few more seconds than strictly necessary.

God, he looked good. Really good. Good enough to—

Focus!

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Cami backed away from the corner of the stage and leaned against the wall. There really was something wrong with her. She couldn't seem to control her wayward thoughts when he was nearby. It was probably just a crush. Was that even a thing for a nearly thirty-year-old woman?

A few minutes ago, he'd texted her to tell her he'd learned some info on Tara and to wish her luck. She started to text him back with a little heart emoji. Then she deleted it. Then she sent it.

Then she questioned her entire existence.

"Ready to go?" asked someone behind her. Her co-director, Trina Parker, was grinning at her. Dressed in a period gown—made expertly from a bedsheet—she was standing hands on her hips, watching Cami. "Or do you need a little more ogle time?"

"Okay, I was not ogling. And yes, I'm ready. Are you? How about Reverend Milner?"

"He's ready. Keep your fingers and toes crossed that our kids don't devolve into chaos. Let's do this," Trina said.

The lights went down, and the audience quieted. And the reverend started the service with a brief story about the origin of Christmas. As he spoke the Canaday family, who had generously trailered in the special effects for the pageant—a small donkey, two sheep for the shepherds, and an alpaca standing in for the wise men's camel—readied them backstage. Trina was helping wrangle the animals along with Mrs. Canaday, who substitute-taught at the Sunday school here.

The church was soon echoing with hymns and full of holiday spirit as the children took their places. As the Christmas story unfolded and the reverend intertwined the story with hymns, little Joseph and Mary, wandered out across the chancel stage holding the miniature donkey. And the angels—Ella waved at her from the stage as she adjusted her wings—climbed up the little platform to stand near the sparkly paper stars hanging there.

Everything was going fine until...

“And the angels on high—” the reverend was saying, “who had come unto Mary...”

“Oh-oh. Oh no!” Trina whispered to Cami, pointing in the direction of Harrison Deitmore, their third wise man and inveterate troublemaker, who was standing up in the right-hand ambo across from the reverend’s pulpit, directing the singing of “O Come All Ye Faithful,” with a wave of his arms.

Cami dropped the shepherd’s hooks she was holding and raced behind the organ to get to him. By then, however, the audience was laughing, and Harrison was eating up the attention, so his invisible baton-waving got grander.

Cami whisper-shouted at the boy. “Harrison! Come down here. Right now!”

He ignored her, predictably, encouraged by the laughing in the audience. Behind her, the angels were dutifully playing their parts from the platform, sprinkling sparkles over the manger. And the alpaca wandered onto the stage without her wise man. Trina had abandoned her post to help get Harrison out of the ambo.

Meanwhile, the mini donkey began to bray with the music and Mary—little Leticia Miller—stood in the center of the chancel stage, holding the wrapped in swaddling clothes baby doll, looking like she wanted to cry.

“Harrison!” Trina shouted, finally marching up the three steps to tug him back down.

“Oh, my gosh!” Cami gulped air, whispering to Trina as they took Harrison toward his entrance point. “What. Is. Happening?”

“The parents are loving it. Don’t freak out.”

“No! Harrison, you listen now. You go right now and get that alpaca and then walk over to the baby Jesus with your frankincense. Go straight there, you hear me? The other boys will join you.”

And then the reverend—the sweet reverend—came to her rescue. “And the wise men traveled great distances with many travails to reach Jerusalem.” Insert big laugh here from the audience. “Encountering hostile environments and long, uphill journeys to reach their goal. But they finally arrived just after Mary gave birth.”

“Spotlight!” Cami pointed at the high school boy running the lights, who was understandably distracted by the shenanigans on stage. He flipped on the heavenly spotlight on the manger where a doll stood in for the real thing.

Suddenly the stage was filled with all of the children as the North Star began swinging wildly over the angels. The reverend directed another hymn, “Angels We Have Heard on High” to be sung.

It was at that moment, Cami risked a look out at the audience. At her family, who were laughing and singing along with everyone else; at Gus and Luke, whose gazes were trained on the little angels on the platform. And finally, she spotted Ryan, standing at the back of the sanctuary with his arm around—

A girl—a young woman—with hair that was long, and blonde, and tipped with pink.

Chapter Eleven

The family surrounded Tara Howard who was holding Lolly in their living room at the Hard Eight. Gus and Ella had come, too, having a vested interest in all this. Cami was trying valiantly to keep it together, torn between relief that Tara had not only been found, but had come here on her own—and a kind of heartache she couldn't even share with anyone at the thought of relinquishing this child she'd already fallen in love with so soon.

The crowded Christmas pageant had not been the place to question why or how she was there or what it meant, or the fact that her nephew apparently knew more about Tara than any of them. Cami had nothing but questions, but asked none of them at the church, where it had taken time to get through all the families thanking her for the pageant and laughing about how it was one they wouldn't forget. Cami certainly wouldn't either.

"I'm sorry," Tara had managed to say when Cami approached her after the pageant. "I didn't know what else to do." Then she burst into tears.

"I know." Cami had put an arm around her and promised they'd talk it out back at the ranch.

Tara had looked longingly at the baby Sarah was holding, but that, too, would have to wait until they were home.

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Twenty minutes later, Shay pulled her newly licensed son aside after he and Tara arrived back in the pickup truck he'd driven her to town in. Sarah made some tea and a plate of actual food and offered it to Tara who seemed overcome with emotion. Maybe it was fear. Cami imagined how hard facing all of them must be after what she'd done. But, somehow, Ryan had become her advocate and rescuer.

"What in the world, Ryan?" Shay said, standing across the room from Tara with her son where she couldn't hear. "Where did you find her?"

"In the loft," he said. "In the small barn. I found her there a few days ago."

"What?" Cami practically croaked. "She's been here? While we've been trying to find her? The whole time?"

"Not the whole time. Just a couple of days. I heard somebody moving around up there so I went to check. She was up there hiding, trying to work up the courage to talk to you, figure out what to do, and I helped her. She asked me not to tell. She was scared. Because, let's face it, in her shoes, I would be too. You all are a lot."

Shay and Cami exchanged slightly offended looks. "Says the boy who just kept the biggest secret of his life from us."

"You would've done the same," he told Cami, puffing up his chest a little.

When had he become man-sized in body and heart?

She started to argue that of course she wouldn't have done that but stopped. Maybe

he was right. Maybe protecting the girl who'd had nothing but heartbreak in her life until she got brave enough to face it was what Cami would have done. The question was, what should she do now?

"And you've been feeding her up there?" Shay asked. "Hiding her?"

"Just with some extra stuff," he said. "We can spare it."

"Like cheese?" Sarah said dryly, leaning in. "And my missing loaf of bread?"

His cheeks reddened. "Yeah. But mostly from my own meals. I just saved some for her."

Cami touched his arm. "That was very kind of you, Ryan. I'm proud of you for taking care of her. And I'm glad you finally convinced her to come out and meet us." She glanced over at the girl, kissing the top of Lolly's head.

The baby reached up and touched her mother's face.

"I didn't really convince her. I just told her she didn't have to be afraid of you. That you'd figure things out. She decided on her own."

"What has she told you?" Shay asked him. "About the baby? About what she did."

"She better tell you all that."

Cami nodded. He was right. She needed to hear this from Tara herself. Right then, Ella was telling Tara how Lolly liked watching Poppy and Pippa, and how she'd gotten to hold Lolly when Cami was there.

Gus intercepted Cami on her way back to Tara. "You okay?" he asked quietly.

No. I'm not. "I'm fine. Really. We just need to get to the bottom of this."

"No," he said, "I meant I know you've gotten... attached to her."

"Attached. That sounds much more clinical than how I feel right now. But we've all wanted what was best for Lolly. She belongs with her mother. And if that's what Tara wants, then we have to make sure that happens." If was the big question. Maybe she'd only come back to explain herself.

"You're right. But I know that doesn't make it easy."

She shook her head, emotions clogging her throat. "We'd better get this over with. Let's find out her intentions."

"Maybe Ella and I should go—" he began.

She grabbed his arm. "No. Stay. You're part of this just like I am. Stay."

"Okay."

"But I'll get Liam to take Ella out to see the horses. Shouldn't be here for this."

*

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Sarah fed Tarea thick sandwich before she settled her down to explain herself. She was hungry and exhausted, her young face drawn with despair, but she held Lolly tight against her. Gus didn't sit with Cami, but leaned against a wall, watching Tara. Will and Izzy had left, not wanting to overwhelm her with so many Hardestys ganging up on her. But Cooper was there with Shay and Ray was sitting with Sarah, who took the baby and rocked her against her shoulder, leaving Tara free to talk. She looked rough, as one would after sleeping in a barn for days, and she plucked at her straggly hair in apology as she began to talk.

"First, please don't be mad at Ryan for helping me for the last few days. He didn't have to, but I'm grateful to him."

Ryan, who seemed suddenly older than he had a week ago, just smiled at her.

"I'm sorry for hiding in your barn. I had nowhere else to go. And I first just came to make sure you had her. Not that that's an excuse, but—"

"Let's put that all aside for now, Tara," Sarah said. "There're worse things than taking shelter in a barn when you have nowhere else to go. What we want to know is what you were thinking. What you want to do now."

Tara stared down at her hands. She looked young. Younger than nineteen and so very alone.

"I don't expect you to forgive me for what I did—with Lolly. I know what I did was wrong. But I just... couldn't ruin her. I couldn't handle having her end up like me. And before you say it, I know I could have turned her over to an adoption agency.

But I didn't trust any adoption agency to do right by her. And I... somehow, I knew you would—all of you—watch over her. I'm sorry. This wasn't even your problem. It was mine."

"Why don't you start at the beginning, Tara. How did you end up alone, without anyone?" Cami said.

She swallowed hard. "I... made a mistake. A lot of mistakes, actually. I trusted someone I shouldn't have. I was living with the Simons and seeing this older boy they didn't like. Then I aged out. Eighteen. And when that happens, you're just... on your own. Cut off from any support or money or help from anywhere. It's like they just don't care what happens to you after that. It was... understood that I would move out the day I turned too old for their foster care support. They said they would try to help me after, but they had a houseful of kids and not enough money, and my foster dad got a new job up north."

"Go on," Cami said when she faltered in the story.

"Anyway... I knew I wasn't family to them. No matter what they said. Joey, my boyfriend at the time, he told me he wanted us to get married and I thought, maybe finally, I'd... belong somewhere, to someone. And he had a place. So, I moved in with him.

"I had just enough money saved up to buy a used car and I got a job working as a Lyft driver, but he didn't like me doing it. He wanted me to quit and promised to take care of me. But then, he sold my car and kept that money for himself. Said he didn't trust me with it. And when I found out I was pregnant he acted like that was all my fault, too. We fought all the time. He left me for good when I was six months pregnant. I don't even know where he went. Somewhere out of town. After that, I just lost the apartment and was sleeping on friends' couches until Lolly was born. I had her in a friend's house.

“I knew she deserved better than me. A better life than I could give her.” Tara dropped her face in her hands. “I love her already so much, but I can’t keep her.”

Gus spoke from behind Cami. “I spoke to Nick at the bus station. He said he gave you a bus ticket to Boise. But that you didn’t get on that bus.”

She looked surprised that he knew about that.

She nodded. “It was kind of him to do that. I figured it was best for everyone if I left. Disappeared. But in the end, I couldn’t... couldn’t do it. I couldn’t get on that bus. I needed to make sure you all got her and were going to help her. Especially you, Ms. Hardesty,” she said to Cami. “My foster sister used to talk about you all the time. How you always took time for her. Cared about her. Not like other teachers. And she always said if she could ever have a different mom, it would be you.”

Cami’s cheeks got hot and she looked at Gus, who was watching her, too. “I know what you did was hard,” she said. “I can’t imagine how hard. And of course we’ve got her. We would never let anything bad happen to her. But the whole reason you did what you did wasn’t because you didn’t want her. It was because you loved your daughter.”

Tara nodded, trying not to cry and failing.

Cami looked around the room at her family who were all watching her, sitting in their comfortable home, surrounded by Christmas decorations and, most of all, love. Something Tara had possibly never known. “It seems what you need most is support. Help. A way to keep her yourself, but to not be alone.”

Tara blinked up at her as if this thought had not even occurred to her. “But—how?”

“What if you work here?” Sarah said. “We have a family business here on the ranch

that we're building right now. A working guest ranch. If you wanted to, you could work here for us."

"We even have an actual apartment," Shay said. "Right off the barn. You could stay there. You and Lolly."

Sarah's boyfriend, Ray Cooper, spoke up. "I've stayed in that apartment for a while and it's nice. You'd do well there. These are good people, Tara. You can trust them."

"You'd give me a job? And a place to stay?"

Cami glanced around the room, and everyone seemed in agreement. "Do you want to keep Lolly, Tara?"

"Oh, yes," she said on a sob. "Yes, I do."

"Then Lolly could do a lot worse than to be here with her mom and the rest of us looking out for her," Cami told her. "And I've kind of fallen in love with her, too. So, you'd be doing me a favor if you stayed."

"There is the small matter of the sheriff," Cooper reminded them.

"The sheriff knows?" Tara asked, her eyes full of fear now. "No, of course he does."

"But I think we can straighten that out," he said. "Especially since I think we can claim you never technically abandoned her. Will's fiancé, Izzy, has experience in family court advocating for people like you and Lolly. If anyone can straighten this out, she can."

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“Try not to worry about that now,” Cami said. “Let’s take all this one step at a time.”

For the first time since she’d met Tara, she saw a glimmer of hope in her eyes.

Sarah took Tara upstairs for a shower and showed her a spare bed she could use tonight. Every decision that had to be made could wait at least until tomorrow. Until then, Tara needed a good night’s sleep and a place to recover. At least as much as Lolly would allow her to sleep, because she asked for the baby and of course they couldn’t refuse her.

Though they’d all made the offer in good faith, none of them really knew Tara or exactly what to do about her. But giving her a chance seemed fair considering her past, and fair to Lolly, as well. It felt like the right thing to do. But with the wedding coming and Christmas and... everything, Cami felt suddenly exhausted herself.

“I should go,” Gus said to her as the meeting with Tara broke up. “I’d better go find Ella.”

“Liam took her out to the barn. I’ll go with you.” She grabbed a coat by the door and slipped it on.

“By the way, did I mention what a great job you did with the pageant?” he said.

She groaned as they walked out onto the porch. “The pageant was a disaster. And one day, soon, I’ll appreciate the hilarity of the disaster. But Tara showing up there was a perfect ending to a perfectly crazy night.”

“Not one parent there would call it a disaster. Probably more on a scale with an adorable memory they’d chalk up to the wonder of six, seven and eight-year-olds’ ability to create chaos.” He looked at her sideways. “Hey. Are you really okay?”

“Why do you keep asking me that?” she said, focusing on the light on the barn to fend off the sudden rush of dizziness she felt. “I’m fine. Really. I’m just tired and... I think I... forgot to eat today...”

Except now, he was watching her with an annoying frown as a clammy sensation and a flush of heat poured through her. He grabbed her by the arm just as her world began to inexplicably turn dark around the edges. Then, astonishingly, blinked out altogether.

*

Cami’s eyes fluttered open at the feel of something cool and wet on her forehead. At the sight of Gus leaning over her, looking all... dreamy and weirdly worried. “Guuuss... hi.” Then she blinked and took in her surroundings. What was she doing on the couch? “Oh! Gus!!”

“Take it easy,” he said, pushing her back down. “Just lie still a minute.”

“What... happened? Why am I—”

“You fainted. Outside.”

She gasped. “I did not. Faint. I have never fainted in my life.”

“Oh yes, you did,” Shay said. “Gus carried you back inside. Good thing we have a doctor on the ranch tonight. A strong doctor at that.”

A grin replaced the worry on his face. “Nah. You don’t weigh that much.”

“Thanks?” she said, uncertain whether to be horrified or disappointed that he’d picked her up and cradled her in his arms and she had zero memory of it.

Ohnnnhhh.Her head felt muzzy.

“Now, you lie still,” Shay said, being her usual mother-hen self. “I’m going to get you some orange juice.”

Cami pressed a palm against her face, encountering a cool, wet towel someone had placed there. “Ugh. How embarrassing.” She sat up insistently, still a little dizzy.

“Okay. Now you’re just being stubborn,” he said, but allowed her to stay sitting.

“No. I feel dumb. I’m... really sorry you had to—”

“Nothing to be sorry about,” he said, holding her hand. His fingers curled around hers. “Your flame just sputtered out in the yard, that’s all. You’ve had a week. Everybody’s got their breaking point. Probably Lolly, school ending, all the rehearsals and the pageant. Not to mention all the prep you’ve been doing for the upcoming wedding.”

“The wedding!” She groaned at the mention and flopped dramatically back down on the cushions. “There’s still so much to do!”

“Not tonight, there’s not,” he told her. “Here. Drink some juice.” He took the glass from Shay’s hands and forced her to drink.

She obliged.

“Nothing’s going to fall apart because you’re not handling everything,” Shay told her in no uncertain terms. “We’ve got the wedding. All of us. And, Cami, it’s Will and Izzy.Family.”

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“I know,” she said. “But after Izzy’s last disaster of a wedding, it has to be perfect for them.”

“And it will be. Seriously, stop worrying. That’s your trouble, Cami. Always taking care of everyone but yourself.”

Cami clucked her tongue at her sister, but really, she couldn’t argue with that diagnosis. It was a fatal flaw. Youngest-child syndrome. Her wanting to make everyone happy.

Or it was just missing lunch and dinner. And a certain baby she was about to lose.

Cooper, who’d been standing worriedly nearby wrapped an arm around Shay’s shoulder and kissed her on the cheek. “You feeling better, Cams?”

She nodded. “I’m fine now. Thanks. Really. Stop worrying, everyone.”

The two of them moved back to the kitchen, giving her a little space.

“Ididforget to eat today,” she admitted to Gus.

“And you’re probably exhausted. Most likely dehydrated. Blood pressure drops and down you go.”

“Ugh. Did I say anything embarrassing?”

“Nah.Well...” He glanced over to find Shay and Cooper talking quietly together.

“You did mention something about kissing me again, but...” Her eyes widened at his contained grin. “Kidding. You didn’t say that.”

She rubbed her forehead on a laugh. “Maybe I was just thinking it.”

Their eyes met for a long beat, and she thought about just doing it. Never mind Shay and Cooper. Never mind she’d just made a complete fool of herself with him.

But he broke the moment. “You okay now?” His hand was on her arm, not checking her pulse, but instead holding her.

“I’m fine. Really. Please try to delete this moment from your memory.”

“I wouldn’t even if I could. You’ll be fine by morning. Drink some water. Eat something solid. Then get some rest. Doctor’s orders.”

She thought better of blurting out a lame getting-treated-by-a-veterinarian joke.

He started to take away his hand, but she grabbed his arm. “Thank you, Gus. Thanks for... catching me. And... for not letting me crash and burn.”

He squeezed her arm, kissed her on the forehead and stood, leaving her alone on the couch feeling vulnerable and small. “We’ll talk tomorrow. I’m going to go get Ella and get home if you’re sure you’re okay.”

Sitting up again, she proved she was. “Just a little glitch in the matrix. Go. Good night, Gus. See you Saturday, at Will and Izzy’s wedding? You promised me a dance, remember? And I’m gonna hold you to it.”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you about the toes.”

She drew an imaginary zipper across her mouth, tossed the imaginary key, and watched him walk out the door.

Before she could make sense of all the feelings the last few minutes had wrought, Sarah hurried down the stairs and rushed over to Cami. “Cami! Ray said you fainted. Honey, are you all right? What happened?”

“I’m okay. I... just”—Fainted—“fell,” she said simply. And unfortunately, for the absolute wrong guy.

“You’re not... you couldn’t be”—she leaned in and whispered the word—“pregnant, could you?”

“God, no. No. Now, that would be a Christmas miracle.”

Sarah tilted a commiserating look at her. “Maybe all the late nights with Lolly?”

“Right. My temporary child.” She rubbed her head. “I was just beginning to think it might be possible to...” She didn’t finish the sentence, because she might just cry.

“I know. Someday you’ll have your very own, my dear.”

“Yeah. Maybe. If I don’t hit menopause first or keep falling for the wrong guys.”

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Her mom took her hand. “He seems kinda right to me.”

“That’s only because he’s here now, but in a week or two, he’ll be gone.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“So he says. Besides, he’s been running from involvement since his wife died years ago. And I think he’s still in love with her.”

“You don’t stop loving someone after they die. But eventually that person takes another seat at the table and makes room for someone new. For more love. At least, I believe that’s true.”

Maybe it was true that Sarah still somehow loved Cami’s difficult father before he died. But Ray Cooper—her mother’s love—had taken that seat at her table long ago and never left.

“Well, Gus is leaving after Christmas with Eloise and Luke. So, that table feels pretty booked up. It’s okay, Mom. I’m a big girl. I can handle it.”

Big words. Or big lies.

Since the day he’d mentioned, oh, so casually, that he intended to leave after Christmas to move to Denver, a little red warning light had been flashing in her brain. A little red, common-sense light that said *Protect yourself. This won’t end well.* And ignoring that little light was like driving down a road in the dark without headlights, knowing that somewhere up ahead—it could be far ahead or only a few hundred

feet—there was a deep sinkhole and if she wasn't careful, she would plunge right in.

Chapter Twelve

It was decided after that night that Tara would, indeed, move into the apartment that was part of the small barn with Lolly and they would train her for a job on the ranch. Sarah contacted the sheriff the next day and explained the situation. She filled him in on Tara's history and the fact that Tara had never technically left the baby but had been on their ranch all along keeping an eye on her. Sarah had convinced him, as only she could, to trust them to be responsible for Lolly's and Tara's safety, and to guarantee that Tara would enroll in a parenting program at the local hospital. Tara agreed wholeheartedly. It didn't hurt that she and the sheriff had known each other since high school or that he was sympathetic to the plight of aged-out foster kids. He wished all of them well.

"But what will I do?" Tara asked Sarah when all that was finally settled.

"Well, what are you good at?"

"Messing up," she answered, her cheeks coloring. "Obviously." She bounced Lolly on her shoulder and the baby snuggled against her neck.

"Everyone makes mistakes, Tara," Sarah said. "We all have. You can't change your past, but your future is another matter altogether. That's all right there waiting for you to take it. Now, tell me what you enjoy. Maybe we can find a fit on the ranch. And if not exactly, maybe we'll uncover something new that you will enjoy."

"I'll do any job you want. Clean toilets. Sweep floors. I'm good at those."

"Okay. But let's think bigger than that. Are you... good with animals? Do you have any special skills?"

Tara hesitated. “I like animals. I just don’t know any, except for the horses down at the barn. I kinda made friends with them so they wouldn’t give me away. But I learned to do spreadsheets in computer class at school before I... And I’m pretty good at reels. Social media.”

“Excellent!” Shay said. “A younger perspective is awesome for our social media.”

“And I draw some, so I could maybe do art for your guest ranch? If you need it that is...”

“You draw?” Cami asked, surprised.

She lifted her chin as if ready to be shot down. “Yeah. I can show you some if you want.”

Her art was surprising and spectacular. It left all of them speechless. She’d done detailed portraits in pencil and in charcoal, and drawings of Copper Mountain and Marietta alongside some graphic art. But she also pulled out a portrait of Lolly that she must have done before everything happened.

Sarah stared at all of them in awe. “Tara. These are wonderful. How long have you been drawing?”

“My whole life. It was the one thing I could call mine, before Lolly, that is. I wanted a picture of her to keep.”

Cami and Sarah exchanged impressed looks.

“You any good with logos?” Liam asked, washing his hands in the sink. “‘Cause we could sure use a new one.”

“I’ve never done one before, but I could try.” Tara’s face brightened. “But I’ll do anything. I can feed the animals, too, or clean out stalls or—”

“There are always a million things to do on this new guest ranch we’re building, which, for better or worse, won’t really officially open until spring. We’re still building the cottages and glamping tents and putting the finishing touches on our rentals. The Montana winter has put a stop to a lot of that for now. But first things first.” Sarah stood and poured more coffee in everyone’s mug. “You’re going to settle in, get your strength back, and then we’ll figure things out. Right now, the rest of us have got a full day prepping for Will and Izzy’s wedding tomorrow. So, let’s make some breakfast.”

As Sarah returned to the kitchen, Tara turned to Cami and teared up. “I... um... haven’t said thank you, yet, especially to you. For watching over my baby. For not hating me. And for giving me this chance. No one’s ever been this kind to me before.”

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Cami touched Tara's arm. "We all just want to help you and Lolly. No one should have to face what you're facing alone, without any family or help. I know you've had a hard time. Starting today is a whole new beginning for the two of you. And truthfully, I've gotten pretty attached to her so you're doing me a big favor by staying."

"It's like a miracle," Tara murmured against Lolly's soft hair. "It's the last thing I expected would happen."

That wordmiraclehad bounced around in Cami's mind all too often in the last few days. Lolly's sudden appearance had been like a little miracle in all their lives—stuck in the sameness of everyday, and she'd managed to nudge them all out of their little boxes and opened up new possibilities. Particularly for her and Gus. But whether that would end up being a blessing or a heartbreak remained to be seen.

She couldn't think about that now. She couldn't change it. Maybe they were meant to be short timers. Andthatwas the story of her life.

*

On Saturday afternoon,Gus, Ella and Luke arrived at the round barn on the Hard Eight for Will and Izzy's marriage. Gus was grateful they'd allowed him to bring Ella, who was dressed in a fancy little dress that would have made her mama cry. She looked so much like Lissa today, with her chestnut-colored hair curled and falling softly on her shoulders. Luke had put on his best sport coat, tie, and slacks and he looked... put together. Gus had gotten rid of his good black suit after Lissa's funeral but had a dark navy suit that he kept for emergencies, like this wedding.

The renovated round barn was already filling with guests by the time they arrived, and a waiter stuck a glass of champagne in his and Luke's hands as they walked in the door.

Luke grinned and cheers-ed him with a clink of his glass. "Impressive," Luke said.

"You should've seen it last summer. It was nothing like this."

Gus had to admit they'd done an amazing job with the place. What had started as an abandoned relic of the last century had turned into a beautiful venue, complete with a rustic, craftsman staircase to the barn's loft that Izzy would come down. The place was dressed for Christmas, boasting evergreen trees with silver wedding bells and roses dotted around the room and boughs of spruce and red roses tied down the banister. He even spotted some mistletoe hanging from the huge, wrought-iron chandelier at the center of the barn.

Liam and Will had both worked hard on this place and it was well worth the effort. There was a small bandstand where a local band was playing some gentle lead-in music, and white cloth-covered tables formed a semicircle around the flower-covered arch and the slip-covered chair seating at the front of the room.

"There's Amelia!" Ella said, pointing across the room at her friend from school. "Can I go say hi?"

"Sure. I'll be right over here," he said and watched her go skipping past the throng of grown-ups between them. He was grateful to see other kids here. This wasn't going to be a formal affair at all. But family oriented. That was just the Hardesty way.

He took a gulp of champagne, scanning the room for Cami. She would be one of Izzy's bridesmaids, he knew, so she'd probably be with the bride.

His cell phone buzzed in his pocket. The caller ID said Clarissa. His agent.

“Were you ever going to call me back?” she asked before he could even say hello.

“Of course,” he said, still scanning the crowd. “But at the moment, I’m at a wedding.”

“Hah. At least someone’s getting married. There’s still hope in the universe.”

Clarissa Mardor was radically single, and all her talk of marriage was just that. Talk. She was as single as he was and not likely to change.

“The Denver clinic is just wanting confirmation that you’re coming in ten days. They sensed a little uncertainty in your last call with them. I hope they weren’t right. This is a good gig, Gus. I negotiated top dollar for you. And Denver is a good place with lots of opportunities. I know I could find you two or three more there within a few months.”

He switched his phone to his other ear as Luke shot him a questioning look. “I know. It’s just been... complicated.”

“Complicated how?” she asked.

“There was this... baby and—”

“Whaat?”

“No, no, it’s not like that. But there’s been a lot going on here that I can’t really go into.”

Clarissa exhaled, her way of saying, Try. I’m not in the mood for ‘no.’

He bumped into someone and apologized silently. “Alden made me an offer to stay. Take over his practice. He wants to retire.”

Silence on the other end for a long beat. Finally, she cleared her throat. “And you said...”

“I haven’t said anything yet. That wasn’t the plan, but my daughter... she likes it here. And Luke is feeling like—”

“I don’t like pressuring you here, Gus, but let’s face it. What’s the future look like in Marietta, Montana? It’s a small town without a big future for a guy like you. I think Denver would be—”

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“I’m staying,” he said, though he’d already truly decided that days ago. And once he said it aloud, he wondered what had taken him so long. “Tell them no.”

“What?Gus...”

“I’ve met someone here and I want to... make things work.”

“Another agent? Gus, if you’re not happy with me as your—”

“No, Clarissa. A woman. I... might be... I’m in love with her. She’s important to me. And I want to make things work with her. I can’t do that from Denver.”

“I see. You’re turning this down for a possible relationship that might or might not work?”

“That’s right. For her and for Ella, who loves it here and needs some roots. For the puppy I got Ella for Christmas, who’ll be happy as a clam to have beautiful places to run. For myself, too. Because as Luke has so astutely pointed out, I can’t go on like this forever. It’s time to stop.”

A waiter passed with a tray of appetizers and Gus snagged a stuffed mushroom, popping it in his mouth. He was suddenly hungry. Starving.

Clarissa sighed again. “Well, I’d like to say I’m disappointed, you being a great client and all, but honestly? Gus, I am happy for you. And surprised. I try not to get emotionally invested in my clients, because... you know. This happens eventually. But I’d all but given up on you putting things behind you and moving on. If you’re

happy, then I am. Minus, of course, my future commissions.”

Relief tumbled through him that she wasn’t furious with him. “I think this place can really be home for us. I don’t need Denver or LA or any elite practices to build my resume. This is really it. It’s time.”

“Okay. I’ll tell the practice in Denver your final answer. Let me know how it goes there. If there’s anything I can do... I hope everything works out the way you want.”

“Thanks, Clarissa. I mean it.”

He hung up, scanning the room again for Cami. He’d thought about telling her tonight, but decided to wait until he firmed up his deal with Alden. He wanted all his ducks in a row before he said anything.

The guests began getting seated and he found Ella but not Luke, who seemed to have vanished into thin air. He and Ella sat on Will’s side of the aisle. Across the way, Izzy’s parents—apparently big deals in Texas politics—sat beside Izzy’s favorite grandmother and a bunch of Izzy’s friends from Dallas who’d flown out for the wedding. Will’s business partner in the limo company, Isaiah, a giant of a man dressed in a tux ran a hand over his bald head and grinned as he walked out to join the minister and Will walked out behind him to wait for Izzy.

Behind them, someone on the piano began playing a perfect John Legend song, and when the singer began the lyrics, Gus spun around to find Luke sitting behind the piano, singing.

“Daddy! It’s Uncle Luke singing,” Ella whispered.

What the—? Luke hadn’t said a thing about this. He sounded really good. Not that he didn’t know his brother could sing, but how had he ended up singing at Will and

Izzy's wedding? And he'd kept it a secret from both of them.

But Gus hardly had time to take that in before spotting Cami and the other bridesmaids coming down the stairs. Dressed in icy, silvery blue, and looking as pretty as he'd ever seen her, Cami came down first, followed by two others escorted by a couple of Will's friends. He caught her eye as she descended, and a quick smile flicked at her mouth, but she was focused on her task.

Then, Izzy began descending the stairway. This time, not on her father's arm, but alone, a shy smile on her lips, her long reddish hair tied up in a messy, but elegant bun and dotted with white rosebuds. She was a picture in that white gown, as simple as it was elegant.

Over the past six months, he'd gotten to know her and Will a bit through his visits to the ranch and he envied them the ease of not only their friendship, but obvious love for each other. Their love story had been unique, having spun off a complete wedding fail of Izzy's back in Dallas to a man who clearly didn't deserve her.

Now, she beamed at Will who stood waiting for her beneath the arch of flowers, and he only had eyes for her.

Gus swallowed thickly. Weddings. Man. They always got to him.

"Isn't she beautiful?" Ella whispered.

But now Gus was looking at Cami. "Yeah. She sure is, love."

At the makeshift altar, Izzy and Will joined hands and whispered something to each other that no one else could hear.

An old friend of Will's was serving as the minister. "Welcome, friends, to this joyous

occasion, and thank you all for coming to share this day with Will and Isabella and their families... If anyone had told me a year and a half ago, I'd be standing up here to preside over the marriage of one of my best friends, this friend in particular, I would have told you absolutely not. Not Will. But that's only because Will hadn't met Isabella—Izzy, for short—yet. And that meeting changed everything.”

Gus stared at Cami as the ceremony went on, thinking how life could turn on a dime and change plans. Meeting her, finding Lolly together, feeling at home in this small town had not been part of his plan. But like Will and Izzy, whose meeting had been random and unplanned almost a year and a half ago, at a low point in their lives, had put a strange spin on both their paths—happily so—and here they were, saying their I dos. When he'd married Lissa, he'd never once imagined he'd be a single dad, raising their child alone or that he'd ever be unlocking his heart once again, enough to find a woman like Cami.

He found himself wishing Izzy and Will a long, happy life together without the drama or pain of unexpected U-turns.

“That day in Dallas,” Will was saying, holding her hands, “the day you kidnapped me and my limo for a drive to the West Coast”—Izzy laughed—“I never saw it coming. My life changed for the better in every single way. Izzy, you are my heart, my life, and my everything. And I promise to love you, protect you, support you, and drive you wherever you want to go... in my limo. As long as I'm by your side.”

Then it was her turn. “Will, I believe if you asked my parents, it was you who kidnapped me that day in Dallas. But the truth is, we rescued each other that day. We took each other on an adventure that changed us. Revealed and healed us. You showed me what home could really mean and what it means to be truly loved. I'm so lucky to have you in my life, as my husband and, yes, open that limo door and I'll go anywhere with you. But,” she said, taking in the family surrounding them, “we should probably stay right here for a while.”

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That drew a laugh from the guests, most of whom clearly wanted that, too.

They exchanged rings and kissed deeply to seal the deal. It was a kiss that brought the audience to their feet and as they walked down the aisle of chairs, everyone applauded and, Gus imagined, were as inspired as he was by this new beginning.

Weddings. They always got to him.

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There were photost to be taken and after that, Cami helped Izzy out of her wedding gown and into the reception gown she'd decided to wear, which facilitated the line dancing that would be happening.

"Well, you did it. How does it feel to be a married lady?" she asked her new sister-in-law.

Izzy sighed happily. "I know I'm supposed to say it feels different... amazing, and I guess it does. But honestly, since we met—Will and I—in that very unlikely way, I've felt exactly the same as I do right now. That bond we share has never faltered. So, this"—she indicated the beautiful gown on the chair—"was more of a celebration of what we already had that we wanted to share with all of you. Does that sound weird?"

"Not at all. You two are solid. We can all see it. And the rest of us can only hope for that kind of love and commitment finding us someday."

Izzy met her gaze and took Cami's hands in hers. "I know it's kind of early days, but what about Gus? Don't tell me you don't see how he looks at you."

She clucked her tongue. "Today is not the day to be discussing my love life or lack thereof. It's all about you and Will. Now, let me zip you up. You need to get back out there to your admiring public."

"My parents are out there. Promise you'll run interference with my mother if she starts getting political."

"I'm your man," Cami said. "She'll be fine. I think she's come around about Will."

Izzy's family—mostly her mother—was none too happy about her running off with a limo driver after her failed wedding, but Cami knew Izzy was glad they'd come to Montana to meet him and his family, which, in the end, had eased most of their fears. Though ranching in a place as remote as Montana was far outside their Dallas society circles, they might just have accepted that Izzy was never again going to be that girl who followed their rules.

Back at the reception, the band had started up again and Cami searched the crowd for Gus. She found him across the barn, talking to a local rancher named George Smartt, who looked to be deep in conversation, probably about his cows. Gus snuck an apologetic look in her direction, unable to get free. She started to make her way across the room to rescue him when she was waylaid by a half-dozen friends and school colleagues who wanted to talk about the pageant and other questionable things she'd rather not talk about right now. But before she could say no, one of her male teacher friends tugged her out onto the dance floor and insisted on a dance.

Greg Wilson was a handsome, single, thirty-something third-grade teacher who was loved by all of his students and the faculty as well. His family and hers had known one another for years. Many of her friends had tried to fix them up, but Cami had

always argued that she had firm rules against dating colleagues. And despite being in proximity to him for the whole past school year, he had never once made her feel the way Gus did—like she'd just stepped out of an airplane into thin air.

Greg caught her looking at Gus. "So, that's him, huh?" he said.

She jerked her look back to Greg. "Excuse me?"

He tipped his chin toward Gus who was still watching them. "I hear he's a good guy."

She felt herself blush. "What are you talking about, Greg?"

"Alden's replacement vet. Hey, it's a small town, Cami. No real secrets around here, really."

"We're just... friends, Greg." And he's leaving town soon.

"Oh. Well, I guess that means I haven't totally lost out yet, then." He laughed awkwardly and Cami stopped dancing.

"Greg, we're colleagues and—"

"I'm just kidding. Sort of. If we were gonna happen, we would have by now. Right?"

She sighed. "It's me. It's not you, Greg. Please, don't take it personally. You're a great guy. Any girl would be lucky to date you."

"To date me? Yeah. That's the problem. I'm kinda looking for more than that. But I get it. Don't worry. I don't want this to make things weird between us."

She was kind of looking for more than that, too. Just not with Greg. "It won't. But I

do see that Izzy has some cute friends here for the wedding. I'm just saying..."

"Okay, okay. Thanks for the dance. But if I don't miss my guess, that guy over there?" he said, gesturing at Gus with a nod. "He's not thinking just friends when he's looking at you."

Indeed, Gus was circling the crowd closer to her. And when the dance finally ended with Greg, she found Gus waiting at the edge of the dance floor for her.

"I was beginning to think I was never going to see you tonight," he said with a grin as she walked up beside him.

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“I’m sorry,” she said. “With all the wedding stuff and photos—”

“You look beautiful.”

She blinked up at him. “Thank you.” She ran a finger along the lapel of his very nice suit. “So do you.” And he did. Oh, he did.

“How are you feeling?” he asked. “You okay after the other day?”

“Can we not talk about the other day? I’m fine. I’m just embarrassed it happened and that you had to witness it.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Because vets are notoriously squeamish about medical emergencies like that.”

“It was hardly an emergency. I just... needed a moment. Apparently. And food.”

He bowed graciously. “Then, consider the whole incident forgotten.”

“Thank you, kind sir. Now. Are you going to ask me to dance or am I going to have to drag you out onto that dance floor myself?”

“The first option, obviously. Wanna dance?”

She offered him her hand. “Yes, please.” She felt suddenly nervous beside him as he pulled her out onto the floor.

He excited her. There was a huge part of her that wanted to just throw herself at him, and throw caution to the wind, but another part that knew she was just asking to get burned by the flame igniting between them.

Luke had rejoined the band on the stage and was singing a cover of a George Strait Christmas song.

“But did you know that Luke would be singing with this band?” he asked as they moved to the floor.

“He didn’t tell you he was singing?”

“He did not.”

Curious. “According to Izzy, the band we had already hired for the wedding happened to be at the Wolf’s Den a few weeks ago where they were having an open mic night and a couple of those guys in the band were there looking for a new lead singer. The rest, as they say, is history.”

“Why wouldn’t he tell me? He’s been kind of secretive lately.” Gus pulled her into his arms.

She resisted the urge to lay her head on his shoulder. And damn, he smelled too delicious for his own good, as well.

“You’d have to ask him that,” she said. “Maybe he just wanted to surprise you.”

“Well, he did that. He’s... Luke’s talented. But I’ve always thought so. I’ve told him so.”

“You’re his big brother. He’ll always look up to you. And want to impress you.”

He stared up at Luke with a smile of admission. "I guess that's true for the other way around, too."

Gus wasn't exactly wrong about his dancing skills, but as they warmed up, so did he. There were happily no squished toes and when he pulled her closer, they fell into a nice rhythm together.

"I thought you said you didn't dance," she said.

"I said I couldn't dance. There's a difference."

"There's really nothing to it and there are no judges out there scoring us. Although, I think we'd be a solid eight at least."

"I think you're being generous." His hand curled around her hip and tugged her closer.

"And I think you overestimate everybody else's dancing skills."

"I think we'd need more practice," he said.

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Why was he even bringing up the idea of the future? Considering they didn't have one.

She didn't want to think about that now, so she changed the subject. "How'd you like the wedding? I think the barn turned out great, don't you?"

"The wedding was beautiful and, yes, Will and Liam did a fantastic job with this place. I mean, not five months ago when I first saw it, this barn was a wreck. Now look at it. And your decorations were amazing. I predict it's gonna be a big draw for weddings."

She was feeling particularly sentimental about weddings today and feeling very much like a bridesmaid. "I guess we'll see." Lost in her own thoughts, she went quiet for a few long moments before she said, "Ella looks like she's having fun." The two girls were flitting around the room as only six-year-old girls could, giggling and sharing secrets.

"She is. She was thrilled to get invited. And she's found a friend."

"That's Amelia Roundtree. She's in her class at school."

"Isshe?" He frowned. "I should know that."

"You wouldn't be the first dad not to know your daughter's friends at school."

"Yeah, but I'm not just her dad. I'm both."

“Maybe the puppy will help fill that gap. Have you given her to Ella yet?”

He shook his head. “Doc Alden’s keeping her at his place until tomorrow night. Christmas Eve.” He pulled her closer. “She’ll be glad to know you helped pick her out.”

“So, you’ll wait until Christmas morning then to give her the puppy?”

“I hope it works out that way. One way or the other, that dog will be ours for Christmas.”

“Lucky girl... uh, dog,” she said. “I-I mean, so lucky to have found a good home. You know, so many shelter dogs never... they spend years sometimes and no one wants them. It’s so tragic, really. But now, she’ll have her own little girl and... and you. I mean, what dog gets a veterinarian”—like you—“for a parent”—she flicked a look up at him—“for heaven’s sake.”

He grinned and his gaze drifted upward as they danced under the chandelier. “Oh, look at that. Mistletoe.”

She followed his gaze upward. “Huh. How did that get there?”

“I don’t know.” Then he wasn’t looking at the mistletoe, but at her lips instead. “But I’d like to thank whoever put it there.” He kissed her, softly.

Not a deep kiss, or one that would embarrass her in front of all of Marietta, but a kiss that promised more. Later. A kiss that sent a warning through her like an electric charge.

It’s too late.

You should have listened.

I already love him.

He broke the kiss smiling down at her. “Hey. There’s something—”

Someone was tapping her on the shoulder. “Cami—”

Blushing, a little disoriented from that kiss, she whirled around to find Shay standing behind her looking anxious. “What?”

“Sorry. I need you. It’s Izzy’s mom.”

“Oh, no.”

“She’s gotten into some kind of debate with the mayor about the pros and cons of climate vs. cattle ranching—mostly the cons—and Izzy begged me to ask if you’d run interference. And rescue him.”

“Oh dear.” This was the downside of her de facto job as mediator in all things family.

“Okay. I’ll try.”

Gus was trying not to look disappointed.

“I’m really sorry,” Shay told Gus. “This’ll just take a minute.”

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“I hope.” Cami sent him an apologetic look, then squeezed his hand.

“I’ll be right here,” he said, as she walked away from that mistletoe kiss and what remained of her resistance.

It took a few minutes to gracefully intervene, diffuse the situation, and pry Eliza Stanton away from politics and their favorite mayor who was quite grateful for the relief.

Cami threaded her arm into Eliza Stanton’s as they walked away and snagged a glass of wine off the tray of a passing waiter, handing it to her. “This cabernet...” she gushed. “It’s from the Willamette Valley in Oregon and we ordered it special for the wedding. It’s really one of our favorites. Have you tried Oregon wine out there in Texas?”

Eliza took it gracefully. “I suppose, you were right to drag me away from your mayor and our little conversation. I tend to get passionate about the things I believe in.” At Cami’s attempted denial, she stopped her. “No, no. You’re right. It’s Isabella’s day and I was... getting carried away. Thank you.”

Cami just stared at her, uncertain what to say.

“She’s very lucky to have y’all as family. She’s far away from home and she seems to have found a new one.” Eliza took a sip of the wine, considering Cami anew. “I wasn’t sure what to expect when she told us she wanted to marry the limo driver, who did, in fact, kidnap her”—she said this with a smile—“but it turns out, we like him. Very much.”

“I’m so glad to hear that. Will’s a great guy. And he’s my brother, which makes me less than objective, but you can see how much he loves her. And how much she loves him.”

“Yes,” she said. “I see that now. I’ve never seen her happier—which, I’m afraid, says more than I care to admit about our relationship. She was the square peg in a round hole that is our family. But she seems to fit right into yours.”

“You know, we’re so happy that Izzy is—”

“Isabella,” she corrected.

“Right, that Isabella is part of our family now. And so are you. I hope you feel free to come visit often.”

“Thank you,” Eliza said and sounded sincere.

“We hope to have the whole guest ranch business up and running late this spring.”

“It’s quite impressive. All the building and the—what are they called? Glamping platforms?”

“Which will be glamping tents. Yes. We’ll finish those off when the snow clears. Maybe you’d like to stay in one someday?”

She laughed. “Me? In a tent? Oh, my dear, I don’t think—”

“Mother! There you are,” Izzy said, appearing at Eliza’s side. “Did Cami show you to your place at the table? We put you at table twelve next to the most interesting man... and no, it’s not Dad.”

Eliza turned to Cami. “So nice chatting with you, dear. And for your kind offer.”

Cami swallowed and nodded, understanding now Izzy’s complicated relationship with her mother. She wasn’t easy. But she was, Cami believed, receptive.

Izzy swept her away then and leaned back over her shoulder mouthing the words, thank you! to Cami.

She snagged another wineglass off a waiter’s tray, this time for herself and half-chugged it as she wandered toward the kitchen. She needed a minute to gather her thoughts. It seemed there was so much coming at her. That kiss. All her feelings. Maybe she was glad he did, just because the likelihood that she’d be kissed that way again for a long, long time was unlikely. On the other hand, would she, in the end, no doubt look pathetic to have fallen for a man who was just temporary? Not that she cared all that much what everyone else thought. It was what she felt that mattered.

She drained the last of the wine and it seemed to go straight to her head. No food again. She needed an appetizer and went in search of a waiter with a likely tray. But the dinner was soon to be served and all the appetizers were gone. To her right, she spotted Tara standing beside Sarah. She’d borrowed a dress from Shay, and she was holding Lolly, who was being a perfect angel.

A pang of regret zinged through her afresh. Regret that she’d allowed herself to imagine she might get to raise that little girl, even knowing that was never meant to be. Regret that maybe she’d never have a baby of her own, the way her life was going. Regret that she seemed to keep making the same mistakes over and over with men. Men who left.

She dumped her empty wineglass on a bus tray, then ran directly into the chest of Doc Alden, nearly knocking him over. Before he fell though, she caught him by the arm and righted him.

“I’m so sorry, Doctor Alden. I didn’t see you there.”

“It’s all right. I’m not as steady on my feet since my surgery. Believe me, it takes longer when you get older despite having the best physical therapist in the county.” He patted the hand of the woman beside him, a tall, middle-aged woman who looked a few years younger than Alden. She had a beaming smile and clear affection for the veterinarian. “This is my friend and physical therapist, Miranda.”

“So nice to meet you, Miranda.” Cami shook her hand. “And we’ve all been the beneficiaries of the vet you hired to fill in for you, Doctor Alden. Gus Claymore? He’s been... terrific.”

“They don’t come much better in my opinion. But sadly, since I decided to retire and offered him my practice...”

He kept talking but a sudden buzz in her ears shut down her hearing. Offered him my—“Wait. Youwhat?”

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“I decided to retire,” he repeated. “My days of pulling calves and wrangling sheep are over, I’m afraid. And Miranda and I are going to marry, travel the world. So, I offered my practice to Gus, but he turned me down. I guess he’s got his sights set on some practice in Denver.”

Shock rippled through her. “When was this? That you offered him the practice?”

“As a matter of fact, at the Deaver place, that night he pulled that calf. You were there that night.”

Cami went cold all over. He hadn’t said a word. He’d had the chance—the opportunity—to stay here, and he’d turned Alden down? Why would he lie to her about that? Maybe it was more omission than lie. But what did it mean? Was he just—ever since that night—just toying with her? What... using her? Wanting to kiss her under the mistletoe and talking about practicing their dance moves? As if they might have a future together? Because clearly whatever was happening between them—maybe nothing, now that she looked at it clearly—hadn’t enticed him to stay here in Marietta. Or even tell her the truth—that he was choosing not to stay.

“It’s too bad,” Alden was saying, “because I can’t think of anyone I’d rather have than him.”

She knew the feeling.

“Ooh! Looks like dinner’s about to be served,” Miranda said leaning into Doc Alden. “We’d better head on over there, darling.”

Alden patted her hand and the two of them said their goodbyes as they ambled over to the tables.

Cami's brain suddenly hurt. She felt all the things, all at once. Mad, sad, foolish, guilty and worst of all, like she didn't matter. Those things tumbled through her like sharp rocks as she looked across the room and found Gus chatting amiably with one of her mother's old friends.

But what right did she even have to be mad at him for choosing Denver over her? He'd warned her. He had his career and she had hers. They were merely a brief intersection between two people who didn't—and never would—belong together. And the sooner she got that through her thick skull the better. But she wasn't mad about his decision to go. It was the lie that infuriated her. And for what? Just to break her heart? Make her think there was hope that he'd stay?

She swiped another glass of wine off a passing waiter and gulped it down, dropping the empty on another bus tray as emotion clogged her throat. The catering servers began coming out the kitchen door with plates of food for the guests mostly seated now at the tables. She nearly bumped into Liam as she considered which way to turn.

"Hey, hey," he said, looking at her with concern. "What's going on?"

"I don't know what you mean," she said, but her eyes were filling with tears.

"Right. Come 'ere." He tugged her out through the kitchen door and the two of them stepped out into the cold December air just outside the kitchen.

"Why are you crying?" Liam brushed her cheek with the back of a knuckle. "This is supposed to be a happy day."

"I always cry at weddings," she lied.

“Don’t kid a kidder. Is this about Gus? Did he hurt you?” Liam didn’t often get his ruff up about things, but when it came to his sisters, that was a different story.

“No.” She turned away from him, unable to look him in the eye. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It does to me. C’mon, what did he do?”

“I have no right to be mad. He warned me from the start that he was leaving. But I stupidly fell for him anyway.”

Liam put his arm around her. “What happened? I mean just now?”

She turned back to him feeling that wine take hold. “I let my guard down. I did it to myself. I have no right to expect anything from him. I just hoped he’d change his mind. And it turns out, he could have. He had a choice. He didn’t choose us. Or what might have been us. And it’s just over. That’s all.”

“Did he say that?”

She shook her head. “Doc Alden said it. He offered him the practice and Gus turned it down.”

Liam pulled her into a hug. “Ah, Cams... Wait right here. I’ll go beat him up for you.”

She knew he was kidding on the square. She laughed in spite of herself. “Nah. He’s your friend. Besides, it wouldn’t change anything.”

“You should go talk to him. Maybe you don’t have the whole story.”

“I think I do. Just, sadly, not from him.”

*

On the otherside of the barn, Gus was being buttonholed by a woman whose cow-kicked dog he'd operated on not two weeks ago as he wrangled Ella to the table where their seating cards were. Cami was seated at the wedding party's table, but he was still looking for her in the room full of people.

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“Tipper’s leg is healing so well after the surgery,” Mrs. Knowles was saying. “Why, we were afraid he would never walk on it again. Dog has no common sense but to keep trying to make friends with the mama cows who don’t want anything to do with him once they calve.”

“That’s good news,” he said. “Once he starts to bear some weight on that leg again, he’ll probably come around fully. Just encourage him.”

“Thank you, Dr. Claymore! Oh, have you met my husband, Don?” she asked as an older gentleman with a generous belly and a white beard walked up beside her.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Knowles.”

“I know what you’re thinking,” she said. “And yes, Don plays Santa every year at the Graff Hotel. He’s a favorite with all the children.”

Gus tilted a look at him. “Ah. You must know Nick then. Works at the bus station and does Santa at the Graff, too.”

The pair exchanged confused looks. “Nick? No. I’m the only Santa at the Graff. Have been for the last few years. I have a contract. As for the bus station,” Don said, “there’s no Nick there that I know. And I’ve known those folks down there for years. It’s Jube Cameron and a skeleton staff down there. And if I don’t miss the mark, that place isn’t long for Marietta.”

Gus frowned. No Nick at the Graff or the bus station? He had to have that wrong. “But, my daughter, she talked to Nick at the Graff in the Santa line. And I spoke to

him at the bus station.”

“Since we just met,” Don said, “I wouldn’t call you wrong. But you might be mistaken, is all. I’m it at the Graff, for the last few years at least. Anyway, tell your little one I’ll be there tomorrow afternoon if she wants to put in any last-minute wishes on her Christmas list. Ho-ho-ho!” His belly gave a reciprocating little jiggle.

Gus laughed thinly. “I sure will.”

He was still trying to puzzle out the Nick dilemma as he and Luke and Ella were seated at the same table beside a handful of others he sort of knew. The Canadays, Jaycee and Reed, were sitting across from them and a private investigator who worked for them, the imposing Trey Reyes and his pretty wife, Holly. Olivia Canaday and her husband, Jake, also clients of his, were at the next table over chatting with Jaycee between the chairs.

As the dinner service got started, Luke was the star of the table and got lots of props from the Reyeses and the Canadays over his singing. Gus sat back and enjoyed watching his younger brother shine. Even though he’d pushed him to find work outside of the arts for stability sake, Luke had pushed back and worked his tail off to land where he had. Gus had to hand it to him for that. He was good. Really good. And Gus was proud of him.

Ella talked nonstop at dinner about the wedding—the dresses, the flowers and finally, about the bride and groom.

“It is ironic, isn’t it, though?” she asked him around a mouthful of chicken.

He looked at her sideways. “Ironic?” This kid and her vocabulary...

“Well, Izzy almost had that awful wedding to that other guy in Texas before finding

true love with Will, right? Just like Buttercup almost did with Prince Humperdink, but then she escaped with Westly, her true love.”

This kid. “Yeah. I guess you’re right about that. It’s also a little ironic that you know what ironic means. And that you know both of those stories. Who told you about Izzy’s other almost-marriage?” Liam had shared it with him long ago, but as far as he knew, it wasn’t common knowledge.

“Amelia did. And her mother told her.” She shrugged. “I guess everyone knows.”

Small towns. The beauty and the peril of them.

He turned to look at Cami who was seated at the wedding party’s table across the room, with her back to him. She had not, in fact, returned after rescuing the mayor and hadn’t so much as met his eye since then. He didn’t want to read too much into it, this being her brother’s wedding and all, but the bad feeling that had been crawling up his neck since she left him, grew worse. Everything had seemed fine while they danced. So maybe he was imagining things. But he began knee-jerk reviewing their conversations in his mind, to explain it. But he couldn’t put his finger on anything. Maybe she was still having mixed emotions about Lolly’s mom returning.

Or mixed feelings about him.

“Are you enjoying your time in our little town, Doctor Claymore?” Jaycee asked.

“Very much,” he said. “I’ve never really lived in a place like this. I’ve spent most of my life in big cities. I think Ella likes it here, too. Don’t you darlin’?”

She nodded a little shyly.

“Ella, did you know we have horses at our place for riding and a big riding ring?”

Reed said. "Anytime you want to go horseback riding, feel free to come over. Our daughter, Olivia, right behind you, gives lessons to a lot of little girls your age."

Ella sent Gus a look that he could only be described as hopeful and despairing at once. It was the same look she had every time the subject of leaving Marietta came up.

Luke's look was more likewell, what are you gonna do about that?

"That's real kind of you, Mrs. Canaday," Gus said.

"Please. It's just Jaycee."

"Thanks. I think Ella would love that. Wouldn't you darlin'?"

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She nodded again, but only half-heartedly.

As they were finishing their dinners, Sarah got to her feet and clapped a spoon on the side of her wineglass for attention.

“Thank you all for coming out on this wintery night, braving the roads and the snow to help us celebrate this evening with Will and Izzy—Isabella. It means so much to all of us that you’re here. When you throw a wedding—which we do a lot here on the Hard Eight—you just hope everything will work out. But when it’s your own son getting married and welcoming such a wonderful new daughter into our family, well, we know some of you have traveled a long way to be here and you’re here because you love Will and Izzy as much as we do. Thank you. And here’s a toast to the bride and groom. May this day be only the first of many, many happy days to come in your marriage and may you take all the love in this room with you on that journey together. And I just want to be the first to officially say, Isabella, welcome to our family!”

The guests all cheered and applauded as Will and Izzy kissed at the bride’s table. Izzy’s parents stood for a toast which was long-winded and not as backhanded as it might have been. Will’s best man and partner in the limo company, Isaiah, a still-formidable, former linebacker in the NFL, gave a brief but heartfelt toast threatening to move the limo company to Montana if Will and Izzy didn’t come back to Dallas for a visit soon.

But Cami got to her feet next and raised a glass.

“There’s something to be said for new beginnings,” she said, and he noticed there

was only a slight slur to her words. “To letting go of the past and looking at the future with fresh eyes. That’s what these two have done—my dear brother and my newest sister. Because you both knew that hanging onto what once was would never make you happy. And now look at you. I love you both so much,” she said. “I love your joy together. And the way you support each other’s strengths. And I love your honesty with each other—even if it did take a little while from your pretending to love each other to that love becoming the real thing.”

The family laughed at that.

“But maybe it was all more complicated than that. Who knows? Love, and even the idea of love, is mysterious. Like Santa Claus and Christmas and even happily ever afters. You can believe in them or not. But it takes real faith to make any of them work. Either way, it all comes down to honesty with each other. Because without it, what have we got? Dishonesty. That’s what.” Her gaze flicked to Gus, but she looked quickly away. “Anyway, I digress.” She raised her glass and everyone in the room followed suit. “Here’s to the two of you. May your love last forever and may you be happy together for the rest of your lives. Here’s to Will and Izzy!”

The couple kissed a long and happy kiss to the crowd’s delight.

*

Until that moment, Gus had wondered if he was imagining that something had shifted between him and Cami. That it wasn’t just the wedding or distraction or something else that had her avoiding him now. Now, it seemed clear that it was none of those things, but more like a... direct message to him through her speech to the happy couple. And when she left the table directly after her speech and disappeared into the kitchen, he got up and followed her. Because this wasn’t going to be how it would go down.

The fault was clearly his for not sharing his feelings about... well, everything.

He was bad at it. Plain and simple. Lissa used to say so. She'd say, "I'm not a mind reader, Gus. You can't expect me to know what you're feeling at any given moment."

But what she'd failed to understand was that his feelings about hard things were always buried so deep, even he couldn't recognize them when they surfaced, so it was just easier to pretend they didn't matter. Had he done the same to Cami? But why was she suddenly upset with him when a half hour ago, they'd been dancing? Kissing.

Animals were so much easier than humans. They didn't ever ask hard things. Or expect anything from him. And in return, he fixed them, cared for them, and did his best to make them feel safe. Probably why he'd become a vet—because it was infinitely safer for him, too.

He pushed through the kitchen doors and saw her leaving out the back door. Weaving past the caterers, he followed her and found her leaning against the wall, standing in the snow.

"Hey," he said as she turned to see him there.

"Hey. Oh. I'm, uh, sorry, I was just getting some air. I was going to come and find you."

"Were you?"

She blinked. "Of course. I just—" she said, brushing a hand across her cheek. "Wedding toasts are so emotional!"

"Was it my imagination or was some of that directed at me?" he asked. "Honestly."

She cleared her throat suspiciously. “I don’t think this is really the time to—”

“It is. It is the time. Because I can see you’re upset with me, and I want to know why.”

“Okay. Honestly?” She lifted her chin. “Why did you kiss me tonight? And the other day?”

Confused, he shook his head. “Why did I...kissyou?” He kissed her because... because—

“What is it you want from me, Gus?”

“Want from you? Nothing,” he answered defensively, unsure what the right answer was here. “I thought we were—”

“What? We were what exactly? Friends? Friends with benefits? A nice distraction until something better came along?”

He swallowed hard. “No. Where is this coming from, Cami?”

She shook off his hand. “I know I have no right to have any expectations of you, of your life or where you choose to be in your career. Except for one thing. As friends. Honesty. And so, I’ll be honest with you. I blame me for allowing myself to fall for you. Which I did.” Her eyes welled up again. “My fault. Because I knew, or I thought I knew your intentions. But you were just...what? Toying with my feelings?”

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“Wait a minute—” he began.

“Because the whole time, Gus... the whole time—”

“Wait a minute.” His cell rang in his pocket, and he ignored it. “You need to tell me what you’re talking about. And why suddenly you’re—”

“You should get that,” she said about his cell. “It’s probably important. It might be Denver.”

Denver? Was this about Denver?The phone rang again, insistent. Frustrated, he didn’t want to answer the damned phone. But he always answered. Always. He pulled it from his pocket. Damn if it wasn’t Denver. The clinic calling him to try to persuade him to come. He lifted his gaze to Cami. “ItisDenver.”

She sent him a steely smile. “Better take it. I’ll leave the two of you alone.”

He grabbed her hand, ignoring the call. “I’m not going.”

She jerked a surprised look at him. “What?”

“To Denver. I already told them I’m not coming. I’m staying in Marietta. I’m taking over Alden’s practice.”

Her lips parted and a shiver raced down her. “But he said—”

Gus pulled her closer to him. “He said what?”

“Alden said you turned him down, that night at the Deaver ranch.”

“I never actually turned him down. I’ve been trying to figure out how to stay and work out the financing to buy his practice. I didn’t want to say anything until I knew for sure. But I already told my agent that I’m done. I turned them down in Denver.” The phone stopped ringing. “I’m not toying with you. I’ve never been toying with you. I’m... crazy about you, Cami.”

“You... you are?”

He reached up to brush the dampness on her cheek. “Honestly? I never thought I’d find love again in my lifetime. I wasn’t even looking for it. And then, there you were. Busy with your life, like I was with mine. And you were making room in it for everyone and everything and pulling us all into your family. If it wasn’t for Lolly, us finding her together, maybe we never would have really gotten to know each other. She was like a little Christmas miracle, inserting herself into our lives and changing everything.

“And if I’d missed all that, meeting you... watching you with Lolly and with Ella, it would have been my loss,” he went on. “Because for a long time I shut people out, because like you said, I was scared. Scared of starting over, of putting my heart out there again. And I’m not the best at it. Obviously, I should have told you what I was thinking, feeling, before you decided I had screwed it all up.”

Cami exhaled a shaky breath and he stared at her long dark lashes against her cold cheek.

“You asked me why I kissed you. I kissed you because you make me feel like myself again, because you make me happy, and I want you to know that. That I’m falling in love with you.”

She lifted her gaze slowly back to him. “You are?”

“Yeah. Yes.” He took her face in his hands and kissed her again, gently this time, to prove to her everything he was saying.

And her lips softened under his and she curled her hands around his arms to pull him closer. She tasted of wine and cold and a little bit of forgiveness. And when she broke the kiss, she looked up at him, those tears still in her eyes, but this time, without anger.

“Oh, Gus. I really thought... I thought we were—”

“I know, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I never meant to hurt you.”

“What if... what if you can’t figure out the financing for the practice?”

“I will. I’ll figure it out. Because it’s already decided. I’ll find a way.”

She shivered hard and her almost-sob was steamy in the cold outdoor air. “As long as we’re being honest, I have to admit I’ve fallen in love with you, too.”

That admission almost broke him, and he dipped his head to steal another kiss from her. Only this time, she wrapped her arms around his neck and didn’t hold back. He didn’t want to let her go. Now or ever.

But she did peel herself away from him, touching his forehead with hers, a little breathless now. “But, Gus?”

“Yeah?”

“I think my feet are frozen.”

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Standing in a snowbank in her open-toed sandals was a clear recipe for disaster. “Oh. Here,” he said, reaching down and scooping her into his arms. “Let me take care of that.”

She gave a gasp of surprise but wrapped her arms around his neck, holding tight. She ran her hand over the taut muscles of his shoulders. “Last time you did this, I missed the whole thing.”

He dropped his mouth onto hers again, feeling her smile against him. “We can’t have that. But don’t worry. This won’t be the last time.”

She laid her head on his shoulder. “Is that a promise?”

He pulled open the kitchen door to the barn where the music and cheer inside poured out and he stepped inside with her, into their future, and finally their lives together. “That, love,” he said, “is a guarantee.”

Epilogue

The Christmas celebration was in full swing at the Hard Eight when Gus, Luke, and Ella arrived, arms full of wine and a bag of presents. He could see Cami helping her mother in the kitchen and the rest of the family was gathered in the living room.

Shay kissed Gus on the cheek. “Welcome in,” she said, giving Ella and Luke a hug. “We’re so happy you’re here.”

“Me, too,” Gus said, handing her a wine bottle. “Merry Christmas!”

“Merry Christmas! And who’s this little munchkin?” she asked of the sweet, curly-haired puppy Ella was holding in her arms.

“This is Taffy,” Ella said, her face half buried in Taffy’s fur. “Our new puppy. I got her for Christmas.”

Gus said, “We couldn’t leave her home alone. Cami said you wouldn’t mind.”

“Mind? Oh! She’s adorable. Wait until Pippa and Poppy meet her. I bet she was tops on your Christmas list, Eloise.”

She nodded shyly. “I love her,” she said, hugging the pup. The Hardesty dogs, Poppy and Pippa had spotted her and were heading her way.

Gus took Taffy and lifted her up out of the path of the enthusiastic duo. “We’ll have to introduce them gently.”

Liam came into the front hall and clapped him on the shoulder. “‘Bout time you made it over. Cami was worrying about you. She’s in the kitchen. Luke? How about a glass of something? Soda, beer, or something stronger?” The two of them headed over to the small bar set up near the front window where Shay’s fiancé, Cooper Lane, was manning the drinks.

Gus said hello to Izzy and Will who had postponed their honeymoon until after Christmas and he nearly bumped into Sarah with an armload of plates heading to the dining room. She stopped and kissed him on the cheek. “Merry Christmas, Gus. We’re so glad you’re here. And this little darling, too. What’s her name?”

“This is Taffy. And she’s happy to be here.”

Gus passed Sarah’s boyfriend, Ray, holding Lolly in the living room, as Tara

unwrapped a half-dozen gifts that were under the tree for the two of them. Gus couldn't help but smile at the look on Tara's face, as if she'd just stepped into some kind of alternate universe.

He stopped to shake Ray's hand and tickle Lolly's little feet. "Merry first Christmas, little one. And to you, too, Tara."

Tara smiled up at him. "Thank you," she said. "For everything."

"I'm real glad it all worked out for you."

"Everyone's been so kind. I-I just..."

He couldn't agree more. "I know exactly what you mean." He kept moving, holding Taffy and headed into the kitchen.

Cami's back was to him, and he snuck up behind her, giving her a kiss on the cheek. She jumped but turned around happily. "Hi there."

"Hi, yourself. Merry Christmas."

"Back at you." She gave Taffy a smooch. "How did the surprise go?"

"I pulled it off. Taffy woke her up this morning with a big wet kiss."

"Aww." She ruffled the dog's little head.

"Yeah, she loves her. Somehow, I don't think that was what she asked Santa for that day at the Graff."

“What makes you think so?”

“Oh. Just a feeling.”

Cami leaned close. “Have you... uh, told her yet? About us?”

“Not yet.” A loose strand of hair dangled in Cami’s face and Gus brushed it back. “I thought I’d wait until today. Does everybody else—”

“You have a better chance of space shuttling it to the moon than you do keeping secrets at the Hard Eight.”

“Ah. Well, then.” He laughed and kissed her cheek. “I see Lolly and Tara are fitting right in.”

Cami’s face went soft with happiness. “It’s working out great. I think they’ll be happy here, and Tara is already working hard at learning our systems. She’s already designed a new logo for the guest ranch.”

Poppy and Pippa were suddenly at his feet urgently requesting a sniff of Taffy. He lowered her down to them and Pippa swiped at her with her tongue. Both were wagging their tails.

“Looks like they recognize family when they see it,” he said, glancing up at Cami who smiled in return. Taffy squirmed in his arms, and he set her down. After a minute or two, all seemed well, and he relaxed a little. “You think they’re good?”

“Neither one has a mean bone in their body. I think they’ll be fast friends.”

The big dogs trotted out of the kitchen and little Taffy followed.

“Hungry?” she asked. “Dinner’s in an hour or so. And there might be something under the tree for all of you.”

“Don’t freak out,” Gus said, pulling a small box from his back pocket with a red ribbon on it. “It’s not a ring. It’s just a little something I thought you’d like.”

“Shhhh,” she said, opening the box to find a small, solitaire diamond necklace that took her breath away. “Okay, that’s... beautiful. But you shouldn’t have—”

“Only if you don’t like it.”

“I love it. Thank you.” She kissed him deeply, wrapping her arms around his neck.

Ella came running into the room. “Daddy! Look what I—” Stopping short at the sight of them kissing, she blinked up at them.

They quickly broke apart.

Awkwardly, Gus knelt down beside her. “Remember that night when we were talking about your mom, and you said you didn’t think she’d mind if I loved someone else?”

Solemnly, Ella nodded.

“Well, I don’t think she’d mind either,” he said. “And I think she’d like Cami. Don’t you?”

Ella’s look slid back and forth between the two of them.

Then she flung her arms around his neck with a little jingle of something metallic. “I think so, too.”

Cami knelt beside them and joined the hug. “Thanks, Ella. That means the world to me.”

She gave a little squeal of happiness. “And, Daddy, look what I found! It was on the tree. Just hanging on a branch.”

She was holding a dog collar, pink and green with a tiny dog tag in the shape of a bone.

“Wow. Where did that come from?” He looked at Cami who looked back at him confused. “Look, it’s got Taffy’s name on it. Who in the world could have—Cami, did you—”

“No. I swear. It wasn’t me.” She lifted the little dog tag, examining it. “Oh, look at this,” Cami said, turning over the tag. On the back, engraved in the silver tag, was an address.

“It says 2054 South Elm Street. Marietta, Montana,” she said. “Isn’t that the little neighborhood south of town? But why would that address be on her collar and who left it on the tree for her? You and I were the only ones who knew you were getting her for Ella for Christmas.”

He rubbed his chin. “Although, come to think of it, I did mention the dog to Santa at the Graff.”

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Wide-eyed with the mystery, Ella said, “But Daddy, you said—”

“I know what I said. Don’t worry. We’ll get to the bottom of this.” Gus took Ella’s hand, heading out to the living room where everyone was gathered around the fireplace. “Um, excuse me, guys, Ella wanted to thank you for the dog collar, but we were wondering who gave it to her?”

No one fessed up and, in fact, no one had even noticed the collar hanging on the branches until Ella herself found it.

He turned the tag over again. “Well, I guess it’s a mystery.” He sent Cami a secret wink.

“Hmm,” she said, pulling out her phone. “That address might show up on Google. Let me look.”

“Maybe you should just... take a quick drive over there,” Sarah said. “To satisfy your curiosity.”

“There’s a thought.” With a wink at Sarah, he turned to Cami. “What’dya say?”

Ella tightened her hand around his. “But what if Taffy’s old owner lives there? And we have to give her back?”

He frowned. “Definitely not happening. I made sure she’s our puppy and ours alone.”

“Then let’s go. We’ll be back before dinner,” Cami said, grabbing her keys, and the

three of them headed out to her truck.

A few minutes later, as they prowled the neighborhood of South Elm, looking at street numbers, they found it. Twenty-fifty-four South Elm was a cute, forest-green Craftsman house with a white painted front porch and a driveway that led to a covered portico. A FORSALEsign was planted in the yard with an UNDERCONTRACTtag slanted across the top.

“Looks like no one lives there.” Cami eyed Gus curiously.

“Huh.” Gus climbed out the passenger side and lifted Ella out of the truck. “Will you look at that. Let’s get a closer look.”

Ella ran up the steps and was the first at the door, where a small note was taped. “See below,” she read, with an arrow pointing down. She searched the porch, then looked under the doormat. There was an envelope there with her name on it.

“It says Ella!” she said a little giddily.

“Well, open it.”

A key fell out and she picked it up as she opened the note. “It says, ‘Dear Ella. Never ever stop believing. Love, Santa.’” Her mouth fell open. “Does that mean—”

“It means it’s our house.” Sending Cami a smile, he reached for her hand. “It’s our home.”

Ella slammed into his waist with a hug. “I knew it! I knew he was real! It’s what I wanted. It’s all that I asked for. You and Ms. Cami and... a real home. I never thought he’d do it, but he did!” She hugged the two of them fiercely.

“Yeah, he did. Well, go on,” Gus said, his voice choked. “Open the door.”

Inserting the key, she swung the door open wide and raced inside her new home. A real home they would share with everyone they loved, and most especially, with Cami.

“You bought a house?” Cami’s eyes were filling too as she watched Ella disappear into the house, exploring.

“Didn’t you hear the note? It was Santa.”

She laughed. “I thought you were against all that... nonsense.”

“Nonsense? Did I say that?” He took her in his arms and pulled her close. “Well, maybe I did, but that was before you came along. And changed my—”

She pressed her mouth against his and kissed him deeply. He pulled her close, his hands around her hips, hoping the neighbors weren’t watching. She tasted of the chilly, December air and the promise of all their days to come.

He swallowed hard, holding her close. “Escrow doesn’t close for another three weeks. But I don’t think this place will feel like home without you.”

“Are you... asking me to move in with you?”

“If I did, would you?”

She smiled against his cheek. “We’ll figure it out.”

“Yeah?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Good,” he said against her neck. “Because, you know, Santa had a hand in this. In us. And I think this was part of his plan. And its... it’s definitely part of mine.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, then... if you put it that way...”

He pressed a kiss on her neck and scooped her into his arms. She gave a squeal of surprise. He laughed, loving the feel of her against him. “And we wouldn’t want to disappoint the old guy, would we?”

“Huhh-uh,” she denied. “That wouldn’t do at all.”

“Then, welcome home, love,” he said, carrying her through the blue-painted front door with its charming white trim. “Welcome home.”

The End