

# **COUNTRY CHRISTMAS**

*Award Winning Author*

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**Recipient of the LaVyrle Spencer Award**

**Affaire de Coeur Lifetime Achievement Winner**

**Recipient of the MFW Rising Star**

**Winner of the Daphne du Maurier**

**Recipient of the Toby Bromberg Award**

**Two Time Rita Finalist**

*“Just what the doctor ordered.”*

**~Publishers Weekly.**

*“Amazingly good.”*

**~Romantic Times.**

## Chapter One

Colt Dickenson hung his battered Stetson beside the ancient wardrobe and entered the kitchen with less than his usual enthusiasm. Bronc rider turned rancher, he was sweet, smart, and hotter than a pistol.

“How’s your mom?” Emily asked and turned from the oven where supper was bubbling merrily.

Lacking a response, she skittered her gaze to the man already seated at the kitchen table. Brody Redman, older than Colt by almost fifteen years to the day, had seemed as lost as she before being found by the residents of the Lazy Windmill some six months before.

“Colt?” she ventured.

“What? Oh.” He nodded and reached for a smile, but it failed to illuminate the universe like it usually did. He was never quite a hundred percent when his wife was absent. “She’s doing good.”

“So her checkup went okay?” Lincoln clattered down the last few stairs and entered the kitchen. He was as lean as a spring sapling and too young to have fathered her child. But he had done so nevertheless and despite the doubters (of whom Emily had been first on the list) had stuck by them. A good thing, too, because he was tops at getting their yearling (as Brody referred to their still-not-toddling toddler) to sleep.

“It went great.” Colt grinned. A modicum of his usual mischievous glee lit his eyes. “Grandma said she was staying ‘til her daughter was out of the woods. Seems like it was all the incentive Mom needed to ensure a clean bill of health.

“Do I smell...” He snuffled noisily. “...chicken pot pie.”

“I swear you’re part bloodhound,” Emily said.

“With cheesy biscuits and...” Lifting his nose, he narrowed his eyes in silent debate. “...raspberry shortcake topped by fresh-whipped cream.”

“You’re freakin’ me out.”

“Did he get it right again?” Lincoln asked.

“It’s spooky,” she said and waved a spoon at him as if warding off evil spirits. “Just sit down, both of you?”

She didn’t have to tell them twice. In a minute the three men were waiting expectantly. Perhaps she would never know why this scenario thrilled her to the core. But she was sure there was a gaggle of therapists somewhere who would love to pick apart the brain of a foster kid turned guest-ranch chef.

“They don’t get on?” Brody, part Lakota, part scholar, part horse Houdini, was a man of few words who rarely felt the need to explain his sparse verbiage.

“Grandma can be a little... opinionated,” Colt said. “Likes to tell Mom how to organize her kitchen and how long to cook her creamed peas.” He glanced at Emily, eyes sparking. “I guess some gals can get a little cranky about that.”

She paused on her way from the oven, chicken pot pie held hostage in her mittened hands. “Are you referring to anyone in particular?”

“Nope,” he said and gave her his devilish grin. “Bliss already in bed?”

“I just put her down.” Lincoln was a good guy and the love of Em’s life, but he was about as empathic as a steaming road apple. Didn’t he realize that Colt always reached for the baby when he was lonely? Of course, he also liked to spend time with her when he was meditative. Or happy. Or tired. Or... Turns out Colt Dickenson, tough guy extraordinaire, just loved babies.

And right now, she’d bet her favorite pair of army boots, he was still a little bit worried about his mother. The idea made her heart twist. “Grandmothers,” she said and determined to distract him, set the entrée in the center of the table.

“You knew your grandparents?” Colt asked and handed a serving spoon to Brody. The fact that he was offering first dibs to another may not have been a sign of the apocalypse, but she wouldn’t want to bet the bank on the world’s continued survival. Generally speaking, Colt was attempting to steal the other man’s food before he even had a chance to sit down.

“Didn’t I ever tell you about Mrs. Clown?” she asked.

In various stages of dishing up, all three men glanced toward her.

Emily shrugged, took the chair nearest the stove and passed the biscuits. “I guess I never knew her real name. Mom...well, you know, she wasn’t much for holiday traditions or anything.” She also wasn’t known for sobriety, she thought. But there was no reason to mention any of those things two weeks before Christmas. “Anyway...I met her a few times.”

“Mrs. Clown.” Lincoln’s tone may have evidenced a bit of disbelief, but what good was the truth if it didn’t make the people you loved more than life smile?

“Fill me up, will you?” she asked and tilted her glass toward the pitcher that always had a prominent place on the Lazy’s kitchen table. Bodacious, the resident nanny goat, could be as prickly as a cocklebur, but her all-organic, unpasteurized milk was a prime component in all of the ranch’s best meals. “I guess I just called her that because I was too young to say Mrs. Claus.”

“And I thought my connection to *Crazy Horse* was impressive,” Brody said.

Colt grinned. “So you’re Santa’s granddaughter?”

“Unless the two of them split up,” Emily said.

Linc was watching her steadily, but she avoided his gaze.

“There are plenty of biscuits,” she assured them and sauntered back to her story. “I was a tough kid. Didn’t believe in Santa or the tooth fairy or any of that other stuff. Until I met Mrs. Clown. Then I knew old Kris must be real.”

“Maybe you should start at the beginning,” Colt suggested. He had already slathered enough butter on his biscuits to lubricate a hay baler.

“Well... I don’t know where the beginning was exactly. But I know that my grandmother was Mrs. Claus.”

“Because...”

“She had the hair,” Emily said and pointed to her own dark dreadlocks. “Bright as platinum permed into cute little ringlets.”

“Em...” Linc said softly, but she was on a roll.

“Spectacles,” she added. “Perched on her nose just like in the pictures.”

Colt took a bite of chicken and sighed his appreciation. "Can't argue with science."

"And...she was plump."

"You trying to be Mrs. Claus, too?" Brody asked and eyed the heaping helping on his employer's plate.

No one said it was fair that Colt Dickenson could eat like a one man thrashing crew and never gain a pound. He chuckled but when Brody helped himself to an additional portion, he sobered abruptly. Colt was fond of his leftovers.

"Did you check on that little buckskin you like so well?" he asked.

"Calumet?" Brody asked and glanced up, already scowling.

"Yeah. He looked a little off. Maybe you better run right out and check on him."

For a second Emily thought Brody might fall for the ploy that would surely result in purloined cuisine and escalating food thefts, but he exhaled a snort finally. "You're not getting my pie."

"How about your shortcake?" Colt asked. "I mean, I don't *want* it necessarily. It's just that all that sugar's bad for a man your age."

There was a pause and a dry-witted comment before the conversation bloomed into that magical blend of silliness and hope that could only be found around tables where people genuinely thrived on each others' company.

By the time the men had helped Emily bus the dishes, she felt sleepy and satisfied.

Brody headed off to the bunkhouse with a mumbled thanks and Colt clipped up the stairs toward his own bed, but Lincoln stayed behind.

They were silent for a while, only the clink of dishes between them as they washed and dried. The Lazy had never been equipped with anything as ludicrously modern as a dishwasher.

"That was quite a story," Lincoln said.

Emily chuckled. Colt's tall tales regarding his rodeo days were as amusing as they were preposterous. "If half the stuff he says was true, he would have been dead ten times by now."

"I meant the yarn *you* were spinning," Linc said and hooking the last misshapen mug on the metal cup holder, settled his scrawny hips against the counter.

She wiped her hands on the Christmas apron that covered her cargo pants and glanced at him from the corner of her eye. No matter what she cooked, she never quite managed to fatten him up. She considered it a personal failure of major proportions. “Want to watch some *Father Knows Best* before you head off to the bunkhouse?” She adored retro TV. Couldn’t help it, she thought and retrieved a ceramic mixing bowl from the cupboard. She’d planned on making waffles for breakfast. But maybe she’d try a new rhubarb muffin recipe.

“You don’t have to lie,” he said.

She raised her brows as if surprised but unoffended. It was an expression she had practiced on her mother and perfected on a dozen half-interested foster parents. “What are you talking about?”

“That whole song and dance that you...” He exhaled as if calming himself. “You don’t have to prove anything. I love you just the way you are.”

She lowered her eyes to the last plate as if examining it for cleanliness. He had said those words before. Many times, in fact, but she remembered each instance as if it were etched on her soul. She just hadn’t quite gotten the nerve to believe them... was light years from being able to say it back. “What’s not to love?” she asked instead and laughed, but he didn’t crack a smile.

“The lies,” he answered. “Why not just tell the truth?”

Retrieving two speckled eggs from the basket on the counter, she spilled the golden-moon contents into the bowl. “What makes you think I wasn’t?”

“You’ve always said your mom hated her mother.”

She shrugged as she whipped up the eggs. “That’s probably why she left me with her.”

“Your mom doesn’t hate you, El.” He was the only one who called her that. It was the name her mother had given her. Ella Casper. The name she had chosen to leave behind when she learned of Baby Bliss’s impending birth.

“I suppose you’re right,” she said. “She’s probably just too busy to call. Getting her doctorate in theology or something.” Her mother, Lincoln knew, had not finished high school. Nor, as far as Emily was aware, ever held down a paying job for more than a week at a time. “Grab the flour will you?”

“It’s not like you’re knocking down *her* door.”

“As if she has a door to knock down,” Emily said and grinned, but Lincoln remained absolutely sober.

“Maybe you should try to find her.”

She stared at him in disbelief for a moment then laughed out loud. “It’d be easier to get a hold of Mrs. Clown.”

“Who had curly hair and spectacles.”

She chuckled as if amused by her own fabrications, but the sound was off. Holy crud, was she losing her ability to lie? If the truth be told it was her most impressive talent, putting her cooking in a shameful second. “*And* who could make the best Christmas stollen on the planet. It tasted like happiness on a holiday. I kid you not.”

“What is this?” he asked.

She glanced toward him. “What?”

“This!” His tone was angry, his expression the same. But she’d cut her teeth on arguments that could tear the roof off. Inter-personal discontent didn’t worry her. “What we’ve got going here.”

There had been a time when she would have fired off insults like poison darts but she had learned early on that it was easier to simply shut down.

“Why not just tell me the truth?” he asked and though she tried, she couldn’t quite manage to ignore the pain in his voice.

“You don’t want the truth.”

“You’re wrong.”

“Why?” she asked. Emotion was storming in, crowding her good sense, threatening the equilibrium she had so carefully cultivated. “So you can feel sorry for me? So you can feel good about helping the poor little messed up foster kid, gloat over how *your* mother typed up your science papers while dear old dad taught you to play—“

“I’d give my life for you, El.” His voice was heart-breakingly soft, unnervingly honest, nearly rolling her under, but she rallied.

“Really? Cuz I seem to remember you walking out after you knocked me up.”

“That was before.”

“Before what?” She jerked toward him. “Before you realized how good you looked compared to me? Before you figured out what a saint you’d be sacrificing your life for me and a kid that might not even be yours?”

Bliss was his baby, biologically and emotionally. Everyone knew that. But pain erupted in his eyes, nevertheless. His jaw bunched and for a second she thought he might strike back. In fact, maybe she half hoped he would. But instead, he turned and walked out.

## Chapter 2

Lincoln was absent on the following morning, as was the ancient truck he had restored for Emily. Brody didn't need to ask why. It was mothers. In his experience they failed regularly and often; Emily's had been particularly horrific. But the girl was a survivor. Had endured neglect, abandonment and perhaps far worse.

The problem was, she still didn't entirely believe she could do better than simply subsist. Didn't realize she could start living now, could nurture, thrive, *love*. So she had pushed young Lincoln away. He could guess that much by the boy's absence and her too-cheery expression.

"What's on your agenda for today, Geronimo?" Colt asked.

Brody didn't bother glancing up. It was a ridiculous nomenclature even though he did kind of resemble some of his fiercest ancestors. "Thought I might take a little raiding party into town."

"Great." Colt grinned at his ridiculous answer. "One less person to steal Em's Christmas stollen and-- Whoa. Wait." He paused, honey-dripping muffin half way to his mouth. "Don't we have people coming today?"

"A mother and daughter," Emily said.

"Sh..." He almost swore then thought better of it even though Casie wasn't there to give him grief. "I promised to get Grandma out of Mom's hair this morning."

"I can take care of the guests," Emily said.

Colt dropped his gaze to his breakfast. "Good idea," he said glibly. "You stay home and take care of things here."

Momentarily confused, she turned her gaze to Brody. It was common knowledge that any time Colt Dickenson looked innocent was the time to worry.

“Pie delivery day,” Brody reminded her. Emily Kane was a culinary artist and supplied baked goods to half the county on a weekly basis.

She sent Colt a peeved glance. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing that a couple dozen good pies wouldn’t fix.”

“I honestly don’t think you’re fixable.” She tasted her own breakfast, pondering. “Maybe I can get my deliveries done before our guests arrive.”

“Don’t you have about twenty stops to make?”

“So?” Sometimes Em’s can-do attitude caused her to bite off more than she could chew. Everyone knew that but Colt’s next words were still surprising.

“Brody can take care of them.”

“What?”

“What?”

The other two spoke in bewildered unison.

Colt grinned. “He’ll never match my overwhelming lovability, of course, but you *can* manage to carry a few suitcases to the bunkhouses without making anybody cry, can’t you, Chief?”

It was a running joke, and one Dickenson adored rehashing with irritating regularity: Baby Bliss, who seemed to take a shine to everyone from feed salesmen to anonymous passers-by, had burst into tears when she’d first set eyes on him. Colt surmised that it was because he looked fierce enough to eat small children alive.

“I don’t know if that’s a great idea,” Emily said.

“Oh come on...” Colt was just warming up. You could tell by the viciously humorous gleam in his eye. “Brody’s practically human now that he’s housetrained.”

“My people have long had a term for your kind,” Brody said and cut into his eggs.

“Charming?”

“Buffalo chip,” Brody corrected.

Colt laughed. Emily didn’t, which made the two men exchange an uncertain glance.

“Everything okay, Em?” Colt asked.

“Besides the fact that you’re a bigot?”

“A bigot! Are you kidding me? I have more Native blood than he does,” Colt said. “He just got that whole ‘I take many scalps’ look going on.”

She poured apple juice into a sippy cup. They had pressed and frozen enough to float a battle ship last fall. “Not everyone can be as pretty as you are, Colt.”

“It’s a crying shame.”

“Some men have to be handsome,” she said and glanced at Brody.

He caught her gaze, wishing, despite the messiness of his divorce, that he and Natalie had been blessed with a daughter. “I will care for your guests,” he promised.

It was a good fifteen minutes before they left Emily with the dishes and rambled out to do chores. But they hadn’t reached the bottom step of the newly renovated porch before Colt spoke. “Any idea what that was about?”

Brody popped up the collar on his Sherpa lined Carhartt. It was faded now and a little tattered around the cuffs and elbows, but in its day it had been a rather attractive garment. According to Lucy, his outspoken daughter-in-law, that was sometime during the last millennium. “My guess?”

“As good as any,” Colt said and scowled. The casual observer might think Dickenson didn’t take anything seriously, but when he loved, he loved fiercely.

Their footfalls crunched against gravel and snow.

Brody glanced toward the weather vane. It pointed valiantly toward the northwest. “Young Lincoln doesn’t care for her stories.”

“You mean Em’s grandfather *wasn’t* Santa Claus.”

“I’m considering the possibility.”

Colt sighed. “Her lies don’t come as easy as they used to.”

“We do what we can to get through.”

Colt's attention settled on him, wondering, perhaps, what would make a man give up a lucrative job in the city to work long hours for practically nonexistent pay on a broken down ranch in the Hills.

"You got enough to worry about without analyzing me," Brody reminded him.

"You sure you can handle the guests?"

"I'll turn on the charm."

"Careful not to lay it on too thick."

"With great power comes great responsibility," Brody said and grinned when Colt chortled.

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"Welcome," Brody said.

The woman in the chunky sweater jumped as if shot. "Oh. I... Oh!" she said and widened her eyes when her gaze fell on him

He kept his face expressionless. It wasn't difficult; Emily had once suggested that he didn't actually *have* expressions.

"I didn't hear you come... I wasn't expecting..." She was no longer a child, but she blushed like a teenager. Fascinating...and strangely appealing. Plus she looked like the actress on that old movie...LadyHawke...what was her name...the one that, unlikely enough, turned into a falcon at dawn. He was certain the physical similarities had nothing to do with her allure. After all, his ex-wife had been considered quite beautiful; he must have learned something from that experience.

She laughed at herself and that was kind of appealing too.

"Hi," she said finally. She had a straight little nose and summer-storm eyes. Flaxen hair curled beneath the bottom of the ugliest knit cap he had ever seen. "This *is* the Lazy Windmill, isn't it?"

"Yes."

“Oh, good, I thought maybe...” She blew out a relieved breath. “How about I start over.” She stuck out her hand, all semblance of nerves well stashed away. “I’m Penelope. Penny. Penny Rogers.”

“Mother or daughter?”

“What?” She looked momentarily stricken.

“Thought there’d be two of you.”

“Oh, yes. Well...Renee had to stay home.” She shook her head. “Lizzie, my youngest granddaughter, came down with the flu. I was so disappointed.” That blush again. “But there was nothing to be done.”

He stared at her, wondering if this is where he should insert the charm. And if so how that charm might manifest itself.

“Her um...her husband, Bill, works nights...as a nurse. A male nurse...so there was no way he could take care of them.” She cleared her throat. “I felt terrible coming alone but it was her Christmas present to me and I didn’t want to disappoint her...or myself. I mean I was...” She took a deep breath and let her shoulders drop a little. “I guess you probably don’t need to hear all this.”

“No.”

“Right. Right,” she said and pressed her hands to her thighs as if wondering where to put them for safe keeping. “Well...maybe you could show me to my room?”

“Yes,” he said and as he turned away, hoped she was tough enough to resist his overpowering charisma.

### Chapter 3

*I'm Penny. Penny Rogers.* Had she gone mad? Was she out of her cotton-picking mind, wondered the self-proclaimed Penny Rogers and closed her eyes to her own ridiculousness. But when she opened them she was still sitting on a bed in a bunkhouse in Nowhere, South Dakota. A bunkhouse that was about the size of a studio apartment and decorated like a...well, it was decorated very nicely actually. Kind of shabby chic maybe. Cowboy cozy. She ran her fingers over the hand-stitched quilt, admired the brindle hide rug that stretched out in front of the black pot-bellied stove.

She had begun unpacking an half an hour ago, but the memory of her own far-flung stories kept distracting her. Who knew she was such an inventive (aka outrageous) liar?

*Lizzie had the flu?* Holy crud! Roger would have called her delusional. But he would have laughed at her insanity. He had always laughed, even at the very end.

The memory made her stomach cramp, but she wouldn't cry. She'd made a vow. Had put sadness behind her. From now on she would embrace life. Would...

"Aaa!" She actually shrieked and jerked a hand to her heart when the rap came at the door.

It sounded again. "Ms. Rogers?"

The voice from outside was that of a young woman. She felt the blood leave her face in a rush, felt her hand droop away from her chest.

"Hello?"

It took several seconds before she managed to rise to her feet, longer still before she could reach the door.

“Hey.” The girl who stood on the modest, little porch was mocha-skinned and pretty with wildly tangled hair and coffee colored eyes. Her body was lush and a tiny ring with a single turquoise bead adorned her right nostril. The two of them couldn’t have been more different and still shared a species. “I’m Emily. Are you Ms. Rogers?” The voice was more tentative this time as if the girl strongly suspected she might be dealing with a recent escapee from the psych ward.

“Yes?”

“Is that a question?”

Penny laughed. “No. Yes, I’m Ms....I’m Penny Rogers.”

“And...are you okay?”

No, she didn’t really believe she was. She wanted, quite suddenly, to go home, to hide. But she lied, and not too badly, she thought. “Yes, I’m fine. Thank you. Just a little...tired, I suppose. I don’t like to fly.”

Emily nodded. “It’s weird.”

“What?”

“If God had wanted us to fly, He would have made airline tickets free, right?”

The girl’s skin was flawless, her eyes bright as moons.

“Ms. Rogers?”

She forced a laugh. “I’m sorry. You must think I’m daft.”

“Just hungry. I get that way.”

“Daft?”

She laughed. The sound was lovely, full bodied and jolly. “Distracted. That’s why I’m always cooking.” She pulled a wry face. “And eating.”

“You cook?”

“And eat. Anyway, I came to ask if you wanted to join us for lunch.”

“Isn’t it a little late for that?”

“Well, here in the boonies, we call lunch dinner and dinner supper. That lets us have a mini meal somewhere in between. It’s always time to eat at the Lazy.”

“That sounds like something my husband used to say.”

“He liked to eat, too?”

“And cook.”

“Come on up,” Emily said, “before we freeze to death and never get to eat another meal.”

“All right,” Penny agreed and slipping into the shoes she’d left beside the door, stepped into the cold.

The girl huddled deeper into her coat and seemed to note her guest’s lack of outerwear. “You’re not from around here, are you?”

“I was going to say the same about you.”

She laughed again, that deep throated chuckle “I don’t really fit in with the Scandinavian landscape, do I?” she asked and tapped up the porch steps to what looked to be the main house.

“So you work here?”

“*Everybody* works here.” The house was cozy and cluttered, bursting with earthy tones and the warm scent of cinnamon. “You’ve met Brody.” She nodded toward the forty-something gentleman. True, he had shown her to the bunkhouse earlier, but could one really say they had met? He hadn’t even given his name. “Sure. Hello again.”

He nodded, as congenial as a porcupine.

Penny glanced around, but if the reason for her six hundred mile trip was present, she failed to obligingly step out of the shadows.

## Chapter 4

Pretty but kind of strange, Brody decided and kept his gaze from straying to their guest because honestly, he probably shouldn't be pondering another's irregularities; his daughter-in-law, the outspoken little Lucy, had once proclaimed him to be as odd as a two legged tortoise.

And speaking of odd... He glanced around, looking for the kitchen's most ubiquitous feature. "Where's Dickenson?"

Emily was already setting a tureen in the center of the battered table. The contents bubbled enticingly. "Still showing his grandmother the sights I guess."

"Eat while you can," he advised solemnly and took a seat.

Their guest glanced at him. "While I—"

"He's kidding," Emily assured her and fired a scowl at Brody. "The world is not coming to end just because Colt's missing lunch."

He gave a questioning shrug and tried to remember their guest's name. Pepper Peterson? Priscilla Edwards? Michele Pfeifer! No. That was the *LadyHawke* gal.

"What is this?" she asked, but Em had just trotted halfway up the stairs to listen for the baby. The monitor must be on the fritz. Again. Leaving him to navigate the social waters he had rarely bothered to dip a toe into.

“Goodness. Try it,” he advised and nodded toward the tureen.

She dished some up with the ladle, blew on a spoonful and tasted gingerly.

“Extraordinary.” She spoke softly then stared into her bowl as if she were divining the future...or contemplating the past. “This is...” She paused as the Em came zipping back in. “What do you call this?”

“That? Oh...” Emily was already bent double, reaching for the oat rolls. The girl spent half her life with her head in the oven.

“Is it a stew or a casserole ...” Ladyhawke ran out of words, tasted again. Emily’s meals often defied description...usually in a positive way. “...or a shepherd’s pie hybrid?”

“Yes,” Emily said and grinned as she tossed the rolls into a basket where they steamed lustily.

“Where’d you get the recipe?”

She shook her head, dreadlocks bobbing. “It’s just something I threw together.”

“I tasted a dish sort of like this once.” She paused a second, looking thoughtful and maybe a little nostalgic. “Did you ever eat at The Meadows?”

“Restaurant or pasture?”

Ladyhawke grinned, full lips tilting. “Restaurant. On Center Road in Omaha.”

“I’ve never been to Omaha.”

“Oh.” She glanced down at her meal as if momentarily lost.

Emily flickered a questioning gaze to Brody’s I-don’t-have-a-clue expression before turning back to their guest. “They have a good place to eat there?”

“Yeah. Yes.” She nodded. “Pretty good.”

“So the...whatever this is...” Em motioned dismissively toward the meal that tasted a little like heaven. “...was it cream based or...” She paused, head tilted. “Oops, looks like she’s awake.” Setting a pitcher on the table, she turned toward the stairs. “Child hasn’t slept through a meal in a year and a half. I’m sorry, Ms. Rogers. I’ve gotta run. We’re short staffed today. But I’m sure Brody will take good care of you.”

What? he wondered and valiantly attempted to come up with a reason to refuse. But he tried even harder to avoid Emily's eyes. They were too big, too earnest and had a tendency to make men do things they didn't necessarily want to do. Like carry on conversations with women who made their palms sweat. "I'm kinda—"

"The best," Emily finished for him and bending, kissed his cheek before turning back to their guest. "Have a nice evening."

He tried to formulate a refusal, but she was already gone, trotting up the stairs like a wood-sprite on speed.

"I didn't mean to scare her off." Ladyhawke's voice was quiet and earnest.

Brody pulled his gaze from the doorway. Scowling at it probably wasn't likely to conjure up the Calvary.

"I wasn't trying to accuse her of stealing the recipe or anything."

"Umff," he said with clever aplomb and returned to his meal.

They ate in silence while he tried like mad to think of how he was supposed to take care of her. Maybe Em had meant it in a hit-man sort of way. She'd seemed kind of spooked, but as much as he liked Emily, he didn't really care for the idea of offing the woman across the table from him. She was, actually, rather adorable...if you were attracted to that fine porcelain, a little on the skinny side kind of look.

"Well..." Rising, she pushed back her chair. It scraped against the scarred hardwood floor, making him question how long he'd been silent. Her plate was empty, scratched knife and fork crossed primly in the middle. "I guess I'll—"

"You ride?" he asked and wondered if the question sounded as panicked as he felt. When was the last time he'd been alone with a woman? When was the last time he'd *wanted* to be?

"What?" She looked surprised that he had spoken. Or maybe she was amazed to learn he possessed the skill.

"Horse. Do you ride horse?"

"Oh, well..." Her hands fluttered a little. She had good hands, long fingered with tidy nails. A musician's hands maybe. "No. Not really. It's been a long time."

Great. He was off the hook then. But the memory of Emily's eyes pricked his conscience. If the girl's cooking abilities failed to bend a man to her will, her eyes would invariably turn the trick. "Want a sleigh ride?"

Her smile lit her storm-cloud eyes, delicately crinkling the corners. "You don't have to take care of me, Mr. Brody. I'd be more than happy to dig into a couple of novels I brought along."

"You're a reader?"

"Terry Pratchett is waiting for me in the bunkhouse as we speak. So you don't have to coddle me. I'm a big girl."

Well, everything was relative, and though she was reasonably tall, she was, by no means, big. He nodded toward the traitorous stairs that had taken Emily. "She says I do...have to take care of you," he explained.

"Is she your boss?"

He considered that for a second. "Not sure."

"You're uncertain whether she's your employer?"

"If I disappoint her I disappoint Colt...I disappoint Colt I disappoint Casie... I disappoint Casie, Colt sends me packing."

"Casie...the Lazy's owner."

He nodded.

"Well then I guess I should take you up on your kind offer."

He nodded, oddly relieved and disappointed all at once.

"What do I wear?"

"Everything you've got."

She raised her brows at him.

"It's nice out now," he said, which made her brows wing even higher. Maybe some people didn't consider twenty-nine degrees all that toasty. "Dress warm."

“Yes sir,” she said, and although she didn’t laugh again, her eyes suggested she found him kind of amusing.

~\*~

What the devil was going on? Brody wondered and hooked the palomino’s traces to the sleigh’s stabilizing whiffletree. He was the last person on the planet who should be handling a customer. Even Ty, the boy Casie had all but adopted, the boy who was as socially awkward as a prairie skink, was better equipped to keep their guest entertained than he was. So why had she agreed to ride around in an antiquated vehicle with him? Was it possible that she didn’t find him entirely unappealing? Or was that too much--

“She’s pretty.”

He actually jerked at the sound of her voice. Like a kid with his first crush. It would be nice to blame Natalie for his dysfunction where women were concerned. But maybe his ex-wife couldn’t take the blame for everything. If he remembered correctly, he’d never exactly been Don Juan.

In an effort to avoid her for a few more seconds, he slid his fingers beneath the girth he’d already checked twice for snugness. Then, glancing over the palomino’s winter-fuzzed back, he found his guest. She was dressed in a red plaid coat that was belted at the waist and flared at the hips. It was a little too cute to be entirely practical. A little too short to be really warm. So maybe they’d have to sit close together in order to...

What in blazes was wrong with him? He didn’t need a woman in his life. Besides, he was pretty long in the tooth to be romanticizing a simple business appointment.

“You ready?” he asked.

“I guess so.” She sounded a little tentative, which seemed logical since, angry about his sophomoric hormonal flare up, he’d all but growled the question.

“Go ahead in,” he said and took a good firm grip on the palomino’s bridle, but there was no need. Evie was the nice quiet sort.

His guest stepped inside the sleigh. He eased in beside her, careful to leave a good twelve inches of open seat between them before settling back against the tufted seat and gently slapping the lines against the mare's golden haunches.

The runners scraped against gravel as they exited the barn then skidded easily over tight-packed snow.

Beside him, his passenger studied the diamond-studded landscape, a half smile tilting her lips. The cold was already snapping color into her fine china cheeks. "Beautiful," she said simply.

He nodded and let himself relax a little, but in a moment she leaned a shoulder against the cushioned backrest and studied him. Nerves cranked up again, tangling messily with rusty hormones. "I'm sorry you got roped into this."

He managed another meaningful glance.

"I get the feeling you're not particularly comfortable with strangers."

Not comfortable? He added a scowl to his repertoire. She made him sound like a persnickety house cat. "I'm comfortable."

"Yeah?" She raised an arched brow. "I bet you've forgotten my name."

He made a harrumphing sound and, despite the temperature, felt a little sweat prickle the back of his collar. "I'm not a betting man."

She laughed. "It's Penny."

Penny? Really? That didn't even sound familiar. But he would have to assume she was right. Wouldn't he? On the other hand, she wouldn't be the first guest who had come to the Lazy in an attempt to leave her past behind. Then again, she didn't look like the kind of woman who... He paused his thoughts, realizing the silence was stretching into infinity, which made him long to assure her that he had never forgotten her name at all, but he was a regrettably poor liar. So he simply nodded....sagely, he was sure.

"So you're not family?" she asked.

"What?" Wasn't it enough that he was taking her on a sleigh ride? Was he really required to speak, too? He'd rather be horsewhipped.

“With Colt,” she explained. “You said he’d send you packing if you disappointed Emily. So you must not be family.”

“Wouldn’t matter if I was Santa Claus,” he said. “Not where Em’s concerned.”

“Oh?” Her brow creased a little. “Is there... Is there something between the two of them?”

It took him a moment to understand her meaning. “Between Em and Colt?”

“She’s very pretty and...”

“Em’s just a kid.”

She glanced at the distant hills. “He wouldn’t be the first man to think that wasn’t a detriment.”

So she was among the walking wounded, too. It didn’t seem right. Not for a woman who appeared to have it all. But maybe no one got out unscathed.

“You haven’t met Casie,” he said.

She turned her storm cloud gaze back to him.

“His...” He searched for the proper word. But ‘wife’ didn’t seem to encompass what the two of them shared. “...beloved.”

“Beloved.” She smiled at the term. “Was she the one who hired Emily?”

“Guess so.”

“Why’d she do it?”

A hare leapt from hiding and bound away, as white as its pristine surroundings. They watched its erratic path until it disappeared behind the skeletal remains of a clump of prairie sage.

“The girl must have been very young, unskilled,” Penny said.

“I suppose.”

“So...” She shrugged.

“Guess it’s what she does.”

“Did she take you in, too?”

Was there teasing in her voice? Was there flirtation? The idea left him momentarily speechless. “I am neither young nor unskilled.”

She laughed. “What do you do when you’re not giving sleigh rides to guests whose names you can’t remember?”

“I like to read...Pamela,” he said, to which she stared at him a second before laughing. It was a pretty sound, full bodied and honest.

“I’m sorry if I’m wasting your time.”

“Lucky it was me if you’re fond of your ears.”

She cocked her head at him.

“Colt would have talked them off of you by now.”

“As it stands I think I’ll live to hear another day,” she said and turned a little to study the countryside. The bluffs shone red and stark against the rough-diamond snow. “This is nice.”

He watched the sienna cliffs skim past. “Legend claims Brave Hunter’s daughter sang buffalo down over the edge of those very cliffs.”

“You read old legends, too?”

“Seemed more fitting than regaling Piper with murder mysteries when he couldn’t sleep.”

“Piper?”

Evie leaned into the uphill grade, throwing her weight against the breast collar.

“My firstborn.”

“I didn’t have you pegged as the storytelling type.”

“Sleep deprivation can make a man do desperate things.”

She watched him, eyes alight. “Where is Piper now?”

He glanced toward the sun. It was just about to kiss the broad, western horizon. “Probably trying to coax his own son to sleep. Karma...” A grin tickled his lips. “...she has a wicked sense of humor.”

“You have grandchildren?” Maybe he shouldn’t have been shocked by the surprise in her voice. Certainly he shouldn’t allow himself to be flattered.

“One. You?” he asked.

“Oh look! A pronghorn!” she said and pointed so excitedly toward the leaping antelope that her failure to answer almost went unnoticed.

## Chapter 5

*“You wouldn’t dare.”*

*Roger slipped his foot between Penelope’s leg and the gelding she straddled. She preferred riding bareback, but she had to admit, there were several quite simple ways to unseat her, and Rog had perfected every one of them on his four older sisters. Sisters who adored him despite his diabolical nature. Maybe it was his face, that late summer blend of angel and demon. Or his stunning, deep-as-cobalt eyes. The sun sparked auburn highlights into his black curls, reflected off the glassy lake. “Tell me the truth.”*

*She shrugged. “I like you okay.”*

*“I just told you I loved you,” he reminded her.*

*“Yeah...” She tightened her fingers in the bay’s mane, but it was slick and wet, supplying little security. “And I said you’re all right.”*

*“Rosie...” His voice was a warning.*

*“You’re kind of vain.”*

*“But you love me.”*

*“And sometimes you have this irritating way of—”*

*He lifted his leg just a little. She grabbed for her horse’s neck, but she was already slipping, striking the water with a splash. He was beside her in a moment, pulling her up, cradling her in his arms. Their lips almost met, and then she awoke.*

Penelope Melba lay quietly, gathering her bearings, erasing the pain.

Roger was gone. Had left her years before. She knew that, but sometimes in the small hours of the morning, she forgot. Or remembered. And mourned. But maybe that was better than the anger that had plagued her for years. Or the guilt. The guilt was the worst.

It was that guilt, in fact, that had driven her here in spite of her vow to forget, to move on, to enjoy. But they had been right. They'd all been right. This was a stupid endeavor. Foolish and expensive and time consuming and...

What was she thinking? Penny pulled the earth-tone quilt to her chin and squeezed her eyes shut. Looking for love in all the wrong places, maybe, as some had suggested. But evidence had suggested this might be the *right* place.

Her thoughts wandered, straying to Roger...his last days, so quick, so slow, so poignantly painful. She'd spent every minute with him, waking and otherwise, and still had no idea if she had done the right thing. If she hadn't tried hard enough. If she'd tried *too* hard. Maybe if she hadn't, maybe if she had been more aware, more...

Beside the bed, her phone rang with startling clarity. Reaching tentatively out, she snagged it and glanced at the display. Peter, her only son, and the man who, somehow, managed to love her regardless of her shortcomings.

"Hello?"

"So you're still alive."

"Of course I'm alive." She smiled, happy to hear his voice despite the censor in his voice.  
"Why wouldn't I be?"

"I don't know. Ravenous coyotes, crazed cowboys, avalanches."

"Avalanches?"

"It could happen."

"Funny, I thought a fifth grade teacher would be a little more aware of U.S. geography."

"Come home."

She felt her gut tighten. "I will."

"When?"

“As soon as I get some answers.”

“So I was right.”

“I doubt it,” she joked and fiddled with the bedspread. “But what are we talking about exactly?”

“My love isn’t enough.”

She smiled but her eyes simultaneously filled with tears; despite the teasing in his tone there was something else, just a grain of hurt maybe. “This is just something I’ve got to do before I settle into my dotage.”

“Yeah, that and another couple dozen triathlons.”

She’d taken up running nearly a decade earlier and found it to be a good stress reliever. Open water swimming however... “You should do the next one with me.”

“I’m too old.”

“You’re too lazy,” she corrected.

“I love you.”

“I love you too,” she said and hung up moments later.

## Chapter 6

“How was the sleigh ride?” Emily wore a flounced denim skirt and striped tights with her army boots today.

“Beautiful. Awe-inspiring. Illuminating,” Penny admitted.

“And silent?”

“My guide said several words.”

“No!” She twisted from the stove, peering past her dreadlocks to show a shocked expression.

“In a row,” Penny added and smiled despite her nerves. She would delay no longer. She’d learn the truth, bear the consequences, and return home to the people who cared about her. There were even a few who loved her. That should be enough.

“I’m sorry I was unavailable,” Emily said and turned away to pour batter into a cast iron pan.

“I like a man who’s comfortable with his own thoughts.”

“You must be practically in love then.”

“I think I am.”

Emily turned toward her, expression *honestly* shocked now and Penny laughed.

“With South Dakota.”

“Oh.” She wasn’t sure if there was relief or disappointment in the girl’s tone. “Well, yeah, the Hills will pull you in.

“Are you a coffee drinker?”

“Sort of.”

“I don’t even know what that means. Is that like being sort of awake?” Emily asked and setting the batter aside, lifted the lid from a steaming kettle.

“My husband was the caffeine addict.”

“Is he...”

“Dead. Yes. For a long time now,” Penny said and was amazed, as always, to see that her voice didn’t shake, her hands didn’t tremble.

“I’m sorry.” Her tone suggested that she truly was.

“Me too. Every day, but I try not to be maudlin. Did that long enough.”

“How’d he die?”

“PNP. Paraneoplastic pemphigus.”

The lid dropped from the girl’s fingers. It clattered like a cymbal, startling them both.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Sorry. Holy crud, I haven’t been this clumsy since I was pregnant. Paraneoplastic pem...” She shook her head, clearly at a loss.

“It’s an autoimmune disease. Very rare. I guess I will take some of that coffee,” Penny said. She needed something to hide behind, to bolster her strength. Now would be a great time for a shot of whiskey...if it weren’t seven o’clock in the morning... and if she liked whiskey.

“Sure,” Emily said and hurried over to fill a mug. It was made of rough clay and oddly misshapen, as if thrown by a first grader, or maybe someone with no opposable thumb. “So what brings you to our little corner of the world?”

Penny blew on the brew, giving herself time to formulate an answer, to consider how truthful she would be. But her first sip was almost too lethal to allow her to breath, much less think.

“Zowie!”

“Shoot! Sorry! I’m sorry!” Emily said and tugged the cup from fingers that seemed to have already gone numb. “I gave you the wrong stuff.”

Penny blinked, found her voice. “Have you lost many guests to caffeine overdose?”

“I don’t usually try to kill them. Here,” she said and poured a paler brew from another source. “Try this one.”

She did. It didn’t even *almost* kill her.

“Better?”

“Yes, thanks. Not that the other one was bad. Just—“

“Morning.” Brody Redman, rustically garbed in a chambray shirt and worn jeans, shambled sleepily into the kitchen and poured coffee from the original pot. Half the cup was gone when he lowered it from his lips.

Penny watched to see if his face would disintegrate. Nothing. She glanced in surprise at Emily who shrugged.

“I heard you gave Ms. Rogers the grand tour.”

He settled his lean hips against the counter, made a harrumphing noise and took another gulp.

Emily rolled her eyes. “That means ‘yes, it was my greatest pleasure,’” she said and turned with a platter piled with fluffy cakes. “Do you want syrup or honey with your flapjacks?”

“Honey?” Penny asked.

“Em’s an apiarist,” Brody said.

“Really? You’re a bee keeper *and* a chef?”

The girl shrugged. “If the pollinators die we’re next on the endangered list.”

“And an environmentalist,” Brody added and reached for the maple syrup. “Colt planted twenty acres in clover just for the bugs.”

“They’re not *bugs*.” Emily said the words as if it was her mantra, to which Brody sent a silently amused glance toward Penny.

Their gazes met for a second, but she tugged hers away. She hadn’t come here in search of romance. Hardly that. “Well...I guess I’ll try some clover honey then.”

“Nice to see *someone* knows what’s good for them. How long will you be staying with us?” Emily asked and slipped a pair of the cakes onto Penny’s plate. Steam curled seductively into the air.

Until that moment she'd been entirely unaware that flapjacks had a scent. Strange for one with such close ties to the food industry.

"Just a couple" she said, and trying to keep her hands busy, scooped a dollop of whipped butter from a nearby bowl.

"Lizzie's doing better, I hope."

"What?"

"Lizzie," Emily said. "Your granddaughter?"

"Oh, yes. Yes. Much better," Penny lied and felt her cheeks heat up.

"Where do they live?"

"Florence." She practically spit out the word, like a toxin too long on her tongue.

They looked at her expectantly.

"Nebraska," she added.

"Oh. I've heard such good things," Emily said.

"Really?"

"No."

Penny took a breath, forced a grin. "I take it you've never been *there* either?"

"Can't tear myself from the excitement of Hope Springs."

Brody drizzled syrup on his cakes. "Heard the Jingle Bell Ringers are coming to town."

"Golly," Emily said and Brody chuckled.

So that was it then, Penny thought. The girl had no reason to lie which meant it was time to go home. Get back to life as she knew it. Forgot she was ever here.

"Look what I found."

They turned at the sound of Colt's voice.

And in that instant, Penny's breathing stopped. Her fingers went numb. She barely noticed when her coffee cup clattered to the table. Was hardly even aware of the fact that the hot liquid had spattered against her shirt.

Perched on Colt Dickenson's arm was a pretty little girl with seal dark curls and cobalt eyes.

## Chapter 7

She was being ridiculous. Emily knew that. Told herself as much a dozen times as she milked Bodacious. Another hundred as she dumped the creamy liquid into a separator and washed the dinner dishes. It wasn't as if there were only five people in the city of Florence, Nebraska. Penny Rogers was just one of 3058 occupants. She'd googled the population. Knew the exact number.

"How's it going?"

She squawked, causing Colt to chuckle. There was nothing he liked better than scaring the wits out of hard-working, army-booted innocents.

"We're gonna have to cut down on your caffeine," he said.

"What are you doing here?"

He took a towel from the rack beneath the sink. "Drying dishes."

"Why?"

"I got the short straw."

"What are you talking about?"

He shrugged, picked up a just-rinsed bowl. "Brody thought you were acting kind of funny at breakfast."

"Funny." She gave him her meanest scowl. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Heck if I know," he said and dried the dishes set on edge in the strainer.

“Well, I wasn’t,” she said but remembered their guest’s gasp at the sight of Bliss, her spilt coffee, her explanation that she wasn’t feeling well, followed by her hasty retreat. She had barely shown her face for the remainder of the day.

“That’s what I said.”

“Well say it louder,” she demanded, snatching his towel away. “And get out of my kitchen.”

“I would...but I thought there might be some stew left,” he said and turned to open the refrigerator.

“Behind the cream.” There was no point in trying to get between him and his nine pm feeding.

He sighed as he pulled it into the light of day, smiled as he settled in at the table.

“Don’t eat that cold.”

He removed the glass lid and took a bite. “Too late. So what do you think of Ms. Penelope Rogers?” he asked. It had been one of Emily’s first orders of business to rid the kitchen of plastic containers. A guest ranch was no place for carcinogens. It was, instead, a place of healthful peace and quiet happiness, but the Lazy had lost its restful appeal for her. She fidgeted then smoothed out the kinks, kept her tone casual. “Has she paid?”

“Far as I know.”

“Then I like her.”

“Guess Brody thought you were a little skittish this morning.”

She pulled ingredients from the cupboard, neither knowing nor caring what they were. “Why would I be skittish?”

“Beats me. Hand me the milk, will ya?”

She did so. “Why aren’t you as fat as a farrowing sow?”

“Clean living I suppose. You’ve never met her before then?”

She almost asked to whom he was referring, but she was smarter than that. There were few who were better versed in deception than those who had been through the child welfare system. Only Lincoln knew her well enough to catch her in a lie, and he hadn’t returned. What did that say about her? “How would I have met a woman from somewhere as exotic as Florence, Nebraska?” she asked.

“I don’t know.” He settled back a fraction of an inch, even quit eating for a second to watch her, but she kept her breathing steady, her movements slow. “I’m just asking if you did.”

She caught his gaze, held it. She’d learned to lie with a foster kid’s polished panache; the truth would be a walk in the park. “I’ve never met her in my life.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“Great. Hey, do we have any of that raspberry extravaganza left?”

“Brody ate the last of it.”

He narrowed his eyes. “I’ve never trusted that guy.”

“Really?” She kept her tone deadpan. Brody and Colt were brothers under the skin, flip sides to the same coin.

“What do we really know about him?”

“Besides the fact that he’s honest, conscientious and hard working?”

“Yeah.”

“He’s kind, handsome, and dependable.”

He snorted. “I still think we should have him investigated. You can’t trust a guy who would steal another man’s extravaganza.”

## Chapter 8

“So you’re feeling better?” Emily asked.

“Yes, much. I’m sorry I ran out like that yesterday. My stomach was kind of wonky. Oatmeal was just what I needed to get set right.” Penny said.

“Maybe *you’re* pregnant.”

She chuckled a little, watching the younger woman. “Were *you*? When you came here?”

“Pregnant. Yeah. Couple months along.”

“So what brought you *here*?” Penny kept her tone carefully modulated, her expression impassive.

The girl kneaded the lump of dough she’d plopped onto the floured counter. “The wind just sort of blew me in, I guess.”

“But you’re only...what...seventeen? Eighteen?”

“Numerically maybe. But I think motherhood has tripled my age.”

“Not with a little beauty like her,” Penny said and watched as Bliss speed-crawled across the linoleum toward the table. “Do you mind if I pick her up?”

There was a second of delay then, “Of course not,” she said and began forming the dough into loaves.

The child’s round, cobalt eyes raised to Penny’s, solemn as prayer as she was lifted from the floor. But in a moment, the cherry lips bowed into a heart-stealing grin.

“So where were you from?” Again with the casual tone, the this-is-just-small-talk expression.

“Originally?” The girl shrugged. “Papa was a rollin’ stone.” She sang the lyrics entirely off key then glanced up, hands still busy in the nine-grain dough. “Weren’t those song lyrics from back in the day?”

“Yes, in *my* day,” she said. “During the dark ages.”

“You’re not old.”

The baby jabbered nonsensically, perhaps arguing the opposite.

“Not compared to the glaciers, I suppose.”

“Well, you’re holding up better.”

Penny slanted her a glance over Bliss’s buoyant curls.

“Than the glaciers...which are melting.”

“Oh right.” She bounced the cherub gently. “My husband was an activist.”

“Was he?”

“Worried about civil rights and...” She shook her head, swallowed by memories for a second. “Everything. But what about you? Where’s your family?”

“On your lap,” Emily said and laughed when Bliss glanced up right on cue.

“How about your mother?”

“Not sure,” the girl admitted and settled the loaves lovingly into pre-greased pans. “Probably living it up in San Francisco or something.”

“You don’t stay in touch?”

She shrugged, noncommittal but pragmatic. “I’m busy...she’s busy.”

“But she must have wanted to be...” She caught herself and snapped her gaze to the girl’s, but Emily was intent on her preparations. “She must want to be a part of Bliss’s life.”

Their gazes met and for one trembling moment truth almost spilled into the room, but the spell was broken when Brody stepped into the kitchen.

“Puke’s warmed up.” he rumbled and shifted his gaze from one to the other.

“You didn’t have to do that.” Emily brushed flour from her hands.

“But sometimes when I do…” He let the sentence fall into silence.

The girl rolled her eyes. “It’s in the hatbox.”

He nodded, solemn as a dirge. “You are the daughter of my heart.”

“Just because you love beating Colt to the punch,” she said and pulling a coat from the wardrobe in the foyer, bundled Bliss into it, then lifted the baby from Penny’s suddenly bereft arms.

“And your pies,” he added soberly.

She laughed as she propped Bliss on one outthrust hip. “And my pies,” she admitted. “Thanks for taking care of her, Ms. Rogers. I’m off to buy groceries. See you at dinner.”

In a moment she was gone. The kitchen fell into silence. Brody turned his somber gaze on Penny. “How do you feel about pie?”

“What?”

“Pie. What are your innermost feelings?”

“Well… What kind is it?”

His brows dipped even lower, as if he were deeply disappointed and maybe suspicious that she might be as crazy as a loon. “That matters?”

“I guess not, actually.”

“Wise,” he said and disappeared into the hallway. In a moment he had returned carrying a metal box by its handle. Setting it on the table, he undid the clasp and carefully lifted a delectable concoction from its depths. “Strawberry crème.” His tone was reverent. “Lovingly crafted from Lazy berries and Bodacious cream.” He turned it slowly as if awed by its perfection then retrieved a knife from a nearby drawer and cut it with careful precision. “Are you a religious person, Penelope Rogers?”

“I like to think I am.”

“Good,” he said and dished a slice onto a plate he’d taken from the cupboard.

“It does look—” she began but he shushed her.

“We must observe a moment of silence.”

She nodded then whispered. “This might be the most I’ve ever heard you talk since—”

“Shhhh.”

She swallowed a laugh as he handed her a fork.

They tasted in unison. The first bite exploded in her mouth like a volcano of flavors. Sweet, rich, creamy with just a dash of zest. “Wow!” she said finally.

“I concur.”

“This is amazing.”

He didn’t respond until his plate was empty at which time he leaned back and watched her finish hers.

She refrained from licking the plate. But if she had been alone... “How does she do that?”

“Do you believe in magic?”

Maybe at one time she had. “Not really. Is this an old family recipe or something?”

“Don’t know.”

“What about her family? Have you met them?”

He watched her, eyes narrowed slightly. “Why do you wish to know?”

She shrugged, careful to continue to breathe. “A girl needs a mother.”

“I believe Cassandra fills that role.”

“But...you’re a grandparent. Wouldn’t you feel cheated if you weren’t afforded the opportunity to be with your children’s children?”

He was silent for a while, eyeing the pie and for a moment she thought he was so immersed in the spiritual experience of dessert that he hadn’t heard her, but he spoke finally. “I have made mistakes.”

“Haven’t we all?”

He nodded in tacit agreement. “But my children have been able to forgive. Some are not.”

She tried to control the wince but he caught the expression.

“Does your family actively avoid you?” he asked. His eyes were too knowing, but she refused to fidget under his scrutiny.

“No.” She could say that much honestly...now.

“Then you probably did as well as any.”

“I wish that were true.”

“Come,” he said finally, and though she tried to think of a reason to refuse, she failed again.

## Chapter 9

“See the little bay there?” Brody asked.

A small covey of horses was crowded against the far wall of the ancient barn. Steam rose from their extended nostrils like a dragon’s fiery breath.

Penny nodded, expression solemn. “The one with the star on its face?”

“You know horses.” It shouldn’t matter if she was familiar with the equine species, of course, but somehow the knowledge made him like her just a little better. Trust her a little more.

“Just the rudiments,” she admitted. “Growing up, we had a few in the backyard. Rudy was mine. A bay. Kind of like that one. But not so...” She paused, perhaps searching for a PC term for tortured.

“Starved,” Brody said. “We found him in a feed lot. Only he had not been fed, not for some time. And the chestnut there...” He pointed at the milling herd.

“The one with the scar on its nose?”

He bumped a nod. “The colt was haltered at a young age. The horse grew. The halter did not.” At one point he would have struck out because of that neglect. And though the thought still made him want to retaliate, he let the anger slide. One could only do so much.

“And the lanky gray?” she asked.

“Em brought that one home.”

“Emily’s an equestrian?”

“She is a humanitarian.”

He shrugged at her quizzical expression.

“She said the animal was unhappy.”

“So she bought her? Just like that?”

He almost smiled now. The inhabitants of the Lazy Windmill were a unique lot, occasionally temperamental, often unpredictable, but perhaps their Emily was the most capricious. “I am unsure whether money ever changed hands.”

It seemed to take her a moment to absorb that idea. “She stole her? She stole a horse?”

“When the gray arrived, she was a hundred pounds underweight.”

“Still...” She shook her head but he kept his attention on the gangly gray. She was starting to trust. Just a little. Enough to snuffle his jacket when he passed by.

“Someone failed each of these animals.” He watched them flicker their ears toward him and away. “They could have become bitter, aggressive, killers even, but they did not. They are yet willing to take a chance on happiness. Some people are the same.”

“You think Emily’s that kind of person?”

“Do you have reason to believe otherwise?”

“I don’t know her.”

He watched her. There was something there. Something he couldn’t quite put his finger on. Something she wasn’t telling him. “Don’t you?”

Her eyes widened like a yearling about to bolt. “How would I?”

He waited, letting the silence wear on her resolve, but she didn’t break. “You are an intuitive being,” he said finally and let her slip the loop.

“Oh, well, thank you.” Her hands fluttered a little. A nervous gesture in an otherwise steady woman. “She seems very nice.” She cleared her throat. “Emily.”

“Why do you ask her about her past?”

“I’m just...curious.”

Maybe. “What about yours?”

“What about my what?”

“Your past.”

“Well, for starters, it’s mine,” she said.

He gave her a steady stare, but she only raised her chin, undaunted, and finally he relented. “I did not mean to pry.”

“I think that’s exactly what you meant to do.”

He chuckled a little. “Sometimes we are overly protective of our own.”

He gazed at the horses for a moment. The bay nipped at the chestnut, begging to play. Not long before they’d been barely strong enough to stand.

“Meaning Emily,” she said.

He half-smiled at the youngsters’ antics, half-shrugged at her words. “And anyone else who can make strawberry crème pie with her expertise.”

“Which is...”

“No one.”

Maybe she was trying to look stern, but she only managed amused and maybe a little touched. “What about you?”

He supposed the question shouldn’t have surprised him; they said that turn around was fair play. “What of me?”

“Casie’s the owner. Colt’s the rodeo cowboy, Emily’s the cook. What’s your role?” she asked.

He tried to remain calm in the face of conversation involving himself. It wasn’t easy. “I do what needs doing.”

“Uh huh.” It was her turn to wait, to watch him in silence.

“I fiddle with the machinery, fix fence, bottle feed lambs.”

“And?”

He shook his head, trying to tacitly assure her there was nothing else, no hidden agendas, no long sad stories.

“Men,” she said with disgust.

He wasn't sure if he should be insulted that she found his gender lacking or thrilled that she included him in that category. So far, it seemed to him, he'd pretty much been acting like a cantankerous grizzly. “What of them?”

“They don't mind poking into other people's business. But watch out if somebody tries to do the same to them.”

“Maybe there's nothing to poke,” he said and lifted a lariat from a nearby peg on the wall. The little dun filly that had begun to venture forward, drew cautiously back amongst her companions.

“Oh there's pokability,” she said.

He snorted.

“How long were you married?”

“What makes you think I was?”

“You have a son. And a grandson.”

“Maybe...” he began but she didn't let him finish.

“You're not the kind to let someone raise your baby on her own.”

He didn't argue, though he would have liked to.

“How long?” she asked again.

He gritted his teeth for an instant, but if he knew people, and he did, though reluctantly, she would just keep poking until she found a sore spot...which she had. “Twenty-one years.”

“Was it before or after that you quit your job as a...” She paused as if debating. “An architect?”

“You're miles off,” he said.

“Engineer?”

He couldn't entirely squelch his expression of surprise.

“I guessed it, didn’t I?”

The animals behind him shuffled nervously.

“You always this spooky?”

“Sometimes. So why’d you quit?”

“Realized one day that I’d been there more than half my life.”

“And?”

He shook a loop into the lariat. “And that I hated being an engineer.”

“Is it okay if I lean on the fence?”

“Free country,” he said and almost smacked himself for such a stupid response. He’d actually *known* bears that were more congenial.

She walked slowly, finally settling her upper arms atop the two by six that separated her from the horses. “So then what?”

He glanced at her, hoping he looked peeved about the prying. But the truth was unsettling; he was disgustingly flattered.

“So has retirement been everything you dreamed it would be?”

“Perhaps there was a bit of a learning curve.”

She raised a quizzical brow. Her face still looked as delicate as porcelain but perhaps the fine china was lined with steel.

“I became somewhat...” He didn’t want to tell her he had been bored out of his mind. Boredom should be confined to boys laboriously grooming those silly man buns and little girls with no one to share their tea parties.

“Bored?” she guessed.

“Restless,” he corrected.

Humor sparkled in her eyes. “So you started working at the Lazy?”

“Red Horse Sanctuary,” he said and lifting the gate’s latch, stepped into the youngsters’ pen.

“Red Horse... Oh!” she said. “Is that where that horse... what’s his name?”

“*Her.*” He didn’t like roping the babies. It scared the devil out of them...and he was a terrible roper. But standing there staring at them didn’t make much of an advance on their training, and selling them would generate the cash necessary to feed others in need.

“What?”

“Courage,” he said and gave the loop a tentative twirl. The little ones watched him like pointers on quail, ears perked, eyes wide. “She’s a mare.”

“Courage. Yes. That’s the horse that was...” He could hear the excitement in her tone, and he couldn’t blame her. It seemed like the entire country had been thrilled by the story. The Lazy was still receiving some residual guests from that excitement, but they were on the far side of the bubble now. America had moved on to its next buzz. “...the horse that brought home that little lost girl.”

Lily. He smiled a little at the thought of her. Small, precocious, bright as a newly minted coin. She’d saved the mare as surely as the mare had saved her and for a moment, at least, had reminded the world that the wild things deserve a place in the universe.

“So the story was true?”

The sorrel with the burr-riddled mane tossed his head, half challenging.

“How she got lost and came back riding a wild mustang?”

“There’s wild and then there’s wild,” Brody said and letting the honda slide a little through his fingers, tossed the loop and prayed.

## Chapter 10

The lariat soared in a graceful arc then fell, almost magically, over the ears of a high-headed roan that dashed past.

After that it was a pitched battle. Penny gripped the rail of the fence in awe-struck amazement. The young mare fought, twisting like a trout on a line. But Brody had already wrapped the end of the rope around the nearest post. Horses charged off in every direction, but the roan was held fast, neck stretched toward the fence, eyes wide with terror. They widened even more when he opened the back door and let the others escape outside.

Without her comrades now, the roan reared and struggled.

Perhaps it would have been difficult to watch if it hadn't been for Brody's demeanor. Firm but infinitely kind, he made the battle a thing of beauty. And his voice, that entrancing, lyrical chant never ceased. It was an ancient dance between man and horse. The animal would jump, Brody would sidestep. She would snort, he would croon. She twisted and leapt, but he merely stood, arm outstretched, waiting.

Penny would have been hard pressed to guess how much time had passed. But in the end, the lariat was removed and the roan was encouraged to circle the enclosure. She did so. Dashing wildly around the pen. Flying like a dervish, him driving her patiently on. Until finally he paused and turned his back to her. For reasons unknown, the mare stopped, flicked her ears up, and slowly approached him. In the end, when he walked to the fence, she followed along. He pivoted in the opposite direction. She dropped her pretty head and did the same.

By the time he returned her to her companions, she gave him one soulful, almost longing glance before reuniting with the others.

“So you’re a wizard,” Penny said.

He looked at her from the corner of his eye. “You must be hungry.”

“Hungry...” She shook her head, still mystified, mesmerized. “That was the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Why don’t you go on up and eat. I’ll just be a couple minutes.”

“I’ve always hated it that magicians won’t reveal their methods.”

He shrugged, a modest lift of canvas clad shoulders. “We all have needs.”

“Needs?”

“For food, for friendship...protection.” He coiled the lariat. “Horses are prey animals. Millions of years of evolution have taught them to seek a herd. They find comfort in crowds. Her crowd was gone. I was all that was left.”

“If they’re prey animals, why didn’t she think you were the predator?”

“She did at first. But when I did not eat her, did not allow *you* to eat her.” Another shrug. A self-effacing grin. “Hope was all she had.” Unlatching the gate that separated them, he stepped through and hung the lariat back on its peg. “Even though she has been damaged, that was enough.”

“What’ll happen to her now?”

“She’ll learn to accept a saddle, carry a rider. Eventually, we will find her person.”

“What person is that?”

“The one she is meant to care for. To share happiness with.”

“You make it sound pretty romantic.”

Humor lit his eyes. “Until I get tossed on my head. It loses some of its poetry then.”

“So where did you learn to do all this?”

He was silent for a second and for a moment she thought he wouldn’t answer, then, “You Tube.”

She laughed.

He didn't.

"You're kidding me," she said.

He didn't assure her he was. On the other hand, he had the good manners to look chagrined.

"You found...that...that magic, on the internet?"

"I had to google it twice."

"What about the roping trick? Did You Tube teach you that, too?"

He cleared his throat, expression embarrassed. "I was aiming for the chestnut," he said.

## Chapter 11

“How was your morning?” Emily asked.

“Amazing.”

“Yeah?” She glanced over her shoulder. Penelope Rogers was a pretty woman, fine-boned and slim, but there was something about her that spoke of strength, of resilience.

“I watched Brody work with one of the young horses.”

“Oh yeah, he *is* amazing.”

“He was kidding when he said he learned his skilled from You Tube, wasn’t he?”

“I’m not sure.” She set a steaming casserole on the table in front of them. “Brody’s kind of a mystery.”

“Not like you then?”

“Me! What are you talking about?”

“I know the truth,” she said then grinned when Emily glanced up, breath held. “You’re a long lost Egyptian princess.”

Em snorted and turned to fetch the milk. “You found me out,” she said. “Despite my somewhat unorthodox appearance, I’m African royalty.”

“I’ve got to admit that the army boots threw me for a while.”

“So what gave me away?”

Penny inhaled the scent of the casserole and sighed heavily. "It was the food."

"Egyptian princesses like to cook?"

"Absolutely not," she said. "They're princesses, why would they learn to cook?"

"Uh huh?" Emily said.

"So it's the perfect disguise."

"Ahhh."

"This smelled fantastic, by the way."

"Go ahead and eat. You wait for the guys you might never get any."

She dished up a serving. "My husband made a mean Mexican lasagna."

Her husband again. And those inscrutable glances, as if she was waiting for something, waiting and hoping.

"How did you say you heard about the Lazy?"

"Your website."

Impossible to disprove that. "Good to know it's earning its keep."

"It kind of underplayed the meals."

"They're just meals."

"Like the Mona Lisa is just a painting. Which makes me wonder why you're hiding out here in the hills."

"Hiding!" She laughed. The sound was almost spot on. "What would I be hiding from?"

"I don't know... a princess-snatching sheik maybe?"

"You *do* have an imagination," Emily said.

"Good thing, too." She took a bite and narrowed her eyes as if trying to determine the ingredients. Good luck," Emily thought. She wasn't entirely sure what was in it herself. "I can't cook to save my soul."

"So what do you do in the real world?"

“I design greeting cards,” Penny said.

“Like for birthdays?”

“Birthday, anniversary, just-because...” She paused. “I do the cantankerous cook cards.”

“The... Oh!” Surprise struck her. “The guy with the curly hair and the chef’s hat.”

“Yes.”

“He’s great. Kind of...snarky. Kind of...kind.”

“Yes, he was.”

Emily watched her in silence, heart pounding. Penny smiled.

“They’re based on my husband. A sort of catharsis I suppose.”

“Oh.” She was being ridiculous again. This wasn’t Hollywood. Her life was neither a mystery novel nor a fairytale. Still, she had to steady her hands before turning to fetch the salad. “I’ve always wanted to be artistic.”

Emily glanced up when the other woman laughed.

“Oh.” She sobered hastily. “You’re serious?”

“Yeah. I’d love to be able to sculpt or paint or—“

“Are you actually talking about artistry when you created...” She motioned toward her plate with the fork in her hand. The tines were bent. Even on the Lazy’s diminutive budget, it might be time to spring for new flatware. “...this masterpiece?”

“Well...thanks,” she said. “But I mean...you know...a traditional artist. Mom...” She stopped herself, horrified. What was she thinking? That she’d share her innermost secrets with this woman she didn’t know from Adam? That her life was suddenly going to become as surreal as retro TV? Family would come flowing in on waves of utopia. Linc would return. She’d dare admit her feelings and the world would become *Leave It to Beaver* perfect.

Hadn’t she learned better than that years ago? “Would you like some biscuits?”

“Yes, thanks.

“What about your mother?” she asked.

And Emily's decision was made; lies were her medium. Her safety net. Why not use them?

"She was really talented."

"Oh?"

"Did the art work for Amos Aardvark for years?"

"Amos..."

"You know. That aardvark with the funny ears."

Penny looked a little confused, a little stricken. "I don't think I do."

"Sure. I think he even had a television cartoon for a while. I can't remember the author's name. It was kind of a sleazy deal because he claimed to be the artist as well, so Mom never got credit for her work. She said that as long as she got the paychecks she didn't mind that she was legally bound to keep it a secret, but I think she would have liked to see her name on the cover. I mean...wouldn't you?"

"What *was* her name?"

"Do you want some coffee?"

"No. Thank you. Her name. What was it?"

"Oh. Laura. Laura Kane. You won't tell anyone will you?"

"Tell anyone..."

"Her name. I mean, it's no big deal and I'm sure Colt and the crew would keep it a secret, but if it got out..." She shrugged. "I don't want to get her in any kind of trouble."

"But I thought...I got the impression that she was already in some kind of trouble."

"Oh well yeah..." She shook her head as if exasperated by her mother's silly antics. But she hadn't found the drinking and drugs any funnier than the men she'd dragged home. "She was a wild child for sure. Lucky I had Mrs. Clown."

"Mrs..."

"My grandmother. In Naperville." She laughed. The sound was pitch perfect, tearing a little hole in her heart. "I can't even tell you how long I thought she was Santa's wife. One Christmas..." she began, but the other woman rose to her feet, face ashen.

“What’s for...” Brody began, but Penny was already rushing from the room.

The duo watched her go in tandem silence.

“What was that about?”

“I don’t know,” Emily said. “Maybe she’s having stomach trouble again.”

## Chapter 12

Penny had never particularly liked the snow, but it was beautiful here...diamond dust on a long ago world.

She stopped running long enough to watch a hawk circle in the powder blue sky then walked on. Her breath curled like wood smoke, crystalizing in the pristine air. Hours passed unnoticed, unchecked, but she still felt like a fool.

She'd told herself she was ready for the truth, whatever it was, but she'd run away, stumbled out of the house like a drunken sailor.

Her hands trembled a little, but not from the cold. The exercise had warmed her blood and cleared her head some. But not enough to drive out the demons.

Just enough to get her lost. She glanced around. Nothing looked familiar. Not that it was a problem. She'd gone west when leaving the Lazy. She was sure of that. Wasn't she? She glanced toward the setting sun.

She'd just head away from the sunset, she thought but when she looked east nothing seemed particularly recognizable in that direction either. She scowled at the landscape. So pretty just a moment ago, it seemed foreign now and strangely brittle.

The Black Hills, she'd learned before leaving Nebraska, was home to some of North American's most spectacular species: bison, elk, mountain lions, all living on millions of acres of public land. The idea of such wild solitude had appealed to her in the comfort of her climate controlled home. She would travel there alone, she'd told Peter, learn what she could, face the

consequences. It had all seemed vaguely romantic. Like a heroine in a novel. But nothing had turned out like she'd hoped.

And now she was lost, making her feel even more ridiculous. Still, if she kept walking in a static direction, she'd come to a road eventually. Someone would find her. It wasn't as if they were in Siberia.

But after an additional half an hour she'd seen no sign of human life. Fear prickled along her fingertips and skittered up her spine, making her breath come faster, her mind bobble erratically. She'd dressed sufficiently warm for the daylight hours, but nighttime would bring a new level of cold, and in her haste to escape the kindly warmth of Emily's kitchen, she'd left her cell phone behind.

A rustle of sound jerked her from her reverie. Off to her right, the branches of a ponderosa pine trembled. A cloud of crystalized air puffed between the boughs, and then an animal stepped into the clearing.

Penny backed away. She didn't know what it was, but it was huge! As big as a...

Horse. It *was* a horse! And upon its back, Brody Redman was leaning into the saddle horn and scowling at the snow covered earth.

"Hello!" The single word was barely a croak, evidencing a fear she had not yet allowed herself to admit.

But the horse and rider turned away. Panic, fully formed now, helped her find her voice. "No! Come back!" she yelled.

For a moment she was sure they would ride on, leaving her alone in the descending darkness, but suddenly they turned, pivoting sharply as if just catching her scent.

Snow spurred into the air as they galloped toward her, settled lightly on her sleeves as they slid to a halt.

"You okay?" Brody's face was wreathed in concern.

She bumped a nod, afraid for a moment that if she spoke he would hear the terror in her voice.

"You found me." The words sounded silly to her own ears.

He shifted the reins to his right hand, lowered his left, and abandoned the near stirrup. She wasn't too proud to clamber up behind him, and when their mount shuffled impatiently beneath them, she found no reason to resist wrapping her arms around his waist. He felt solid and warm and safe.

"Thank you," she said and closed her eyes with relief, but he spoke, amping up her angst again.

"Why'd you leave?"

"No reason. I just...I just needed some air." It was the worst excuse ever, but he didn't call her a liar.

"Em was worried," he said but the anxiety on his face eased her mind a little. It wasn't the end of the world, she reminded herself. Life went on.

"I was a little concerned myself. Thought I was about to get eaten by a yeti."

He shook his head, bare as always against the elements. "All the self-respecting yetis headed north years ago."

"Except you?"

She heard the small rumble of a chuckle and let herself relax a little. So what if the investigator she had hired had been wrong? So what if *she* had been wrong? This wasn't the end. She could try again.

"Hold on," Brody said

She tightened her arms around his waist as their mount gathered itself into a ground covering lope.

By the time they reached the Lazy, Penny felt bruised but grateful.

He delivered her straight to the bunkhouse where he held out an arm to aid in her dismount. Grasping it in one uncertain hand, she slid gratefully to the ground where she stumbled drunkenly before finding her balance.

"I don't..." She paused, taking a moment to steady her voice. "I don't know how to thank you."

His gaze met hers in a flash of amber heat. "You could invite me in."

His rumbled words surprised her. “I don’t think...”

“Brody!” Colt Dickenson was running across the yard toward them. “Didn’t you...” His words stopped when the gelding shuffled backwards, revealing Penny’s presence.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes. Thank you. I’m sorry I worried you.”

“She’s cold,” Brody said. “Needs a fire.”

“I’ll get one started right—”

“No!” The force of her own objection shocked her. “I mean...” She exhaled shakily and raised her gaze to the man on the horse. “Couldn’t you do it?”

There was a moment of silence as if the world was getting up to speed then, “I’ll see to the gelding,” Colt said.

Brody opened the door. Penny flipped on the lights. “I’m sorry,” she said and felt her cheek twitch with remorse. “You’ve done enough. More than enough. You don’t have to coddle me.”

“There should be supplies in the cupboard if you want to fix something hot to drink.”

“That’s not necessary.” She felt fidgety now. How long had it been since she’d been alone with a man? A man to whom she owed an explanation.

“I meant for me.”

“Oh, sorry,” she said and turned away to rustle around in the cabinet. In a moment she was filling a little metal pot with water from the tap in the mini kitchen.

He was already kneeling, settling kindling into the pot-bellied stove. “Have you always been?”

“What?” She turned back toward him. A small flame flickered hopefully beneath his broad, capable hands.

“Have you always been sorry?”

She plugged the pot into the nearest outlet. “You think I apologize too much.”

“Doesn’t seem like you’ve done anything too heinous.”

“Heinous?”

“I’m hooked on Grisham,” he said.

She nodded but didn’t speak. Couldn’t maybe, but for once he pursued the subject.

“What have you done that’s so awful?”

“You’d be surprised.”

“Not generally.

She smiled grittily, got cups down.

“Try me.”

For a moment she resisted, but finally she closed her eyes and let go. “Well...for starters, I lied.”

“You’re not really sorry?”

“I’m not really Penelope Rogers.”

He didn’t speak, just watched her. She shivered.

“Come over by the fire.”

She did so, but the bone deep chill stayed with her.

“Want to tell me why you ran out of the kitchen?”

“Not particularly.”

“How about why you’re incognito?”

“It’s...” She laughed, nervous, fidgety. “I’m looking for something.”

“Love in all the wrong places?”

She glanced up, surprised that he had mimicked Peter’s words almost exactly.

“I won’t find love.”

“What if it finds you?”

She flickered her gaze to him. His eyes, river-stone brown and Sunday morning earnest, pulled at her, but she tugged her gaze away and stretched her hands toward the fire. Warmth seeped cautiously into her frigid fingertips. “I messed up.”

He didn't goad her, maybe that's why she continued.

“I had a daughter. A beautiful, bright...” She felt her lips twitch with age old regrets. “That I...neglected. No! Worse than that.” She swallowed. “I had a daughter that I abandoned.”

## Chapter 13

Brody watched her in silence, absorbed the pain, shared the sadness.

Perhaps he should have offered some sort of comfort. Assured her that everything would be okay. Mouthed assurances that whatever had happened hadn't been her fault. But he didn't know that to be true and had no real evidence that worthless platitudes were helpful in the long run. The road to self-forgiveness was often the longest road of all.

"Why?" he asked instead.

She raised her haunted gaze to his. "What?"

"Why did you abandon her?"

She laughed. The sound was harsh. "Apparently, you don't know how this works."

He never broke eye contact. "Probably."

Her smile was brittle. "Here's where you're supposed to say that you're sure I'm wrong. I'm a wonderful human being, a caring, responsible individual who..." Her voice cracked. She sat down on the couch. "We loved her so much."

"You and your husband."

"Yes. He was..." She glanced toward the far wall. "You remind me a little of him. The sense of humor that not everyone gets."

He wondered vaguely if that meant he wasn't funny, but now didn't seem to be the time for self-indulgent insecurities.

“He was a great dad. She was crazy about him. I was always...I think I was always a little bit jealous.”

He nodded, understanding that weird double edged sword that comprised parenthood. Wanting them to be close to the other parent...but not close enough to threaten your own fragile security.

“They were so cute together. Cooking. Playing. Building tree houses or snow forts or...” She shrugged. “And then he got sick.” Her exhalation was slow and controlled. “I was sure we could beat it. As if I was too special for this to happen to me...to my family. I was consumed with his care. Medications, treatments, schedules, dates. At first, when Michele started staying out late I was almost relieved. She had friends, peers, people she could talk to so I wouldn’t have to explain...wouldn’t have to do...” She glanced toward the window. “She didn’t even cry the night he died. Just went to a party with kids I didn’t know. Didn’t even want to know.”

“Everyone grieves differently.”

“I realize that. A part of me always understood that. And eventually I tried to make amends. To find that bond that we had once shared, but by then everything had changed. She was...” She twisted her hands and raised her chin a little as if challenging the world to find fault. “I finally checked her into a treatment center.”

“For drug abuse.”

It took a minute and seemingly all her nerve to nod. “It was horrible. She was so angry. But finally she started to come around. By the time she returned home I thought I had my sweet little girl back. Things were better. Good even. Kyle started visiting. Just to make sure we were all right. He was a friend of Roger’s. A nice...He seemed like a nice guy. Peter adored him.”

“Peter?”

She laughed. “Michele wasn’t the only one I neglected. But Peter was a little older and...different. Solid. Self-assured. Even back then. He’s a school teacher now. Fifth grade.” There was pride in her voice. Pride and love and poignant regret. “Sometimes he’d spend the night. Kyle.” She winced, shifted her gaze to his.

But who was he to find fault. If one of Natalie’s friends had come around in the early days following the divorce he probably would have proposed before hearing her full name.

“I’d like to find a really good excuse,” she said. “But turns out I was just...”

“Lonely.”

“Yes. And I guess she was too.”

He waiting, half knowing.

Her cheeks were bright with color now, her hands white as she clasped them between her knees. “When I found them together I tried to think clearly, to believe...but he swore she’d initiated it. I told her to get out. Screamed it.” She shrugged, a quick jerk of taut shoulders. “So she did.”

“She left.”

“Nineteen years ago.”

“And you haven’t seen her since?”

“She’s called me a few times. From Seattle, or Philadelphia or San Francisco. I asked her to come home. Begged her really. But she said she was having too much fun. Just needed a little cash for groceries or car insurance.” She glanced toward the window. Outside, it was as black as sin. “Maybe I believed her. But maybe I just wanted to so I wouldn’t have to try to find her. Wouldn’t have to face her.”

“But you’re trying to find her now.”

Silence stretched into forever.

“Not anymore.”

The room was quiet but for the crackling of the fire, the snapping of the logs.

“Graham, an old friend of Rogers...he helped me track her down. Turns out...” She cleared her throat. “She died of an overdose in...um...in Houston I was told. A friend of hers...Greg...Gregory...he gave me a couple pictures of her.” She caught him with her eyes. “Her and her baby.”

Brody felt his cheek twitch in sympathy. “She had a child.”

“A daughter. Yes. Pretty. So pretty. Dark curls, eyes that’d make you cry.”

“So you’re looking for *her*.”

“She’d been gone for months by the time I met Greg...he didn’t know who took her.”

“And you think she might be around...” He stopped, gut clenching. “You don’t think Emily has her.”

“What? No.” She exhaled, then laughed a little at the misunderstanding. “I thought Emily *was* her.”

Surprise blindsided him. “How long ago did all this happen?”

“You must be thinking I’ve had plenty of time to find her. To make things right.”

He didn’t know what to think. Not about anything. “What was her name? Your granddaughter. What’d this Greg guy call her?”

“Eleanor Casper.”

“Then...”

“I told myself she’d probably changed it. Disavowed...” She blew out her breath. “It couldn’t have been easy. Traveling around with a mother who was using... I thought maybe she wanted to put everything behind her. Start fresh. I mean, we have so much in common.”

He watched her, dubious.

She breathed a chuckle. “We both say holy crud. Who does that? Nobody. We--”

“Penny...”

“She has his skills. His eyes.” She glanced away, looking sheepish. “Stupid. I know that now. But I didn’t want to spook her. I mean...there’s no telling what Chelle might have said about me. So I took an alias and dropped some hints.”

“And?”

“Well she certainly didn’t spook. I’ve told her my story in bits and pieces. She didn’t even blink. But I still believed. Still thought she might be Michele’s until a few hours ago.”

“When you bolted from the kitchen.”

“She said her mother was an illustrator for children’s books. And her grandmother...” She took a fortifying breath. “Her grandmother was just like Mrs. Santa.”

Brody felt his gut clench, but he waited, listening.

“The hair, the apron, the cookies...” She fluttered her hands, running out of steam.

“So you’ve decided she’s not the girl you’re looking for.”

She cracked a grin. “Maybe you haven’t noticed but I don’t exactly fit the bill. If it hadn’t been for cold cereal we would have starved to death after Roger’s death. When Michele turned fifteen...” She chuckled, blinking back tears. “She was fresh out of rehab. I tried to bake her a cake. It was...geez...” She twisted away, rolled tortured eyes toward the ceiling. “Such a disaster. No wonder—“

“She lied.”

It took her a moment to turn back toward him, longer to scowl her confusion. “What?”

“Emily...” He held her gaze and hoped to heaven he was doing the right thing. “She lies when she’s scared.”

## Chapter 14

“So your mom’s doing well?”

“Yeah.” Colt Dickenson watched Casie in the light of the Chevy’s dash. Some people might not call his wife beautiful, but he’d always known there was an overabundance of halfwits in the world. “God probably thought she deserved a clean bill of health for raising such a great son.”

She canted her head as if considering the possibility. “Or maybe He decided she had suffered enough.”

He laughed. “I kinda missed you.”

“Even though Em was here to do the cooking?”

He looked into her eyes, felt the love like a poultice against his heart. “As if you’d do the job if she wasn’t around.”

“I might.”

“And our guest might flee like a rat on a sinking ship. Hey...” He scowled through the windshield. “Maybe that’s her now but why— Holy...!” He pounded the heel of his hand against the horn, but the truck kept coming. “Hang on!” he yelled and jerked the wheel to the right.

Fenders crashed. Wheels spun, but finally they lurched to a halt.

He turned groggily toward Casie. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” She was struggling to free herself from her seatbelt. “Just—”

“Are you sure? You’re not—”

“I’m fine. Go check on Em.”

“Emily?” He jerked his gaze to the other vehicle, realizing finally that it was Casie’s dilapidated pickup that had almost run them down. “Emily!” He was outside in a moment, racing through the snow. Wrenching open the rusty door, he took stock of her condition. Shocky but no apparent lacerations. No obviously broken bones. He wrenched his gaze to the rear where the baby grinned at him from the safety of her car seat. “Holy cats, Em, what were you thinking?”

“Bliss...” Her tone was disoriented.

“She’s fine. Great. Thought it was a roller coaster ride or something. What the devil—”

“Emily!” Casie rushed up from behind. “Are you okay? You could have—”

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry? You’re shaking like a leaf.” Reaching inside, Casie undid the girl’s seatbelt.

Colt was already releasing Bliss from captivity.

“Come on. We’re going to the house.”

“I can’t.”

“What? Why? Are you hurt? Where...”

“I wasn’t stealing it.”

“Stealing what?” Colt asked and passed the baby to Casie who looked equally confused.

“Puke. I wasn’t—”

“Of course you weren’t stealing Puke,” Casie said.

“No one would steal Puke. That’s why we call it Puke.” Colt was already slipping his right hand behind her back, his left below her thighs.

“She can’t have her,” Emily rasped.

“Who can’t have who?”

“Does she have a concussion?” Casie asked.

“I know I don’t deserve—” Emily began and started to cry. Slipping her arms around Colt’s neck, she sobbed against his chest.

He was already carrying her to the house, strides long and hurried.

“What happened?” Brody rushed up, silvery breath pluming in the chill air.

“Should we call an ambulance?” Their guest was beside him, eyes wide and scared in the darkness.

“Let’s get in the house and —”

“No! No!” Emily writhed in his arms, jerked her feet to the frozen earth. “She’s mine! I won’t let you— Colt!” She turned toward him, desperate, terrified. “Don’t let her take my baby.”

“Honey!” He grabbed her arms, stilled her shaking body. “What are you talking about? Nobody’s going to—”

“I heard you talking. In the bunkhouse.” Skirting him, she reached wildly for Bliss. But her hands were shaking, her eyes feral.

Casie backed away. “Emily, you’re scaring me. What are you talking about? No one—”

“I’m not going to take your baby, Eleanor.” Penelope’s voice was low and steady.

“*Ela...!*” Colt shifted his gaze toward her. “*What?* Of course, you’re not—”

“Let’s get out of the cold,” Brody suggested and ushered them all toward the house.

Inside, it seemed ungodly bright, Godly warm. They gathered in the kitchen where Em’s cooking drew all comers. She fidgeted there, casting restless glances at the baby who was tasting testing Casie’s buttons.

“Okay,” Colt said and exhaled slowly. “Let’s start from the beginning.”

“She’s mine,” Emily said.

“That’s not the beginning,” Colt said. “That’s just a fact and not even a contested—”

“What was your mother’s real name?” Penny’s voice was soft, heartbreakingly empathetic.

Emily snapped her gaze to the older woman, but finally she drew a breath, pressed her hands together as if in silent supplication. “Michele. Her name was Michele Melba.”

Penelope smiled a little, nodded shallowly. “My husband’s last name was Melba.”

The kitchen fell into silence.

Emily nodded brokenly. “I knew...when you said he died of PNP. Mom said...It’s rare and I...” She snapped her gaze to Penny’s. “Why’d you hate her?”

Regret, harsh as a winter blizzard, crossed Penny’s face, but she raised her chin, nodded shallowly. “I...we loved her to distraction, Ella. With everything we had. But I failed her.”

The words fell softly into the silence.

Emily’s brows lowered distrustfully. “She used to tell me stories about her dad. How they built a tree house together, told knock knock jokes...make weird kinds of ice cream.” She swallowed. “They were good stories. I just thought...I just assumed she was lying.”

“Pepperoni.” Penny smiled. The expression wobbled on her fragile features. “That was their worst. Pepperoni ice cream.” Her voice broke. “I told them it was doomed to fail, but Chelle wanted to try it, and Roger... he thought the sun rose and set on her. So if she wanted—”

“She said you killed him.” The words exploded from Emily’s mouth, nearly knocking the older woman flat. But Brody stepped forward, slipping an arm around her waist, one hand on her arm.

“Em...” His voice was a disapproving rumble, but Penny shook her head.

“Maybe I did. Maybe it was my fault he died. I was so desperate. So absolutely set on saving him whether he wanted to be saved or not. I tried everything. Gave him every experimental drug, read every scrap of information, visited every...” She paused, drew a breath. “And for what? He died anyway, and Chelle, my only daughter...by the time I could see through my self-important haze I had lost her.” She shifted her gaze to Bliss who grinned crookedly. “She’s got your grandfather’s eyes.” She smiled a little, reached out, almost touching. “Your uncle’s curls. Aunt Mimi’s nose.”

“I...I’ve got an Aunt Mimi.” Emily’s voice was strangely wistful as if she were gazing into a world she had always imagined, but never quite believed existed.

“Great aunt,” Penny corrected. “She’ll be eighty-two in April...still runs the Meadows a couple days a week. I wanted to sell it. Use the money for Rog’s treatment. That’s when he put his foot. Said it was Chelle’s.” She swallowed. “Her inheritance.”

The room went quiet. Emily scowled.

“You’re my grandmother?”

“I’m sorry I don’t have more...” She shrugged, exhaled a laugh. “Whatever you need.”

“But I don’t need anything,” Emily said.

Penny nodded, raised her chin, pulled gently out of Brody’s grip. “You’re right. I see that now. You’ve got...” She studied the faces around her. Faces filled with concern and hope and caring. “You’ve got everything. So I’ll just...I won’t take any more of your time. Forgive me for lying,” she said and turned away.

“How about the yearling?” Brody asked. “What does she need?”

“Bliss...” Emily said the name quickly, as if she might lose strength if she waited too long. “She could kinda use a steady influence in her life. I mean...these people...” She glanced at Colt who loved her like a daughter, at Casie, who had saved her life. At Brody with his sturdy presence, his perpetual kindness. “They’re all right. But they’re not...” She lost her train of thought for a second, shook her head. “I have an Aunt Mimi?”

## Epilogue

“It’s a bouncy thingie,” Colt said and motioned toward the gift Emily had just unwrapped. Newspaper was strewn like confetti around the living room. Emily Kane did not approve of wrapping paper. Or store bought gifts. Which meant that most of the bags and boxes piled beneath the fresh cut Christmas tree had been hand crafted or previously owned.

Outside, the wind blew cold and harsh against the Lazy’s weathered siding. But inside it was summer-warm, Christmas spicy.

“Are you sure?” Emily held up the contraption. Across the room, Lincoln watched her. She’d asked him to come, but hadn’t been sure until just a few hours before if he would. “Cuz it looks more like an instrument of torture.”

“Torture... No,” Colt said and rising from the couch, took the apparatus from her hand with a snort. “See. You hang it on the doorway.”

“Why?”

“Give me that baby,” he said in disgust and motioned toward Bliss.

“I just got her,” Brody complained.

“It’s no wonder she hasn’t learned to walk,” Casie said, but Colt was already slipping Bliss into the sling.

Reaching toward the floor with her home-knit booties, the baby tested the device, then bounced merrily.

“Oh, well...” Emily watched her, heart aching a little from the sharp pangs of love. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Colt said and took a swig of spiced cider.

“I have something for her, too,” Penny said although, honestly, she’d been showering the baby with little treats ever since the truth of their kinship had been revealed.

Easing away from Brody’s side a little, she handed a package to Emily who unwrapped it for her daughter. Inside the box was the cap Penny had worn on her arrival. Emily looked at it askance. “Well...that’s...”

“Ugly?” Brody guessed.

Penny jabbed him with an elbow. “Aunt Mimi made it...”

“...ugly,” he finished for her.

Penny chuckled. Bliss giggled and Colt rose rapidly to his feet.

“Well, I think that’s my cue to dish up the bread pudding.”

But Emily cleared her throat, eyes suspiciously misty. “Thank you. I have something for you too.”

“Can’t it wait until after we taste the pudding?” Colt asked. “I mean, you worked so hard and--”

“Sit!” Casie ordered and pulled her ever-hungry husband down beside her.

He did so reluctantly.

“You didn’t have to buy me anything,” Penny said.

“Well, I didn’t,” Emily admitted and scurried under the Christmas tree to emerge with a package. “Not really.” She handed over the gift.

Her grandmother held it in her hands for a minute, saying nothing.

“I think the pudding’s getting cold,” Colt said.

Penny’s chuckle warbled a little, but she opened the bag. Inside was a photograph framed in barn wood. The picture was of an ethereally beautiful woman and a pretty, dark-skinned child. They

were lying on their backs and laughing as they pointed at the clouds. “Chelle,” she said. The word was only a little choked. “And you.”

“I don’t know who took it. But it was a rare...” Emily shook her head, disavowing the remembered hardships. She hadn’t asked about her mother’s current whereabouts. Not yet. “...*nice* moment. I thought you might like to have it.”

Penny nodded. “Yes. Thank you.” She cleared her throat, tugged the picture to her heart. “All of you. I um...” She glanced at Brody. “This place...you...all of you...you’re the best gift I ever... The best...” Her voice broke.

“Yup. We’re good stuff,” Colt said and snapped to his feet. “Now let’s...”

“I have a gift for Linc,” Emily said.

Colt muttered something under his breath as she approached her boyfriend’s chair, froze as she dropped to one knee.

The room went ghostly quiet. Even Bliss was silent.

“I love you.” Emily said the words succinctly, gaze fastened on Lincoln’s as she pulled a ring from the pocket of her Christmas apron. The sterling circle looked suspiciously like it might have been a fork handle in a former life.

“I...” His mouth opened. “I love you too, El. Always have.”

“I know.” She shrugged, grinned, as if it was a miracle too deep to fully comprehend “That’s because I’m lovable.” She blushed a little. “Right?” she asked and skimmed her still-needy gaze to the others.

“You’re the best,” Casie said softly.

“A gift,” Penny whispered.

“You’re all right,” Colt admitted and Emily laughed as she shifted her attention back to Lincoln.

“So will you marry me?”

His eyes filled with tears that he tried but failed to blink away. “Yeah. Sure. Yes!” he agreed and the room burst with happiness.

“I’d like to make a toast,” Penny said when the ruckus had died down to a quiet rumble. Raising her glass of Bodacious milk, she watched the others do the same. “To family,” she said. “Blood kin and otherwise.”

“To family,” they echoed.

“Even better than dessert,” Colt admitted. “But I’ll get the bread pudding anyway.”