

A photograph of a young couple standing in a snowy field. The woman on the left is wearing a white parka with a fur collar, a grey fur hat, and a colorful patterned scarf. The man on the right is wearing a dark navy parka and a grey fur hat with earflaps. They are both smiling at the camera. The background is a soft-focus snowy landscape with falling snow visible.

# SNOWBOUND WITH THE SOLDIER

JENNIFER FAYE

A stylized, light pink rose graphic is positioned to the right of the 'Cherish' logo.

*Cherish*<sup>™</sup>

Jennifer Faye

**Snowbound with the Soldier**

«HarperCollins»

**Faye J.**

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It has been seven years since Kara Jameson last saw Jason Greene. Returning home as a wounded war hero, Jason is a shell of the man she once knew. Yet her heart still skips a beat...Jason might not be so sure, but when they end up snowbound together they are forced to confront the ghosts of Christmas past.

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Maybe this Christmas...?

It has been seven long years since Kara Jameson last saw Jason Greene. Returning home as a wounded war hero, Jason looks a shell of the man she once knew. Yet her heart still skips a beat as if it was yesterday....

Stepping back into civilian life, Jason looks to Kara for help. But there's too much water under the bridge—not to mention too much lingering attraction.

But it seems that the mountain weather has other ideas, and when Kara and Jason end up snowbound together they are forced to confront the ghosts of Christmas past.

## **“What about the military? Didn’t they do anything for the holidays?”**

He paused by the front door. His back went ramrod straight.

“I always opted to be on duty,” he said, his tone clipped.

“You’re home now. Time to start over. A chance for new beginnings...” Her voice trailed off. She didn’t want him to misconstrue her words—to think she wanted them to have a new beginning. “You should try joining in the fun. After all, it’s the most joyous time of the year.”

Kara forced a smile. She couldn’t believe she was trying to talk him into celebrating the exact same holiday in which he’d broken her heart. If he wanted to be an old, cranky Scrooge, why should she care?

Jason didn’t say anything as he opened the door and stepped aside, allowing her to enter. In the narrow opening her arm brushed against him, and even through the layers of clothing an electrical current zinged up her arm, warming a spot in her chest.

Staying here wasn’t a good idea.

Being alone with her new boss was an even poorer idea.

This whole situation constituted the worst idea...ever.

Dear Reader,

I’m thrilled to be able to share this holiday romance with you. It’s a story of love and forgiveness...of facing down one’s deepest fears in order to find peace and acceptance. My fondest hope is that this story will touch you as deeply as it did me.

Do you remember the youthful rush of falling in love? The undeniable certainty that you’d found “The One”? Well, Kara and Jason were those young lovers with stars in their eyes...until their fairy tale suddenly veered into a nightmare.

Now, seven years later, a lot has changed...especially Jason—a returning war hero with jagged scars that run deep. But Kara has changed, as well. No longer is she a naive young girl. She has tremendous responsibilities weighing on her and no time to waste on what-might-have-been. However, when old flames are reignited, will the Ghost of Christmas Past destroy any chance of a future? Or will they learn the true depths of forgiveness and its power to open doors to a new beginning?

I really rooted for these two, having laughed and cried with them. They’re two wounded people who refuse to give up until they’ve earned their happily-ever-after, and in the process bring a smile to my heart.

Happy reading!

Jennifer

Snowbound with the Soldier

Jennifer Faye



In another life, **JENNIFER FAYE** was a statistician. She still has a love for numbers, formulas and spread-sheets, but when she was presented with the opportunity to follow her lifelong passion and spend her days writing and pursuing her dream of becoming a Mills & Boon® author, she couldn't pass it up. These days, when she's not writing, Jennifer enjoys reading, fine needlework, quilting, tweeting and cheering on the Pittsburgh Penguins. She lives in Pennsylvania with her amazingly patient husband, two remarkably talented daughters and their two very spoiled fur babies otherwise known as cats— but *shh*...don't tell them they're not human!

Jennifer loves to hear from readers—you can contact her via her website: [www.JenniferFaye.com](http://www.JenniferFaye.com).

This book is dedicated to the real life Sly. A beautiful, sweet black cat who crossed my path and stole my heart. She was my muse for this heart-touching story. Sly, you passed through our lives far too quickly. You are missed.

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CHAPTER ONE

OLD MAN WINTER huffed and puffed, rattling the doors of the Greene Summit Resort. Kara Jameson turned her back on the dark, blustery night. She didn't relish heading out into the declining weather to navigate her way home after a very long day at work.

She took a moment to admire the massive evergreen standing in the lobby of what had once been one of Pennsylvania's premier ski destinations. The twinkling white lights combined with the sparkling green and red decorations would normally fill her with holiday cheer, but not tonight. Not even the rendition of "Jingle Bells" playing softly in the background could tempt her to hum along.

The resort had been sold. The somber thought weighed heavily on her shoulders. It didn't help that rumors were running rampant that all the management positions were being replaced. Why did it have to happen with Christmas only a few weeks away?

Everything will work out. Everything will work out. She repeated the mantra over and over in her mind, anxious to believe the old adage. But something in her gut said nothing would ever be the same again.

"Kara?"

The deep baritone voice came from behind her. She froze. Her gaze remained locked on a red bell-shaped ornament as her mind processed the sound. Even in the two syllables of her name, she knew that voice, knew the way her name rolled off his tongue as sweet as candy.

Jason Smith.

It couldn't be. He'd sworn he would never come back.

"Kara, won't you even look at me?"

Her gaze shifted to the glass doors that led to the parking lot. Her feet refused to cooperate, remaining cemented to the swirled golden pattern on the hotel carpet. Seven years ago, she'd bolted out those exact doors after Jason had broken their engagement. Back then she'd been unsure and confused by the depth of her emotions. Since then life had given her a crash course in growing up. Running was no longer her style.

She sucked in a deep breath, leveled her shoulders and turned.

Clear blue eyes stared back at her. A slow, easy grin lifted the tired lines around Jason's eyes. She blinked, but he was still there.

This couldn't be happening. The overtime and lack of sleep must be catching up with her.

"Are you okay?" He reached out to her.

She jumped back before he could touch her. Words rushed up her throat, but clogged in her mouth. She pressed her lips together and willed her heart to slow. Her pulse pounded in her ears as her fists clenched at her sides. A breath in. A breath out.

"You're so pale. Sit down." He gestured to one of the overstuffed couches surrounding the stone fireplace. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

She didn't move. This surreal moment struck her as a clip from a movie—a visit from the ghost of Christmas past. Only, this wasn't a Hollywood soundstage and he wasn't an actor.

She studied the man before her, trying to make sense of things. The dark scruff obscuring his boyish features was a new addition, as was the two-inch scar trailing up the right side of his jaw. His hardened appearance was a visual reminder of the military life he'd chosen over her. Her fingers longed to reach out and trace the uneven skin of his jaw, but instead she gripped the strap of her tote even tighter. A bit older and a little scuffed up, but it was most definitely Jason.

Just pretend he's a mere acquaintance from years ago, not the man who threw your love back in your face and walked away without any explanation.

"Jason Smith. I can't believe you're here," she said, trying her best to sound casual.

"Actually, I go by Jason Greene these days...."

The fact he now used his mother's maiden name came as a surprise, but Kara supposed she shouldn't find it too shocking, knowing the stormy relationship between him and his father. The name change had presumably contributed to her inability to track him down and notify him of his father's failing health. A question teetered on her tongue, but she clamped her lips shut. Playing catch-up with Jason was akin to striking a match near fireworks. One wrong move and it'd blow up in her face. Best to stick to safe topics.

His gaze implored her for an answer, but to what? She'd lost track of the strained conversation. "What did you say?"

"How are you?"

He wanted to exchange pleasantries as though they'd parted on good terms? She didn't have time to beat around the bush. She should already be home, getting dinner for her daughter before they went over her homework.

"When you left Pleasant Valley, you swore you'd never return. So what happened? What finally changed your mind?"

His expression hardened. If he'd been expecting a warm welcome, he'd been sadly mistaken.

He shrugged. "Things change."



Well, most things did, and generally not for the better, but not in Jason's case. He hadn't gained so much as a beer gut or a receding hairline. Even the jagged scar on his face added to his sexiness.

Kara's gaze rose to meet his. At first glance, she thought his intense blue eyes were the same as she remembered, but a closer inspection revealed a hard glint in them. He no longer resembled the warm, lighthearted guy she'd dated for nearly four years. Or had he been that way all along? Had those rose-colored glasses she'd been wearing back then obscured his real character? Had she ever truly known him at all?

Jason hitched his thumbs in his jeans pockets. "I'm sorry about what happened between us. I handled it poorly."

"You certainly did."

"If I could explain, I would, but I can't—"

"Don't." She held up a hand, stalling his too little, too late explanation. "Nothing you say will change what happened."

Her pride refused to let on that his presence affected her, that even after all this time she longed to know what had changed his mind about marrying her. She reconciled herself to the fact that she was better off not knowing—not prying open that door to her past.

Jason shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "I guess it was too much to hope that you'd be willing to put the past behind us."

She lifted her chin, drawing on the strength she'd used to manage this place in the recent absence of her boss, who also happened to be Jason's father. "I've moved on."

It'd taken time—lots of time—but she'd gotten over him and the way her life had unraveled after he'd dumped her. She refused to let him get under her skin again. Besides, she had enough on her plate already.

After working her way up through the ranks, to now be dismissed from her hard-earned position would be utterly demoralizing. She'd like to think she was needlessly worrying, but the rumors said the new owners wanted their own people running the show—people with more education and experience.

She went to step around Jason, but he snagged hold of her arm. "Wait. I need to apologize."

Even through her coat she could feel his warmth radiating into her body. She yanked at her arm, to no avail.

"Let go," she said with a hard edge. He couldn't just worm his way past her defenses with an empty apology. She refused to let him off the hook that easily. "If you were truly sorry, you'd have said something before now. You wouldn't have ignored me all these years or returned your father's letters unopened."

His hand slipped from her arm. "You know about that?"

She tightened her hold on the strap of the tote bag slung over her shoulder, which held the red scarf she was knitting for Jason's father for Christmas. "Yes. He told me. After you left, he was never quite the same. Not knowing if you were dead or alive seemed to age him overnight."

Jason's body visibly stiffened. "I think you've mixed my father up with someone who cares."

"He's sick, Jason. Real sick. I've done what I can to help him, but he needs you."

"I don't want to discuss him."

She should turn away and walk out the door before the snow grew any deeper, but her feet wouldn't cooperate. There was one thing she needed to know—one nagging question that demanded an answer.

She licked her dry lips. "If it isn't because of your father, then why have you suddenly returned home?"

"Do you really care?" His gaze never left hers.

"No. Never mind. I shouldn't have asked."

Her pulse quickened. Heat scorched her cheeks. Even though it was a lie, she refused to let him think that she cared anything about what he said or did. He was part of her past...nothing more.

"I have to go." She needed space to make sense of things.

"Kara, I know we can't go back to the way things used to be, but it doesn't have to be this awkward. We were friends for years before we dated."

They had been the best of friends. She'd told him everything about her life, but apparently that openness had been one-sided. She wouldn't make the mistake of trusting him again.

"Does this plea of friendship mean you're planning to stay in Pleasant Valley?"

"Yes."

The blunt response lacked any telling details of what had prompted his unexpected return. Her errant gaze strayed to his bare ring finger. Still single. Still available. Been there, done that. She glanced away.

"Welcome home." She buttoned her black peacoat. "I really do need to go."

"Be careful. The snow's picking up." His gaze moved to the glass doors. "It looks bad out. You should spend the night at the hotel."

She shook her head. "The resort's closed for renovations. You shouldn't even be here. Who's been showing you around?"

They weren't the only ones there late. With the new owner, GSR Inc., arriving on Monday, a number of people were working late even though it was a Friday evening. Everyone had gone above and beyond their duties, hoping to make a good impression on the new owner. Though Jason had been away for years, a number of employees knew him and would have volunteered to give him a last look around the place.

She glanced up at him, waiting for a response. His lips were pursed as though he was about to say something, but had refrained.

"I don't have all night," she stated.

"I don't need an escort."

Kara squared her shoulders. "Since I'm in charge around here, I'm telling you that either you have an escort or you must leave. Now."

This close to the new owner's arrival, she wasn't taking any chances. The last thing she needed was for anyone to get hurt on her watch.

Jason's brows arched. "You like being the boss, don't you?"

"I do whatever needs to be done to keep this place going."

"Good. I hope all my employees are so devoted."

"Your employees..." Alarm tightened her throat, smothering her next words. Surely she hadn't heard him correctly. Or she'd misunderstood.

"Yes, my employees."

This nightmare couldn't be unfolding right before her eyes. "You...you're GSR?"

"I've gone in with a couple of investors. This place needs to be reorganized. A lot of cutting needs to be done, but I think it's possible to turn the business around with the right management."

A lot of cutting? Right management? The implication of his words shattered her dream of keeping her job. Fragments of her hopes scattered over the freshly laid carpet. Finding an equivalent job would not be easy without a college degree. She inwardly groaned.

She might even have to move. Her thoughts turned to her parents, who had been involved in their only grandchild's life since the day she was born. To tear her daughter away from them now would devastate not only them but her little girl, as well. But Kara wouldn't have a choice. She would have to move wherever she could find reasonable employment.

"Time to start job hunting," she muttered under her breath.

"What?"

"Nothing. I have to go before the snow gets too deep to drive in." She yanked on her gloves. "Good night."

Kara forced herself to take measured steps, training her gaze on the glass door. She hadn't run away when the locals had clucked their tongues and shaken their heads at her youthful mistake. Now she wouldn't give Jason the satisfaction of witnessing how he could still shake her to the core.

\* \* \*

Jason Greene clenched his hands. He'd heard enough of her mumbled comment to know she had no intention of working for him. He couldn't leave things like this. Her assistance and knowledge over these next several weeks were essential to the resort's success. He'd risked everything he owned on restoring the Greene Summit. And he couldn't afford to lose it all now.

He started for the door. Large snowflakes fell, adding to the several inches of accumulation on the ground. He'd forgotten how fast the weather could deteriorate in the Laurel Highlands. An overwhelming urge settled in his chest to stop her and convince her to stay over in one of the hotel rooms, where she'd be safe and warm during this stormy night.

His steps grew quicker. Damn, he still cared about her. This was bigger than when they'd grown up together—back when Kara was 100 percent tomboy and he'd protected her from the school bully. The emotions brewing inside him now had an adult edge.

He lingered at the glass doors, staring out into the stormy night. He couldn't tear his gaze from Kara's petite figure as she braved fierce winds while crossing the snowy parking lot. Her appearance had changed, from jeans and snug T-shirts that nestled against her soft curves, to casual business attire. A short haircut replaced her ponytail. Everything combined to give her a mature, polished persona. He certainly wasn't the only one who'd changed.

Was she worried about her trip home? Or was she doing the same as him and reliving the past? He still had time to stop her. He pushed the door open. The bitter wind stung his face as he followed her footsteps. She would demand once more to know the sordid details behind his seven-year absence. His pace slowed. Could he bring himself to explain that dreadful night?

He stopped. No. No way. If he knew the words to make everything right between them, he'd have said them years ago. As the cold cut through his coat and over his exposed skin, he realized he'd played out all the scenarios in his mind thousands of times. Each ended with her looking at him with repulsion. No way could he put either of them through that experience.

Jason rubbed the back of his neck, trying to ease the stiff muscles. His return to the Summit was going to be just as rough and bumpy as he'd imagined, but he'd get through it. He turned and limped back to the lobby. Only one day on his feet, with the cold seeping into his bones, and already the wound in his thigh throbbed.

He exhaled a weary sigh. The last time he'd worked at the resort, Kara had been his priority. Now, with no significant other in his life, he could sink his dreams into restoring this place without all the emotional entanglements of a relationship and raging teenage hormones. His experience in the military had forced him to grow up. He now realized what was important and why.

He shoved his fingers through his hair, hating the selfish boy he'd once been. This time he'd prove himself worthy of the trust others placed in him. He wouldn't repeat the mistakes of his past.

Muffled footsteps drew his attention. He glanced over his shoulder to find his childhood friend Robert Heinze approaching him. He looked every bit the professional in his navy suit, and definitely fit the part of a distinguished attorney.

"Jason, what are you still doing here?"

"While I was walking the grounds, I came across some maintenance men working on a problem with the towrope for the bunny hill."

"And from the grease stains on your jacket and jeans, I'm assuming you couldn't just let the staff handle it on their own."

Jason shook his head. "I'm not good at standing around watching when I could pitch in and lend a hand."

“You’ll have plenty of time to play Mr. Fix-it after tomorrow. By the way, I heard the roads are getting bad. If you don’t leave now, you might find yourself riding out the storm right here.”

“Before I go, I want to thank you for finalizing this sale with my father. Without you going back and forth between us, I don’t think an agreement would have ever been reached.”

Robert flashed a small smile. “I think you give me too much credit. You were the mastermind behind this whole venture. I hope it turns out the way you planned.”

“It will.” He’d returned a couple of days ago, and until the deal had become official, he’d intentionally kept a low profile. “By the way, I just ran into Kara Jameson.”

He didn’t know why he’d mentioned it. Maybe he just wanted someone to talk some sense into him. After all, before Robert had moved away to be an attorney in downtown Pittsburgh, he’d grown up right here with Kara and Jason.

“Did you tell her you bought this place?”

He nodded.

Robert shrugged on his coat. “How’d it go?”

“The news took her by surprise.”

“Seems like an understandable reaction. You’ve been gone for years.” His old friend paused and looked intently at him. “What else is bothering you? Did she quit on the spot?”

“Not exactly.”

“Then why do you look like you just chugged a carton of sour milk?”

“Kara lit into me about ignoring my father. He must have fed her some kind of lies to gain her sympathy.” Jason didn’t bother to hide the loathing he felt.

Robert let out a low whistle. “Boy, you didn’t exaggerate about the rift between you two.”

If anything, he’d understated the distance between himself and his father. Every muscle in Jason’s body grew rigid at the thought of their insurmountable differences. He refused to dwell on something that could never be fixed.

With the help of a couple of investors, he’d at last gained ownership of his heritage—the resort his grandfather had founded. His gaze moved around the lobby, taking in its splendor.

“I’ve thought of nothing else for the past year but of making this place mine, of restoring the Greene Summit back to its former glory, like when my grandfather was alive. I’ll make him proud. No matter what it takes.”

Robert patted him on the shoulder. “Then you might want to start by being honest with Kara. I’ve talked with her and she’s bright. When your father’s health started to decline, he leaned on her to keep this place running. By now, she must know where each and every skeleton is buried. You’re going to need her.”

“I know. I’ll tell her everything Monday.” Well, not everything—just the parts pertaining to the Greene Summit.

Robert’s brow furrowed and he began patting his pockets. “I must have left my phone in the office. I’ll run back and grab it.”

“Okay. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Get some sleep. We’ve got work to do.”

Jason turned to the lobby doors and gazed out at the parking lot. He rubbed his thigh, trying to ease the persistent throbbing. He had a business to rebuild and no time to slow down.

The grand reopening in three weeks had to go off without a hitch. All his investors would be on hand to take part in the festivities, and their approval was of the utmost importance, especially if he wanted more capital to undo the years of neglect.

He knew he could never again be the man in Kara’s life. Still, he had to find a way to get her to stay on at the resort. He needed her knowledge to make this a smooth transition.

But when she preferred braving a snowstorm to staying safe here with him, how in the world would they be able to work side by side?

## CHAPTER TWO

THE HYPNOTIC SWIRL of flakes made it difficult for Kara to focus on the winding mountain road. The cascade of snow hit the windshield harder and faster with each passing minute. She flicked on the wipers. The built-up ice on the rubber blades made an awful ruckus. Swish. Thunk. Swish. Thunk.

The knowledge that Jason was now her boss haunted her. She'd thought that, with the resort sold, any lingering ties to him would be severed. How could she have been so wrong?

A bend in the road loomed ahead. Her foot tapped the brake a little too hard and the car lost traction. Her fingers tightened on the steering wheel as she started to skid.

Stay calm. You know how to drive in this weather.

Thoughts of Jason vanished as she turned into the skid. Like a pinball shot into action, the vehicle slid forward. Trees and the guardrail whizzed by in a blur. In an attempt to straighten the car, she spun the wheel in the other direction. Her throat constricted. At last, she came to a stop in what she hoped was the middle of the road.

That was way too close.

The pent-up air whooshed from her burning lungs. She rested her forehead against the steering wheel, trying to calm the frantic thumping of her heart. She silently sent up a thankful prayer.

On her way to work that morning, the radio announcer had mentioned the possibility of light snow flurries this evening but never alluded to a foot of snow. And it still continued to fall.

She let off the brake and crept forward, anxious to put as much distance between herself and Jason as possible. Would she ever be able to sweep away the tangled web of attraction, woven tightly with strands of resentment? She sure hoped so, because as long as she lived around here, they were bound to run into each other. After all this time, she'd expected to feel absolutely nothing where he was concerned. So why did she let him get to her?

She exhaled a frustrated groan and glanced down to crank up the heater. When she looked up again, a brief flash caught her attention. Her gaze focused off to the side of the road, where her headlights reflected off a pair of eyes staring back at her. A millisecond later, a deer darted into her path.

A screech of terror tore from Kara's throat as she tramped the brakes, braced for the inevitable collision. Like a skater on a sheet of ice, the car careened over the slick pavement. At the last second, the deer jumped over the hood, just as the front tires dropped off the pavement.

Kara's foothold on the brake slipped, sending the car off the road. She pitched forward, but the seat belt jerked her back, slamming her into the door. With a thud, her head careened into the driver's side window. Pain splintered through her skull. The sound of ripping metal pierced the inky darkness.

At last the car shuddered to a halt. The air bag thumped hard into her chest, sending the breath whooshing from her lungs. She clung to the memory of her daughter's sweet smile.

\* \* \*

With newly attached chains on the SUV's tires, Jason drove cautiously down the curvy mountain road. Soon he'd be home, enjoying a piping-hot bowl of leftover stew. His stomach rumbled in anticipation.

He stared out the windshield at the dark, desolate road. When he was a kid, there would have been a string of headlights passing him as anxious skiers flocked to the resort to try out the fresh snow. Tonight, the only evidence of another soul on this road was the faint outline of tire tracks.

Was it possible they belonged to Kara?

The thought of making peace with his childhood sweetheart weighed heavily on his mind. He didn't blame her for still being angry with him. She had every right to be furious over the way he'd walked out on their engagement. He'd probably act the same way if their roles had been reversed. No, he'd have been worse—much worse.

If only there was a way to make her understand that even though he'd handled it poorly, his leaving had been the only answer. But he had no idea how to convey that to her without going into the details of that fateful night, and that was not something he was willing to do. Not even to save the Summit, his birthright.

The wipers were beginning to lose their battle with the thickening snow. He turned on the vehicle's fog lamps, hoping they'd give him a better idea where he was on the road.

The tire tracks he'd been following suddenly veered to the right. His stomach muscles tightened. Trying to get a rescue squad out for an accident during this storm would take hours. He'd best go investigate first. He gently applied pressure to the brakes. The tires fought for traction, sliding a few yards before the SUV stopped. He glanced around, not spotting anyone standing next to the road. Not a good sign. They could be injured or worse.

He grabbed a flashlight from the glove compartment and flicked the switch, sending a light beam out the window. He squinted, trying to see through the thickening snow. At last he spotted the tracks. They led off the road into a gulley. Concern sliced through him. Please don't let it be Kara.

He threw the SUV into Park, switched on the flashers and jumped out. Wet snow tossed about by the biting wind stung his face. If Kara was out here, he'd find her.

With his hand shielding his eyes, he marched forward. Piercing pain shot down his thigh as he forced his way through a drift. He gritted his teeth and kept moving. From the edge of the road, he shone the light down at what appeared to be a ten-foot drop. At the bottom was a car with its front end smashed against a tree trunk. Whoever was in it was in need of help.

He'd just started down the embankment when his foot slipped. Hot pain shot through his knee and up his thigh, and his eyes smarted as he choked back a string of curses. Beads of perspiration ran down the sides of his face. But he couldn't stop now. He had a mission to complete.

His fingers curled around a branch and, using his good leg, he regained his balance and sucked in an unsteady breath. He massaged his knee, hoping he hadn't just undone the surgeon's long hours of reconstructive surgery, and weeks of physical therapy. Cautiously Jason flexed the joint. A new wave of agony swept up his body and socked him in the gut. It might hurt like the dickens, but it still worked. That had to be a good sign.

When he reached the two-door coupe, he tapped on a snow-covered window. "I'm here to help. Open up."

The window inched down, letting the buildup of flurries spill inside. Jason flashed his light into the dark interior. A hand immediately shot up, shielding the occupant's eyes from the glare.

"Jason?"

"Kara?" He leaned down, trying to see her better. "Are you all right?"

"I don't know. I think so." Her breathy voice held an eerie squeak. "There was a deer. Then the car skidded off the road. The door's stuck and my phone won't work."

"Okay, slow down. First thing we've got to do is get you out of there."

She started pushing on the door with her palms. He tried pulling on the handle. Without warning, she slammed her shoulder into the door. A grunt followed, but she pulled back, ready to repeat the process.

"Stop!" He used his drill sergeant voice, hoping to gain her attention. "Sit still."

"But I smell gas."

The mention of a gas leak shot a dagger of fear through his chest. Jason surveyed the area with the help of the flashlight, soon spotting the reason the door was stuck. The bottom was jammed against the embankment. The passenger door was pressed against a tree trunk.

"I need out!"

"Wind down your window the whole way."

"It's stuck." Her eyes grew round as her palms pressed against the glass. Her fingertips slipped through the opening and curled over the edge. "Help me."

The frigid wind continued to throw snow through the opening. With these low temperatures, he needed to get her out—fast. He kicked the ground, hoping to find a rock beneath the white blanket of frozen moisture.

At last, armed with a decent-size rock, he used his drill sergeant voice again. “I’ve got to break the window to get you out. Turn away. And cover your head with your coat.”

She did as he instructed, and soon he was assisting her through the opening. When her foot sank down into the deep snow, she lost her balance and pitched to the side. He caught her, hugging her slight form to him. Her hands clutched at his shoulders, pulling him closer. When her head came to rest on his chest, he breathed in the faint scent of strawberries. The feel of her body next to his and the enchanting smell of her all came together, jumbling his senses.

Unable to resist the temptation, he ran his fingers over her golden locks. “It’s okay,” he murmured. “You’re safe now.”

Her weight shifted fully against him. Warmth filled his chest. After all those long, lonely nights in different towns and countries, Jason felt as if he’d finally found his way home. He never wanted to let her go.

A gust of wind threw wet snow in his face, bringing him back to his senses. He shouldn’t be holding her. It was wrong to enjoy their closeness. He’d sacrificed that liberty years ago. And he was no longer the same man she’d once known.

He held her at arm’s length. “You’re bleeding.”

“I am? I don’t feel a thing.”

He cupped her face in his hands. A crimson streak trailed from her forehead to her cheek. Please don’t let it be serious.

“Are you sure? No headache? No double vision?”

“Nothing.”

Ever so gently he wiped away the blood with his thumb. When he found only a minor cut, he breathed a little easier. “Tell me if you start to feel bad.”

She nodded.

He pulled his phone from his pocket, punched in the numbers for help and held the device to his ear. After a few seconds, he moved, positioning the phone in front of him. “I can’t get a signal. Looks like we’re on our own.”

She shivered, wrapping her arms around her midsection. “How will I get my car out of there?”

He gave her a quick once-over. Aside from the small cut, he didn’t see any other signs of trauma. “The car’s not going anywhere tonight. And if you smelled gas, we aren’t taking any chances. The tow truck people can deal with it tomorrow.”

Her body shook and her teeth chattered. “Now...what...am I going to do?”

He worried about shock settling in. He was certain the accident had been horrific enough, but then to be trapped, even for a brief time, might have been too much for her.

“My SUV’s up on the road. We need to get you warm.”

He ushered her up the short embankment to his vehicle, which still had the engine running. After she climbed in, he reached behind the seat and pulled out a blanket. “This should warm you up.”

He was about to close the door when she said, “Wait. I need my stuff from the car.”

She started to climb back out, but he placed a hand on her shoulder, holding her in place. “I’ll get your stuff. You wait here and turn up the heater.”

“My purse is there...in the backseat...and my cell phone.”

Jason closed the door and yanked his gloves from his pocket. He hobbled along, doing his best not to stumble on the uneven ground. The coldness seemed to freeze all but one of his thoughts: Kara. He’d missed her much more than he’d been willing to admit to himself. Between her pouty lips and soulful eyes, it was tempting to forget the demons that lurked in his past.

But that couldn't happen. He couldn't let himself go soft in the brain. It wouldn't be fair to her. Soon they'd be off this mountain, he assured himself. Once he gathered her belongings from the car, his only agenda was to deliver her safely to her doorstep and leave.

He limped to the wrecked vehicle and ran the flashlight's beam from trunk to hood. A sour taste rose in the back of his throat. In the military he'd witnessed the tangled metal wrecks and human carnage caused by IEDs, so this accident scene shouldn't evoke a reaction—certainly nothing like the wave of nausea washing over him. But he couldn't escape the fact that Kara could have died here tonight.

He blocked the awful thought from his mind. She was safe, he assured himself. All he had to do now was retrieve her belongings and drive her home.

\* \* \*

Long minutes ticked by before Jason reappeared in the glow of the headlights. Thank goodness he's back. Soon she'd be home, snug and warm, with her family. Still, something struck her as not quite right. She gazed through the window, giving him a second, more intense inspection. She noticed he moved with a limp. The knowledge that he'd been hurt while rescuing her gave her pause.

When he yanked the back door open, she asked, "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

After placing her belongings on the backseat, he closed the door with a loud thud and climbed in beside her. It'd been a long time since they'd been together, but as close as they were physically, they'd never been so far apart in every other way. And it would remain that way. It was for the best.

But that didn't mean she could ignore his physical pain. "You aren't fine. You were limping."

"Don't worry. I'll be fine after I rest my leg for a bit."

The lines etched around his eyes and mouth said the pain was more severe than he'd admitted. Once again he was holding back the truth.

"Can I do anything—for your leg?"

He shook his head. "The, uh, weather—it's getting worse. We better get moving. Are you ready?"

"Definitely. I'm anxious to get home. I don't want my family to worry."

He yanked off his snow-covered hat and tossed it in the backseat. When he unbuttoned his coat, a fluff of pink fur poked out. Kara gaped at him. Nothing about him either in the past or now screamed pink fuzzy anything.

He withdrew the object. "I found this on the floor in back when I was searching for your purse."

"Bubbles." Her daughter must have forgotten the stuffed animal that morning, when Kara had dropped Samantha off at her grandparents' house before school.

"Huh?" Jason's gaze darted from the teddy bear with Baby Girl embroidered on its belly to her. "Bubbles? Really?"

Kara reached for the stuffed animal. "Something wrong with the name?"

"Uh...no." He tossed her the ball of fluff. "Not at all."

"Hey, it's the color of bubble gum—hence the name Bubbles."

"Logical. I guess."

She glanced at him, expecting to find humor easing the tense lines marring his face, but his expression hadn't changed. What had happened to the old Jason, the one with a thousand and one fast comebacks and an easy grin? Sadness burrowed into her chest. She mourned the boy who had always made a point of making her smile, even during the worst teenage crisis.

She hugged Bubbles to her chest. "Thanks for rescuing him."

"The bear is really yours?" Suspicion laced every syllable. "You carry a baby's toy around in your car?"



She stared down at the bear. It had been her daughter's very first stuffed animal. Even though Samantha had accumulated an army of plush toys over the years, she still reached for Bubbles when she was tired or upset.

Kara considered pretending she hadn't heard the question. However, she recalled how Jason had been worse than a hound dog rooting around for a bone when he wanted information. He would continue to hunt and dig until he found exactly what he was after.

Maybe a glib answer would suffice. She did know one thing: she certainly wasn't prepared to blurt out the entire truth about her daughter. So she'd give him the basics, and hopefully, he wouldn't ask any more questions.

"The bear belongs to my daughter."

### CHAPTER THREE

SERIOUSLY, COULD THIS night get any worse?

Kara didn't say anything more, hoping he'd get the hint that she didn't want to talk. Her daughter was off-limits to him. She turned her head and stared out at the starless night, which mirrored her dismal mood.

"So you're a mother?"

The astonishment in his voice set her on edge. This was the very last topic she wanted to discuss with him. After all, she didn't owe him any explanations. She didn't owe him a single thing. Her daughter was no secret, but that didn't mean she had to share the circumstances of her birth with him.

"A lot changed after you left."

"Obviously. So who's the lucky man in your life?"

Kara suddenly hated her single status. The thought of lying tiptoed across her mind, but she'd never been any good at it, even as a kid. Best to stick with the truth. "There is no man."

"Thought you'd have guys lined up, waiting to take you out."

"And you'd be wrong."

She smothered a sigh. After he'd dumped her and she'd found out she was pregnant, it was a very long time until she was willing to trust any man. When she finally did dip her toe in the dating pool, finding a man with the right personality, who was ready to take on a young mother, was a challenge. Most of the guys she met simply didn't want the hassle of a ready-made family. And they certainly weren't thrilled about having their social calendars dictated by whether or not Kara could secure a babysitter.

Not that she'd become a nun or anything. She'd dated here and there. The evenings out were nice, but that's all they were—nice. She shielded her daughter from her dating life. She didn't want Samantha getting attached to someone, only to lose him when things didn't work out.

Sensing Jason giving her periodic glances, Kara refused to meet his gaze. Instead, she continued to stare into the night. The thickening snow kept her from spotting the pond where they used to skate as kids. In those days, they'd been practically inseparable. Did Jason ever think about the good old days? Did he even regret his abrupt departure from her life and this community? Was that why he'd finally come home? To make amends?

She sneaked a glance at him. His long fingers clenched the steering wheel, fighting to keep the vehicle on the road. When he turned his head to glance at her, she jerked her gaze away, focusing on the hypnotic swish, swish of the windshield wipers.

A loud crack echoed through the night as a tree limb fell onto the road. "Watch out!"

He cut the wheel to the left. The driver's side tires dropped off the snow-covered pavement. Kara's upper body jerked to the left, where firm muscles pillowed her and held her steady. Jason's body was rock hard. The kid she'd planned to explore the world with was long gone, and in his place was this man she barely recognized. The army life had transformed him into a human tank. And in that moment, she knew he'd protect her.

Thankfully, the vehicle slowed to a stop. With some effort, Jason eased it back on the road. “Sorry about that. You okay?”

Realizing she was still leaning against his arm, she pulled herself upright. “I’m fine.”

But was she? Her heart continued to palpitate faster than a jackhammer. The blood pounded in her ears. It was the near miss with the tree limb that had her all riled up. She was certain of it. She settled back in her seat and took a calming breath.

“Hang on tight.” Jason released the brake and the vehicle crawled forward. “The weather’s getting worse. I can barely make out the road.”

The tires crunched over the snow blanketing the pavement. The wind created white sheets that draped over the vehicle. All the while, the wipers worked furiously to clear the windshield for a second or two at a time. How in the world was she going to get home tonight? It’d be dawn before they got down the mountain at this inchworm pace.

“What are we going to do?” She didn’t bother to hide the quaver in her voice.

Jason patted her leg. “We’ll be okay. Trust me.”

He was the very last person she should trust, but in these extreme circumstances, she didn’t have much choice. Heat emanated from his lingering touch and radiated outward, sweeping through her limbs. Her gaze zeroed in on his fingers gripping her thigh. She should pull away, at the very least shove his hand aside. Before she could act, he withdrew it himself, to grip the steering wheel.

“Kara, why are you still there—at the resort? Working for my father?”

Not exactly a subject she wanted to broach with him, but at least it kept him from asking about her daughter. “You mean why didn’t I leave him like you did?”

“That isn’t what I meant.” A note of bitterness wove through his tone. “Why haven’t you moved on with your life? Gotten away from here? You always dreamed of traveling the world. Why give it all up for an old drunk who ran my grandfather’s dream into the ground?”

She straightened. “Don’t you dare judge me. Your father and I did our best to keep the resort up and running. Maybe if you’d been here, you could have helped.”

“I was busy at the time, getting shot at while defending our country.” He turned to her, his eyes glittering. “And recovering from a bomb blast.”

Her brain stuttered, trying to imagine the dangers he’d faced. “I had no idea.”

“You weren’t supposed to. I shouldn’t have mentioned it.”

“What happened? Are you okay now?”

“I’m fine.”

“If you’re so fine, why are you here and not still overseas?”

A muscle flexed in his cheek. “They gave me a medical discharge.”

She realized abruptly that something awful had happened to him. For all she knew, he might have come close to dying. A shiver washed over her body. Common sense said she should let the subject drop. After all, he was no longer part of her life, and she couldn’t afford to let him back in.

But the tense silence set her frazzled nerves on edge. Maybe some light conversation would ease her anxiety about the weather. “Your father must be so relieved to know you’re home. That you’re safe.”

“I haven’t seen him. And I don’t know if I will.”

Shocked at his admission, she paused. It wasn’t right that these two men, who had only each other, should be so distant. She fiddled with the blanket’s satin binding while staring out at the storm. Time was running out for his father. She felt compelled to try to help them.

“You have to go to him,” she insisted. “His liver is failing. I tried to put him on the transplant list, but with his history, he isn’t a candidate.”

“You can’t expect me to act surprised. No one can drink at breakfast, lunch and dinner without paying for it in the end.”

“Jason!” She glared at him.

In all the time she'd known him, he'd had a strained relationship with his father. Kara surmised it had started with the death of Jason's mother, but none of that explained why Jason had turned his back on his dad after so many years. She couldn't imagine ever cutting herself off from her parents. They didn't have a perfect relationship, but her folks were always there when she needed them, and vice versa.

Refusing to believe Jason could be so cold, she said, "The next time I stop by the nursing home, I'll let him know you're in town."

"Don't interfere. That man and I took care of everything we had to say to each other years ago. There's nothing left between us."

Jason's rigid tone told her she was pushing her luck, but she couldn't help herself. "But he's changed. He's sober—"

"No more." Jason's hand slashed through the air, as though drawing an imaginary line she shouldn't cross. "I can't argue with you. I need to focus on the road."

She sagged back against the seat with a heavy sigh. He was right. Now wasn't the time to delve into the situation with his father. At best, Jason would be only partially listening to her while he worked to keep them out of a ditch. At least she'd had a chance to make her point about his father's condition. There wasn't much more she could do now. She just hoped Jason would come to his senses and make peace with his dad before it was too late. Regrets were tough to live with. She should know.

She reached for the radio, then paused. "Do you mind if I turn on some music?"

"Go ahead."

At the press of a button, an ad for a local grocery store resonated from the SUV's speakers. Kara turned the dial, searching for her favorite country station. The headline news greeted her. She glanced at the clock on the dash. With it being the top of the hour, news would be on most every station.

"This bulletin is just in from the National Weather Service," the radio announcer said in a somber tone, garnering Kara's full attention. "The arctic express is supposed to dump twenty-four inches of snow in the higher elevations by tomorrow."

"Two feet," she said in horror.

"We'll be okay." Jason reached over and gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. An army of goose bumps marched up her limbs. She assured herself it was just a reaction to the dire forecast and had nothing to do with his touch.

The radio crackled as the announcer's voice continued to ring out. "That isn't even the worst of the storm. Sometime this evening, a blast from the south will raise the temperature, only to have the thermometer quickly sink back below freezing. I know you're thinking this is a good thing, but let me tell you, folks, those pretty little flakes are going to change into an ice shower, and with a wind advisory due to kick in at midnight, it's going to get dicey, resulting in downed trees and power lines...."

After another advertisement, strains of "Let It Snow" began to play. Someone at the radio station had a sick sense of humor. Outside, the flakes were continuing to come down hard and fast. A glance at Jason's squinted eyes and the determined set of his jaw told Kara the conditions were already beyond dicey.

Minutes later, when the vehicle skidded to a stop next to an old elm tree, outside a modest log home, she turned to him. "What are we doing here?"

"The roads are too dangerous. We'll hunker down here until the storm passes."

"Here?" A half-dozen snow-covered trees surrounded them. "In the middle of nowhere?"

"This isn't the boonies. There's heat and shelter. You'll be fine. Trust me."

There he went again with that line about trust. The words grated across her thinly stretched nerves. What in the world had she done for Fate to conspire against her?

"I can't spend the night with you," she protested, even though she knew her daughter would be safe with her parents.

Jason leveled a frown at her, as though he wasn't any more pleased than she was about the situation. "You aren't scared of being alone with me, are you?"

"Don't flatter yourself," she said a little too quickly, refusing to meet his intense stare. "I grew up a long time ago."

Her lips pressed into a firm line as she surveyed the sprawling log structure. Being snowed in with Jason, of all people, would be more stressful than sliding down the slick mountain road. Her hands clenched. She and Jason had too much history, and she hated how he still got under her skin, evoking a physical awareness she hadn't experienced in ages.

"Do you even know who lives here? Or are we about to commit an act of breaking and entering?"

"This is now my home. Don't you remember it? I brought you here a couple of times to visit my grandmother."

Her gaze moved past him to the covered porch, with its two wooden rocking chairs. She searched her memory. At last she grasped on to a vague recollection that brought a smile to her lips. "I remember now. She fed us chocolate chip cookies fresh from the oven. I liked her a lot."

"She liked you, too." His lips quirked as though he'd been transported back in time—back to a life that wasn't so complicated. "I inherited this place from my grandparents, along with a trust fund my father couldn't squander."

Glowing light from the dashboard illuminated Jason's face, highlighting the discomfort he felt when mentioning his dad, as he opened the door, letting the frigid air rush in. "Wait here. I'll leave the heat on while I shovel a path to the porch."

She refused to let him overexert his injured leg again on her behalf. With a twist of the key, she turned off the engine and vaulted out of the SUV. She sidled up next to him as he limped along.

He frowned down at her. "Don't you ever listen?"

"Only when I want to. Now, lean on me and take some pressure off your leg."

He breathed out an exasperated sigh before draping his arm over her shoulder. She started to lean in closer, but then pulled back, keeping a respectable distance while still assisting him. She refused to give in to her body's desire to once again feel his heat, his strength. She had to keep herself in check. This was simply a matter of he'd helped her and now she was returning the favor—that was all.

On the top step, they paused. Her eyes scanned the lengthy porch. Her gaze stopped when she noticed a freshly cut pine tree, all ready to be decked out in colorful ornaments and tinsel. She remembered as a child accompanying her father and grandfather to the local Christmas-tree farm to cut down their own tree. The fond memory left her smiling.

"I'm so jealous," she said as Jason pulled away to stand on his own. "You have a real Christmas tree. All I ever have time for is the artificial kind. I remember how the live trees would bring such a wonderful scent to the whole house."

"A neighbor asked to cut down a tree on my property, and thanked me by chopping one for me, too. The thing is, I don't do Christmas."

"What do you mean, you don't do Christmas?" Her eyes opened wide. "How do you not do Christmas? It's the best time of the year."

"Not for me." His definite tone left no doubt that he wanted nothing to do with the holiday.

Her thoughts strayed to her daughter and how her eyes lit up when they put up the Christmas tree. Even in the lean years before her promotion to office manager, Kara had managed to collect dollar-store ornaments and strings of lights. With carols playing in the background, they would sing as they hooked the decorations over the branches.

The holiday was a time for family, for togetherness. A time to be grateful for life's many blessings. Not a time to be alone with nothing but your memories for company. The thought of Jason detached from his family and friends during such a festive time filled her with such sorrow.

“I haven’t celebrated it since...my mother was alive.” His last words were barely audible.

Kara recalled when they were dating how he’d always have a small gift for her, including the silver locket at home in her jewelry box. But he’d always made one excuse after another to avoid the Christmas festivities.

“Surely after all these years you’ve enjoyed Christmas carols around a bonfire, driven around to check out the houses all decked out in lights or exchanged presents with various girlfriends?” Kara didn’t want to dwell on that last uneasy thought.

He shook his head.

“What about the military? Didn’t they do anything for the holidays?”

He paused by the front door. His back went ramrod straight.

“I always opted to be on duty,” he said, his tone clipped. “I’ll get rid of the tree the first chance I get.”

“How could you possibly throw away such a perfect tree? You’re home now. Time to start over. A chance for new beginnings...” Her voice trailed off. She didn’t want him to misconstrue her words—to think she wanted them to have a new beginning. Not giving him time to ponder her statement, she continued, “You should try joining in the fun. After all, it’s the most joyous time of the year.”

Kara forced a smile. She couldn’t believe she was trying to talk him into celebrating the exact same holiday during which he’d broken her heart. If he wanted to be an old, cranky Scrooge, why should she care?

Jason didn’t say anything as he opened the door and stepped aside, allowing her to enter. In the narrow opening, her arm brushed against him, and even through the layers of clothing an electrical current zinged up her arm, warming a spot in her chest.

Staying here wasn’t a good idea.

Being alone with her new boss was an even poorer idea.

This whole situation constituted the worst idea ever.

#### CHAPTER FOUR

ALARM BELLS CLANGED loud and clear in Kara’s mind.

There had to be a realistic alternative to staying, but for the life of her, she couldn’t come up with anything reasonable. One hesitant step after another led her across the threshold and into the log house. Warmth enveloped her in an instant.

“It’s getting really bad out there.” Jason slammed the door against the gusting wind before stomping the caked snow from his boots. “Let me get some lights on in here.”

He moved past her to a table and switched on a small antique lamp with little blue flowers painted around the base. The soft glow added warmth to her unfamiliar surroundings.

“Thanks.” She clasped her shivering hands, rubbing her fingers together.

When her eyes adjusted to the lighting, her curious gaze meandered around the place Jason called home. Worn yet well-kept maple furniture stood prominently in the room, with a braided, blue oval rug covering a large portion of the oak floor. Nothing flashy, but not dingy, either—more like cozy and comfortable.

Jason favored his leg as he made his way to the fireplace and arranged some kindling. He struck a match, and soon a golden glow gave his hunched figure a larger-than-life appearance. What would it be like to curl up with him on that leather couch with a hot mug of tea and a fire crackling in the stone-and-mortar fireplace? To sit there and discuss the day, or make plans for the future?

She gave herself a mental shake. This wasn’t a romantic vacation. Nor was she interested in curling up with him now or ever. She’d keep out of his way and wait out the storm. Once the weather broke and the plows cleared the roads, she’d be gone. And it couldn’t be soon enough.

She tugged her soggy jacket tighter, trying to ward off the chill that went clear through to her bones. All the while, she continued to examine her surroundings. A wadded up pile of white sheets lay on one of the armchairs, as though Jason was still in the process of making himself at home. Her

attention moved to the oak coffee table with a folded newspaper and a tidy stack of what appeared to be sports magazines.

“Something wrong?” he asked.

“You mean other than being snowed in here with you?” She couldn’t resist the jab. She didn’t want either one of them to get too comfortable in this arrangement and forget about all the problems between them. “Actually, I’m surprised to find this place so clean. I guess I just don’t think of men as being neat freaks. Unless, of course, you’re living with someone....”

The thought hadn’t occurred to her until then, and it annoyed her that it even made a difference to her. Yet the presence of a girlfriend would assure their past remained in the hazy shadows, along with the snarled web of emotions.

“I’m not involved with anyone.” The flat statement left no doubt in her mind about the status of his bachelorhood. “I learned to clean up after myself in the military. You’ve got to be prepared to move out on a moment’s notice, and you can’t be ready if your gear is in a jumbled heap.”

The tension in Kara’s stomach eased. Instead of examining her worrisome response to finding out he had no one special in his life, she chose to stick to safer topics.

Glancing up, she said, “I love the cathedral ceiling and how the chimney rises into the rafters.”

“Wait until you see this place with the morning sun coming in through the wall of windows on the other side of the room.”

Preferring not to dwell on the idea of watching the sunrise with him by her side, she pointed past the fireplace. “What’s over there?”

“My grandfather used the area as a study, and I didn’t feel a need to change things.”

She glanced around, taking in the winding stairs. “Where do those go?”

“To the loft. When I was little my grandparents used it as a bedroom for me. I’d spend hours up there playing. Now the space is crammed full of junk. Maybe this summer I’ll get around to throwing it all out.”

“Why would you want to do that? There are probably heirlooms up there that you’ll one day want to hand down to your children.”

His thick brows puckered. Storm clouds raced across his sky-blue eyes. “One man’s treasure is another man’s junk. And since I’m not having kids, I don’t need the stuff.”

Not having kids. The knowledge knocked the air from her lungs. He made it sound so final, as though he’d already given the subject considerable thought. She’d never heard him say such things when they’d been dating. In fact, they’d discussed having a boy and a girl. A little Jason and a little Kara.

In that instant, she realized a stranger faced her. What could have changed him so drastically? She bit back the question. None of her business, she reminded herself.

Dredging up these old memories stung worse than pouring rubbing alcohol over a festering wound. Her judgment concerning men seemed to be made up of one painful mistake after another.

“I’ll get us something warm to drink,” he said, ending the conversation. “You can get out of those wet clothes in there.” He pointed to a door on the opposite end of the great room.

“I don’t have anything to change into. Besides, I need to call my family.”

“You need to get warmed up before you come down with pneumonia. Then you can phone home. It’s not late, so they shouldn’t be too worried yet.”

She hoped he was right.

When Jason bent over to untie his boots, he groaned in pain. She grabbed his arm, tugging him upright. He started to pull away, but she tightened her grip, noticing how his muscles rippled beneath her fingertips. In spite of her awareness of his very muscular build, she dragged him over to a wooden chair beneath the picture window.

“Sit,” she commanded, in the same tone she used when Samantha was being uncooperative. “You don’t need to put any more pressure on your sore leg.”

His startled gaze met hers. Then, ignoring her words, he once again attempted to loosen his laces. She swiped his hand away.

“I’ll do it,” she insisted, kneeling before him.

Her cold fingers ached as she dug her short nails through the chunks of ice, trying to loosen the laces.

“So this take-charge woman you’ve become, is it part of being a mother?” he asked, startling her with the intimate question.

“I suppose so.” The mention of her daughter, combined with his nearness, flustered her. Her fingers refused to cooperate. “I almost have your boots untied. There’s just this one knot...”

She bit down on her lip, forcing her attention to remain on the frozen tangle and to ignore how easy it’d be to end up in his capable arms. With one last pull, followed by a solid yank, she loosened the laces. And none too soon. This proximity was short-circuiting her thought processes.

She jumped to her feet and strode over to the fireplace. Why did this log home have to be so small? She supposed small wasn’t a fair description, as this all-purpose room was quite spacious. But it didn’t allow for any privacy, any breathing space away from Jason.

Her gaze shot to the two doorways off to the side, below the loft. Maybe she could wait out the storm in one of those rooms.

“I’ll find you something to wear.” Jason got to his feet. “Come on.”

He led her to the nearest bedroom. Before he even opened the door, she guessed it was his. Definitely not her first choice for accommodations. She couldn’t imagine sleeping in his bed, surrounded by his things.

“What’s in the other room?”

“Wall-to-wall furniture. My grandmother had the great room loaded with so much stuff you could hardly get around.”

So much for that great idea.

She stepped into his room. It wasn’t spacious, but roomy enough for a dresser and a double bed. Her gaze lingered on the bright colored scrap quilt covering the mattress. The thought of being here alone with Jason had her lingering at the doorway.

Her mind reeled back to the summer of her sophomore year in college. Jason had told her that he wanted to leave Pleasant Valley, that he was joining the army. In the very next breath, he’d proposed to her. He wanted to elope with her after she earned her journalism degree. The answer had been a no-brainer—a very definite “Yes!” But she hadn’t wanted to wait. She’d planned to drop out of college and earn her degree via the internet while following Jason around the world. She’d been so certain she could make it work.

She recalled how they’d made love over and over, celebrating their impending nuptials. At the time, she’d thought her heart would burst from the abundance of love. Never once had they been bold enough to come together in the luxury of a bed. Their special spot had been a remote pasture near a creek at the back of the resort, where the warm rays of the sun had kissed their bodies. The place hadn’t been important, only that they were alone to talk, laugh and love each other.

When Jason abruptly left Pleasant Valley—left her—seeing the world was no longer an option. As the only child of two loving parents who worked manual labor jobs to get by, Kara realized as soon as she learned she was pregnant that she couldn’t burden them with another mouth to feed. The day after she’d finished her junior year of college, her job at the Greene Summit Resort went from part-time to full-time.

Youthful endeavors and girlish dreams were lost to her. With the most sweet, well-behaved baby counting on her, Kara grew up overnight. Her parents were supportive, but the bulk of the responsibility for child care fell to her, whether she’d been up half the night for feedings or exhausted from a strenuous day at work. It was a lot to adjust to, but she would do anything for her daughter—then and now.

The dresser drawer banged closed, jarring her back to the here and now. When Jason handed over a pair of gray sweatpants and a flannel shirt, their fingers briefly touched, causing her heart to skip a beat.

“Thank you.” She jerked her hand away.

“The bathroom is just through that door.” He pointed over his shoulder. “I’ll go get you something warm to drink.”

“You should rest your leg,” she protested.

“I’m fine. But you won’t be if you don’t get out of those wet things.”

Before she could utter a rebuttal, the door thudded shut. Irritation niggled at her. Did that man always have to have the last word?

She rushed over to the door, only to find it lacked a lock. Nothing like feeling utterly vulnerable. With a sigh, she turned and leaned back against the door. She stood there for countless minutes with his clothes clutched to her pounding chest. She inhaled deeply and Jason’s manly scent assailed her senses. She couldn’t resist burying her face in the soft flannel. Even though it had obviously been laundered, spicy aftershave clung to the material. He wore the same brand as he had years ago. Okay, so maybe not everything about him had changed. She smothered a groan of desire.

After everything that had happened, why did she still have a weakness for him? But no matter how many memories bombarded her, they couldn’t go backward. What was broken between them couldn’t be undone. The only thing for them to do now was to take a step forward—in opposite directions.

Determined to stave off her lingering attraction to him, she rushed off to the bathroom. The pulsating water eased her achy muscles and the billowing steam soothed her anxiety. She refused to let the crush of memories overwhelm her. She just had to treat Jason in the same gracious manner she would anyone else who rescued her.

Minutes later, dressed in the warm clothing, she glanced in the oval mirror mounted above the chest of drawers. Kara didn’t need to inspect her reflection to know she looked ridiculous, as though she’d just fallen out of a Salvation Army donation bin. She cinched the baggy sweats around her waist so they didn’t slip down over her hips, and rolled up the dangling sleeves.

That left dealing with her hair, which was an absolute mess. She attempted to finger-comb the waves, but it didn’t help. Surely there had to be a brush or comb around here. She scanned the dresser top, taking in the papers and envelopes haphazardly dropped in the middle. She noticed how there were no photos of people from his past or ones currently in his life. It was as if he was a clean slate just waiting to be written on, but she knew that was far from the truth.

A small, flat box sticking out from beneath the papers snagged her attention. Though she knew it was none of her business, a longing to learn more about this man from her past had her reaching for the box. It creaked open. Suspended from a red-white-and-blue ribbon was a gold five-point star with a laurel wreath surrounding a silver star in the center. Her heart swelled with pride for Jason. Her eyes grew moist as she realized he must have put his life on the line to receive such a great honor.

With her thumb, she lifted the medal and read the engraving on the back: For Gallantry in Action. A tear dripped onto her cheek. Jason was a bona fide hero. Just not her hero.

A brief knock at the door drew her attention. “Uh...coming.”

She repositioned the medal and snapped the lid closed. Just as she was about to return the box to its original spot, the door squeaked open.

Heat swirled in her chest before rushing to her cheeks and ears. Nothing like getting caught red-handed, snooping. Still, part of her was glad she’d learned this important detail of Jason’s life. Knowing their country had taken time to recognize him for risking his life touched her deeply. Before her stood a rock-solid hero with broad shoulders, hefty biceps and a chest any woman would crave to be held against—except her.



Kara refused to let his gallant acts or obvious good looks change what she knew about him. When a relationship got too serious or hit a snag, he'd rather skip town than talk out their problems. She refused to get involved with someone she couldn't trust.

His blank stare moved from the box in her hand to her eyes. "I have the water heated up. I just need to know if you want tea or coffee."

"Tea." Her mouth grew dry and she struggled to swallow. Giving herself a moment to suck down her embarrassment, she took her time returning the box to the dresser top. At last she turned. "I didn't read about your heroism in the paper."

He leaned against the doorjamb and crossed his arms. His eyes needled her. "Snooping, huh?"

She didn't know if her face could get any hotter without catching fire. Unable to deny his accusation, she went with a different tack. "Such a great honor shouldn't be kept a secret."

"And that justifies you going through my things? Digging up unwanted memories?" The roughness of his voice spoke of a deep emotional attachment to the memories.

"Why were you honored?" she asked, needing to understand what had happened to him during those missing seven years.

"I did what had to be done. End of story."

"Does everything have to be some sort of deep dark secret? Or is it just me that you refuse to be honest with?"

Pain reflected in his eyes, but in a blink, it was gone—hidden behind an impenetrable wall. Regret for snapping at him rolled over Kara. She hadn't meant to make him defensive. She truly cared about what had happened to him.

"I'll get you some tea."

"You don't need to bother." She didn't want to be even more of an imposition. "I can just wait in here, out of the way, until the snowplow digs us out."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"It's for the best. This way we don't have to get in each other's way. You can go about your business like I'm not even here."

"This room isn't very warm. You'll be a lot more comfortable in front of the fireplace."

"I could just bundle up in a blanket."

Why was he being so difficult when she was trying to make this awkward arrangement as tolerable as possible for both of them? Surely he wasn't any more interested in spending time with her than she was about spending it with him.

"Suit yourself." He shrugged. "But you should know that as soon as I get your tea, I'll be in to get my shower. And with the bathroom being a bit cramped, I tend to strip down in the bedroom."

Heat scorched her cheeks until she thought for sure her hair would go up in smoke. So much for her idea about keeping distance between them.

"I'll be out in a minute," she said. "You wouldn't have a comb handy, would you?"

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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