MILLS & BOON

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Marriage on Her Mind

CINDI MYERS

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Аннотация

Danger! Marriage Ahead!It took a lot of courage to leave her groom at the altar. But Casey Jernigan knows she made the perfect decision, and she isn't about to make the same mistake twice. That's why she's come to Crested Butte, Colorado, to live life on her own terms. She's instantly smitten by the town and its colorful inhabitants. That goes double for her irresistible new landlord.With his bad-boy good looks and footloose ways, Max Overbridge is definitely not the marrying kind. Which is just fine with Casey. Until she realizes she may have met Mr. Right! What will it take to convince the town's most popular bachelor that wedding bells are in both their futures?

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To the people of Crested Butte, Colorado

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Chapter One

More than once in the past few weeks, Casey Jernigan had wondered if she was losing her mind. What was a Chicago-born-and-bred woman like her doing packing everything she owned in the back of her RAV4 and heading halfway across the country to take a job in a small town she knew nothing about?

Sitting in her car at the city limits of Crested Butte, Colorado, on a clear April morning, Casey wavered between hysterical laughter and abject panic. Though spring was fast approaching in the Midwest, here snow still lay in drifts to the rooflines, and passing cars were adorned with ski racks and snowboards. As she watched, a snowplow rumbled by, colored lights flashing as it scraped the roadway bare.

But the thing that most made Casey doubt her sanity was the dragon.

It rose, thirty feet long and fifteen feet tall, silver and gleaming in the bright afternoon sun. Neck outstretched, wings unfurled, it lunged toward the man who cowered before it. Saint George—surely it was Saint George—cringed before the dragon's onslaught, his shining armor, upraised sword and shield seeming a poor defense against the giant beast.

As defenseless as Casey suddenly felt in this remote place where she knew no one and no one knew her. At the time she'd accepted the position as the assistant director of marketing

for the Crested Butte chamber of commerce, the chance to make a completely fresh start had been the primary attraction of the job. Not to mention there was something so romantic and exciting about living in a ski town in the mountains. She'd pictured handsome ski instructors and laughing children, building snowmen and cuddling before crackling fires with cups of hot chocolate.

Dragons—and this sick feeling of being far out of her element—had never figured into her dreams.

Sighing, she put the Toyota in gear and rolled slowly toward downtown Crested Butte. Elevation 8,885 feet, proclaimed the city-limits sign. Never mind the population. What was important here was the elevation. In the distance, Casey could see the mountains of Crested Butte Ski Resort, like meringue peaks on a giant pie.

She checked the directions on the computer printout on the seat beside her and searched the street signs for Elk Avenue. She'd been assured that the apartment she'd rented sight unseen was easy to find. "Right on the main drag," her new boss at the chamber, Heather Allison, had said. "You'll be able to walk to work."

Elk Avenue proved to be a collection of colorful Victorian storefronts arrayed behind towering snowdrifts. The sidewalk snaked between the drifts like a carnival maze. Casey checked her directions again and guided the Toyota to a stop in front of a bright pink-and-turquoise building with the number 27 out front.

Mad Max's Snowboards and Bicycle Rental, proclaimed the sign over the door.

Mad Max? Snowboards? Where was the apartment building within walking distance of the office? The dizzy feeling of being out of place returned. Obviously, she'd written the address down wrong. But she might as well get out of the car and ask. Besides, after hours of driving she could stand to stretch her legs.

A string of sleigh bells on the back of the door to the shop jangled as Casey stepped over the threshold. A fat golden retriever stood and ambled over to her, tail wagging slowly. "Hello," Casey said, scratching the dog behind the ear. "Is anybody else here?"

"That's Molly. She's the official greeter." A smiling man with shaggy brown hair and broad shoulders emerged from a back room. He was dressed in faded jeans and a red-and-black plaid flannel shirt over a green sweater. His face was sunburned and alive with a smile that fairly bowled her over with its welcome. She stared at him for a moment—into eyes the brilliant blue of the Colorado sky. In the small part of her brain that wasn't preoccupied with admiring him, a warning sounded Danger! Danger! Danger! The last thing she needed right now was to lose her head over some handsome guy. Even if he did look as though he could have posed for one of those charity calendars—Modern Day Mountain Man or something like that.

"Let me guess. You're Casey Jernigan," he said.

"How did you know my name?" she asked, trying not to show

how nervous the idea made her.

"Saw the Illinois plates on your car," he said. "And the ficus tree on the front seat gave you away. Not many people vacation with their houseplants."

She laughed. It was either that or admit she was freaked out that he'd spotted her for a newcomer so easily. But then again, Crested Butte was a small town, with a year-round population of fifteen hundred that easily swelled to six thousand during ski season—or so the visitor's guide she'd received from the chamber of commerce told her.

"I am Casey Jernigan," she said, offering her hand.

"Max Overbridge." He shook her hand with a firm, hearty grip.

"Nice to meet you, Max. And Molly." She smiled at the dog. "I've rented an apartment somewhere around here and can't find it. Maybe you can point me in the right direction."

"That would be right over our heads," Max said. "Park around back and I'll help you with your things."

"Overhead?" She shook her head. "No, I've rented an apartment. Not retail space."

"That's right. There are two of them upstairs. I live in one and rent out the other."

"Y-you're my landlord?" she stammered.

"And your neighbor." He grinned. "See, you came to the right place after all."

Right. She was going to be living in a bright-pink building,

over a snowboard shop. With Adonis here for a neighbor. Well, she'd said she wanted different. This was about as different from her life in Chicago as she could imagine.

She followed him outside and around the side of the building to a set of stairs in the back. Molly trailed them to the top, where Max unlocked a door that opened onto a long hallway. "Your place is the apartment on the left. I'm right across the hall." He unlocked the door to her apartment and held it open for her.

There were two rooms and a bathroom. The front room was a combination living/dining area with a galley kitchen to the side. She was surprised to see a round cast-iron stove squatting in the corner. "Original to the building," Max said, opening the stove door. "Firewood's in a shed out back. Help yourself. It'll keep the place pretty toasty most days."

She walked over to one of two large windows looking out onto a side street. Max came and stood behind her. "You've got a view of a C.B. landmark," he said. He pointed toward a tall, rather plain wooden building. "The two-story outhouse."

"A two-story outhouse?" Was he pulling her leg? Playing the new girl for a fool?

But his expression was perfectly serious. "If you think about it, it makes sense. When the snow gets too deep to dig down to the outhouse, you move the facilities upstairs. It's on the National Register of Historic Places."

Okaaay.

"Bedroom and bathroom are back here…." He showed her

the pink-tiled bathroom, with its chain-operated toilet and claw-foot tub, and a bedroom furnished with a massive white iron bed and an oak dresser with a wavy glass mirror. “Are these antiques?” she asked, running her hand along the smooth wood of the dresser. She knew women in Chicago who paid big bucks to furnish rooms in such quaint style.

“Probably.” He shrugged. “It all was here when I moved in.” He led the way back into the main room. “Phone’s on the wall by the kitchen.” He pointed to the black plastic princess model mounted on the wall. “We just got satellite last year, so you’re in luck.” He picked up the remote and aimed it at the television on a stand in the corner opposite the woodstove. “Until last year we had our choice of three stations—and none of them came in well.” He switched the TV off. “Of course, you’ll probably be too busy to watch much TV, anyway.”

“Is the chamber of commerce that busy?” she asked. She knew Crested Butte was a tourist town, but she hadn’t imagined the workload would be so heavy she’d have no leisure time.

“They’re busy, but what I meant is there’s always something going on in town—parties and things. It’s a really happening place.”

“Oh. Well, I’m really not much for parties.” She had had enough of the social whirlwind back in Chicago. She’d looked forward to evenings that didn’t require dressing up, making small talk or smiling until her face hurt. She picked up a red velvet pillow from the sofa and smoothed her hand along the fringe

around its edges. “I guess I’m more of a homebody.” At least, she wanted the opportunity to be a homebody. How could she figure out what she wanted to do with her life if she didn’t try out new things?

“You won’t be staying home much around here,” Max said. “People around here will find a way to get you involved. You’ll see.”

Clearly, he was one of those people who couldn’t understand that some people preferred to keep a low profile. The whole reason she’d come to this burg on the backside of nowhere was to stay in the background. But really, that was none of his business, was it? She merely nodded politely. “The place looks great,” she said. “Thanks.”

“It’s nice to have a neighbor again,” he said, offering her another of his brilliant smiles. She had trouble breathing when he looked at her that way…. Get a grip, she ordered herself.

“Let me help you with your stuff,” he said.

“Oh, no, that won’t be necessary. There really isn’t much….”

But he and Molly were already halfway down the hall. Casey followed him out to her car, where he hefted a box of books, and a suitcase from the back. She grabbed the dress bag that had taken up a large portion of the back of the car. It rustled like a sack of dry leaves as she folded it over her arm.

“What’s in there?” Max asked as she followed him up the stairs. “Some kind of ball gown or something?”

“Um, something.” She absolutely didn’t want to talk about the

contents of the bag with Mr. Gorgeous.

They deposited their loads and returned to the car, where Max grabbed more boxes. “You don’t have a bike,” he said as she followed him up the stairs again, carrying the ficus.

“No, I don’t.”

“You’ll need one. Don’t worry. I’ll ask around and find you a good deal.”

“Why do I need a bike?” she asked. “Heather said I could walk to work, and I have my car for longer trips.”

“Do you want to spend the winter digging your car out of drifts and the summer fighting tourist traffic?” He set the boxes just inside her door, then turned to take the plant from her. “A bike will be much easier. Plus, C.B. has some awesome trails you’ll want to check out.”

She should have been annoyed that he was so quick to orchestrate her life for her, but these announcements were delivered with such sincerity that she found it hard to object. “Thanks. Maybe I will get a bike. After I’ve had a chance to settle in more.” She could add bike riding to her list of new experiences.

The sound of distant bells floated up to them. “Guess I have a customer,” Max said. “I’d better get back to work.”

“Yeah. And I’d better start unpacking.” She looked around at the stacks of boxes. “Thanks for all your help.”

“No problem. See you soon.”

It seemed to Casey that Max took some of the air out of the

room when he left. Either that or the altitude was responsible for her light-headedness. She sank onto the sofa and hugged the red velvet pillow to her chest. Dragons, two-story outhouses and pink snowboard shops? She'd said she wanted to live someplace different, but she'd never imagined a place like this existed outside of Lewis Carroll novels. Of course, no one she knew in Chicago could have imagined a place like this, either—and they certainly wouldn't suspect that one of the newest members of the Junior League was now living here. Frankly, she was a little stunned herself.

She carried the dress bag into the bedroom and hung it in the closet. She had to stuff it in, it was so large. Feeling guilty, she carefully lowered the zipper on the bag and admired the confection of ivory satin and lace within. So maybe bringing her wedding dress with her to Crested Butte hadn't been such a great idea. It wasn't as if the dress was much good without a groom. But she hadn't been able to bear the thought of leaving the dress behind. She'd picked it out herself—over her mother's objections—and she knew if she abandoned it her mother would burn it or donate it to charity or something before Casey was even across the state line.

She zipped up the bag and pushed it to the very back of the closet. She had no plans to wear the dress anytime soon, but it made her feel better knowing it was there. The dress was a kind of symbol—proof of the one time in her life that she'd refused to listen to what everyone else wanted her to do and instead had

gone after what she wanted.

The dress had been the first step. Buying it had proved she could stand up for herself and live her own life.

Coming here to Crested Butte was another big step. Maybe the town wasn't quite what she'd expected, but she'd deal with it. Casey Jernigan, Chicago socialite, was no more. Casey Jernigan, mystery woman, waited in the wings. The part of Casey that wasn't shaking in her shoes at the prospect could hardly wait to see what this new, improved version of herself looked like.

MAX'S FRIEND HAGAN ANSDAR was waiting at the front counter. The tall blonde in the Crested Butte Resort Ski Patrol uniform was rubbing his head and wincing. "You should have a warning sign on that door," he said in a heavy Norwegian accent. "I almost give myself a concussion."

"You need to remember that Victorian doorways weren't built for six-foot-four Norsemen," Max said. He fed another stick of wood into the stove behind the counter and shut the iron door. "Anything exciting happen on patrol today?"

"I met two girls from Austin who are on vacation. One of them broke the binding on her snowboard and I told her I would be happy to repair it for her."

Max shook his head. "It's criminal, the way women fall all over you, just because you wear that uniform and have an accent."

"I told you before. Volunteer for patrol and you can have all the women you want following you around." Hagan grinned.

“Except those aren’t the kind of women I want.” He held out his hand. “Let me see the binding.”

Hagan fished a strip of plastic out of his pocket and handed it over. “How do you know these women aren’t the ones you want if you haven’t even met them?” he asked.

“Because they’re tourists.” He examined the piece of binding and frowned. “This has been cut.”

“No!” Hagan leaned closer.

Max pointed to the neatly severed edge. “My guess is she decided she wanted the big strong ski-patrol guy to rescue her, so she sliced through the binding strap with a pocketknife.”

“That wasn’t very smart,” Hagan said.

Max grinned. “I don’t know. She got what she wanted, didn’t she?” He turned to the shelf behind him and pulled down a box. “Here’s a new strap. You can install it when you see her again.”

“Tonight.” Hagan grinned. “She is really hot.”

“They all are, buddy. And you’re welcome to ’em.”

Hagan handed over his credit card and leaned against the counter. “I think tourists are the perfect dates. I see them a few times, then they leave town. No messy relationship problems.”

“That’s because you don’t really have a relationship.” Max rang up the sale and returned Hagan’s card and the charge slip. “People on vacation aren’t really themselves. You don’t know these women. You just know how they act away from home.”

“That’s all I need to know,” Hagan said. “And you are one to talk. When was the last time you dated anyone?”

“I go out with women every night,” Max said.

Hagan shook his head. “Not groups of friends, men and women. I mean a date. You and one woman. How long?”

Max stuck the charge slip in the cash drawer and slammed it shut. “A while. You know how it is in C.B.—there are more of us than there are of them.” In fact, single men outnumbered single women almost two to one.

“And you’ve already worked your way through all of them.” Hagan punched his shoulder. “My way is better. At least until some new women move to town.”

“As a matter of fact, someone new has moved to town. She’s rented the empty apartment upstairs.”

Hagan looked at the ceiling. “Convenient. What’s she like?”

“Kind of quiet. But nice.”

“Pretty?”

Max nodded. “As soon as word gets around, there’ll be a line at her door.”

“And you will be first in line, living right across the hall.”

Max grinned. “I do have something of an advantage.” Although he’d be careful: everything about Casey, from her expensive clothes to her stylish haircut, screamed money and class. In his experience that kind of woman expected a lot from a man.

“Only because I’m excusing myself from that particular competition,” Hagan said.

“Yeah—like she’d be interested in a homely guy like you.”

Max shook his head. “Besides, it’s not a competition. I figure, what happens, happens. The point is to go with the flow and have fun.” Casey Jernigan might be fun to get to know. If not… well, there were always other women. No need to limit himself unnecessarily.

Hagan laughed. “Good luck to you, my friend.” He pocketed the binding strap. “Thanks for fixing me up with this. Mitzi will appreciate it.”

“Mitzi? Is she a woman or a poodle?”

Hagan delivered a one-fingered salute and exited, the sleigh bells on the door jangling wildly behind him.

Max checked the display of snowboard bindings and made a note to order more. He could hear Casey moving around upstairs. His new tenant was attractive. And though she looked like a city girl, the fact that she’d chosen to move to C.B. said she was up for an adventure.

The thought made him grin. Everyone headed out on an adventure could use a guide. And he just happened to be uniquely qualified to help.

AS CASEY UNPACKED, she couldn’t help stopping to look out the windows. In addition to the historic outhouse, she had a view of the chiseled mountain the chamber literature had identified as Red Lady. The snow-covered peak took on a crimson glow in the setting sun. The image was almost too beautiful to be real.

She still couldn't believe she was here. Even finding the ad for the job opening had been a sheer stroke of luck. Desperate to get out of Chicago, she'd immediately faxed her résumé, and had been more relieved than overjoyed when she'd gotten the job offer.

So here she was. Tomorrow she'd start work, but until then, she was at a loss for what to do. She picked up the remote control and glanced at the TV, then shook her head. No hiding in her room today. She'd get out and explore her new town. At least she could figure out where to report to work in the morning.

The sunlight was fading fast, and with it the warmth it had brought. Casey zipped her parka to the top and pulled her knit cap lower over her ears, then set off down the sidewalk. She passed a T-shirt shop, an art gallery, half a dozen real-estate offices, several restaurants and a bar, each housed in narrow wooden buildings painted ice-cream pastels.

At the end of the street sat the transit station. A bus painted with bright wildflowers idled by the door. Men, women and children, most dressed in ski clothes, exited the bus and poured into the street, laughing and joking. Vacationers? Or locals lucky enough to live where life was like a vacation every day?

She came to an ice-cream parlor and stopped to pat a shaggy brown-and-white dog waiting patiently out front. Crested Butte was definitely a dog lover's town. Dogs looked out of windows and greeted her from backyards, and half the cars that passed seemed to have four-legged passengers.

A coffee shop beckoned on the corner and Casey quickened her step. A steaming mocha sounded good right now. But her steps slowed as she reached the walkway leading up to the shop. Two men in snowboarding pants, parkas and knit caps were building a moose snow sculpture in the space between the building's front porch and the sidewalk. "What do you think?" one of them asked her. Blond dreadlocks stuck out from beneath his bright green hat. "Are the antlers too small?"

"I don't know," she said. "I've never seen a real moose."

"They're too small." His friend, wearing a red cap over his black hair, frowned at the sculpture. "But we're having a hard time getting them big enough without them falling off."

"Maybe you could use a stick or something as a kind of framework," Casey suggested.

The blonde slapped his friend on the back. "Why didn't you think of that?"

"Why didn't you think of it?" the other man asked.

"Because you're supposed to be the brains of this outfit." He grinned at Casey. "I'm the beauty."

"I'm sure you've both impressed her with your looks and intelligence." A woman wearing a bright-pink ski jacket came out of the building and walked down the steps to meet Casey. "I'm Trish Sanders," she said, offering her hand.

"Casey Jernigan. I just moved to town."

"We saw your car pass by a little while ago," the man in the red cap said. He stuck out his hand. "I'm Bryan Perry and my

friend here is Zephyr."

She shook hands with both men. "Zephyr?" she asked.

"I'm a musician," Zephyr said, as if that explained everything.

"Welcome to C.B.," Trish said. "What brings you here? Are you into skiing or boarding?"

"Not really. It sounded like an interesting place." Did that strike them as a pretty flimsy reason to move halfway across the country? She pushed the thought away. She'd vowed to leave worrying about what others thought of her behind in Chicago. But lifelong habits were harder to shake than she'd anticipated.

Trish laughed. "It can be pretty interesting. Have you met your landlord yet?"

The question caught Casey off guard. They must have seen her go into the snowboard shop. "Max? Yeah. He helped me move my things upstairs." Though judging by how much everyone already knew about her, she'd bet they knew that, too.

"Be careful around him, girl," Trish said. "Mad Max is the original party boy. Lots of fun, but he's broken a lot of hearts."

Her own heart beat a little faster, remembering Max's killer smile. "Mad Max?"

"Long story." Trish's grin widened. "Nothing to worry about, though. He's a great guy. Just don't make any plans to take him home and show him off to the folks."

The idea almost made Casey laugh. Any man who didn't wear a designer suit and come with a mile-long pedigree was unlikely to meet with her parents' approval. That was only one

of the reasons she was glad to be so far away from home. As for Max, well, if she were in the market for a boyfriend, she would definitely find him tempting.

She eyed Trish a little more closely. With her long blond hair, blue eyes and high cheekbones, Trish looked like a Scandinavian princess. The kind of woman who'd get a second look from any man. "Do you speak from experience?" she asked.

Trish laughed again. "Nah. I already had a boyfriend when I came here. But I know the type. Ski towns are full of them."

"Don't listen to her," Zephyr said. "She thinks all men are scum."

"Not all of them," Trish said. "But let's face it, most men come to a ski town because they'd rather play than work."

"Then why do most women come here?" Bryan asked.

"Maybe the same thing." She winked at Casey.

"I'm going to go see if I can find some wood or something for the moose antlers," Bryan said. "It was good meeting you, Casey."

"It was nice meeting you, too," she said. "All of you." Her feet were freezing standing here. She stamped them and nodded toward the coffee shop. "Is the coffee any good here?"

"The best in town," Trish said. "Come on in and I'll pour you a cup on the house."

"She only says that because she runs the place," Zephyr said. But he followed the women up the steps and into a small front room that barely had space for three small tables, a combination

deli case/front counter and a huge gleaming brass-and-silver espresso machine.

"What'll you have?" Trish said, moving behind the counter.

"A mocha, please," Casey said.

"Whipped cream?" Trish asked, already turning levers on the coffee machine.

"Of course."

"I'll have one of those, too," Zephyr said.

"You have to pay," Trish said.

He grinned. "Put it on my tab."

Trish rolled her eyes, but pulled a second cup from the stack by the machine. "So where are you from, Casey?" she asked.

"Illinois."

"Where in Illinois?" Zephyr asked.

"Um…Chicago." She watched his face carefully. Would her name ring a bell?

"No kidding." He shook his head. "Never been there."

She relaxed a little. She didn't know why she was worried. People out here probably didn't care about the society pages in the Chicago paper. And she wasn't going to care about them anymore, either. "I'm going to be working at the chamber of commerce," she said. "But I bet you already knew that."

"You probably think we're nosy, but C.B. is still a small town," Trish said. "A new person moving in is big news."

"Especially a new, single female." Zephyr removed the top from a glass jar of biscotti and helped himself, dodging Trish's

hand slap.

"Oh?" Casey asked. "Why is that?"

Trish's eyes widened. "You didn't know? I thought maybe that was one reason you came out here."

"Know what?"

"Single men outnumber women two to one in ski towns," Zephyr said.

"Military bases and Alaska are the only places you're likely to find a better ratio," Trish said. "Of course, like I said before, that depends on your definition of eligible bachelor." She angled a look at Zephyr.

"What?" he asked, brushing crumbs from the front of his sweater. "Chicks dig musicians."

"Tourist chicks, maybe," Trish said. "Those of us who know you better aren't so sure." She handed Casey a steaming cup topped with a mound of whipped cream.

Zephyr grinned. "You only say that because you want my body."

"Like I want cellulite and chapped lips," Trish said.

Casey sipped her coffee and kept quiet. The drink was sweet and rich and warmed her through. But more warming still was the feeling of being accepted so quickly by these strangers. All her life she'd heard about small town residents' views of outsiders. Maybe the locals-versus-tourists mentality in Crested Butte negated all that.

"You should stop by the Eldo tonight," Trish said.

Casey vaguely remembered passing a bar by that name. “What’s going on at the Eldo?” she asked.

“Just the regular Sunday Night Soiree,” Zephyr said. “One last chance to party before the workweek begins.”

“All your neighbors will be there and it’ll be a good opportunity to meet them,” Trish said.

Max hadn’t been kidding when he’d said it was impossible to stay uninvolved in C.B. She half expected if she said no, people would come and drag her from her room. But honestly, everyone was so friendly she didn’t really want to refuse. And the Sunday Night Soiree didn’t sound anything like the boring social events she’d endured too often in Chicago. “Thanks,” she said. “Maybe I will.”

She was feeling better about making this move. The people she’d met so far made her feel that being a little bit different wasn’t a bad thing. Who knew, she might even find what she needed in this place to slay a few personal dragons of her own.

Chapter Two

The Eldo was a long narrow room occupying the upper floor of a building at one end of Elk Avenue. The place was packed, every table and barstool occupied by young men and women, the crowd spilling out onto the balcony that overlooked the street. Despite the frigid temperatures, the balcony was full and patrons cheerfully called down to friends and passersby on the street below.

"Is it always like this?" Casey asked Trish as the two women squeezed past a group of pool players on their way to the table Bryan and Zephyr had saved for them. The table was near the small stage where two guitar players and a drummer played enthusiastically if not well.

"Mmm. Sometimes it's worse." Trish maneuvered past two men who were arm wrestling and plopped into a chair.

"I ordered us a pitcher," Bryan said, his voice raised to be heard above the band. He grinned at Casey. "I'll bet there aren't many places like this in Chicago."

"None that I've visited," she said truthfully. Her mother would faint it she knew Casey was here now, drinking beer poured from a pitcher in a place she would no doubt have called a dive. Casey smiled and took a long sip of beer. The idea of unsettling her mother pleased her.

One of the arm wrestlers looked up from the struggle

and spotted Casey and immediately released his hold on his competitor. He stood and came over to them. “Hi,” he said, grinning at Casey. “Wanna dance?”

She looked around at the packed bar. As far as she could tell, there wasn’t five square feet of free space anywhere. “There’s nowhere to dance,” she said.

“Sure there is.” His grin widened. “We’d just have to stand really close to each other.”

“Um, no thanks.”

“Maybe some other time, Chris.” Trish gently pushed the man away. “Casey just got here. Let her relax a little before she gets into the swing of things.”

Bryan grinned. “It’s already happening.”

“What’s happening?” Casey asked.

“I told you a single woman in this town was big news,” Trish said. “Now that you’ve been noticed, you’d better be prepared.”

“Prepared for what?”

But Trish didn’t have time to answer, as a waitress staggered toward them with a tray loaded with drinks. She set the tray down heavily in front of Casey. “These are for you,” she said.

“For me?” Casey stared, dumbfounded, at the half a dozen glasses—everything from bottled beer to a margarita to some drink that featured a number of cherries and a frilly pink paper umbrella. “I couldn’t drink all this. I’d be ill.”

“We’ll help.” Zephyr plucked a bottle of beer from the tray.

Trish picked up the pink umbrella drink and grinned.

“Everyone just wants to make you feel welcome.”

Casey nodded and took another sip from the glass of beer she’d already started. “I don’t know what to say. It’s a little… overwhelming.” Coming to town, she had had a vague idea that because no one here knew her or her family, she would be able to fade into the background. Her past experiences being the center of attention had made her wary of the spotlight.

“Enjoy it while you can,” Trish said. “Pretty soon you’ll be just another local and no one will look at you twice.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” Bryan said thoughtfully.

Trish elbowed him and he gave her a mock-wounded look. But Casey’s attention was quickly distracted by a trio of men in ski-patroller uniforms who were headed her way. “Hello,” they chorused.

Casey blinked, sure she’d fallen asleep and been sucked into a bizarre dream. “You’re Casey, aren’t you?” one of the men—a sunburned guy with thinning brown hair—said.

She nodded. “And you are?”

“I’m Mike. This is Scott and Eric.”

She nodded. “Nice to meet you, I’m sure.”

The three found chairs from somewhere and pulled them up to the table with the arm wrestlers. Soon Casey was peppered with questions about where she was from, what brought her to Crested Butte, did she want to have dinner, dance, have a drink, go hiking, skiing, biking, skating, et cetera, et cetera.

She felt dizzy and dazed and after a while stopped answering

them, letting Trish fill in the details she knew. More drinks arrived at the table. More people crowded around them. The band stopped playing and they joined the group around the table also. At some point someone turned on a stereo or jukebox and the three ski patrollers took it upon themselves to serenade Casey with a very bad rendition of the Grateful Dead's "Casey Jones." She didn't quite get the connection, but then, nothing about this town really made sense.

About that time she looked up and saw Max watching her from across the room. She was so grateful to see a familiar face—and one that didn't seem determined to impress her, woo her or find out everything about her—that she could have wept.

His eyes locked on hers and he frowned, then started toward her. He waded through the crush of people, easily shoving aside chairs and stepping over the tangle of outstretched legs and feet. "Are you guys trying to drive Casey out of town her first day here?" he asked the three ski patrollers.

"We were just providing a little entertainment now that the band was done," one of the men—Eric?—said.

Max shook his head. "From what I heard, there wasn't anything entertaining about it." He offered Casey his hand. "If you're ready to leave, I'll walk you home."

A chorus of groans and catcalls greeted this offer, rising in crescendo when Casey let him pull her out of her chair. "It was nice meeting all of you," she said. "But I really am exhausted."

She followed Max through the crowd to the door. They didn't

speak until they'd descended to street level. It was snowing, tiny flakes gently drifting down like powdered sugar shaken from a jar. The chill night air hit like a slap in the face, reviving her. She drew her parka more tightly around her and gave Max a grateful look. "Thanks for coming to my rescue," she said.

He nodded. "You looked a little overwhelmed in there."

"It was all a little…much." They began walking slowly down the deserted sidewalk, sidestepping patches of ice.

"Take it as a compliment," he said. "Everyone wants to welcome you to town."

"I guess I hadn't expected my arrival to be such a big deal."

"Hey, it's not like it's the end of the world." He patted her shoulder. His hand was heavy, comforting. She tried to ignore the tickle of desire that fluttered in her stomach at his touch. Max was only being friendly.

Right, the warning voice in her head—which might have been her conscience—said. And grizzly bears only want to be friendly, too. No danger there at all.

She forced a smile to her face and a lightness to her voice. "I'm sure everyone will get tired of me soon enough."

"I guess this is a big change for you, being from a big city and all," Max said. "It's a lot easier to be anonymous there."

She laughed at the irony of his words. As the daughter of the mayor's chief aide, she'd never felt particularly anonymous. From the time she could toddle, her parents had been hauling her to campaign rallies, charitable balls and other prominent

social functions. Her picture had appeared in countless editions of Chicago papers, usually in the society column. Her mother dutifully saved each one, delighting in the fact that her daughter was so popular. For a time, Casey had enjoyed it herself, but after a while the constant scrutiny had chafed. The older she got, the more the public seemed to expect from her, until she began to feel her life wasn't her own.

Which was partly why she was in Crested Butte. As much of a cliché as it was, she'd come here to find herself. To rediscover the Casey she'd lost somewhere along the way.

"What's so funny?" Max asked.

"Nothing." She shook her head. "Nothing at all." She tilted her head up and let the snowflakes kiss her cheeks. Away from the din of the Eldo, the street was silent except for the crunch of their feet on the fresh snow. She felt more at peace than she had in months.

"What are your plans for tomorrow?"

Max's question startled her out of her reverie. She glanced at him, curious but cautious. "I start work tomorrow. Then…I don't know. I thought I might buy groceries." She shrugged. "Nothing exciting."

"After work, why don't you let me show you around." He wasn't looking at her, but off to one side, his voice deliberately casual.

"Are you asking me out on a date?"

He shook his head. "A date? No."

"No?" She couldn't keep a note of disappointment from her voice.

"No. A date would be dinner or a movie or something like that. I just thought—if you're going to be working for the chamber of commerce, you need to know the area, so you can direct tourists and stuff. I need to run up to the resort sometime tomorrow to trade out some stock with a snowboard shop up there. I thought you could ride with me and check things out." He shrugged. "Just as a friend."

That certainly sounded nonthreatening enough. "Okay. That sounds good."

"Good. We'll talk more tomorrow."

She was surprised to find they were already at the foot of the steps leading up to the apartments. "Are you coming up?" she asked.

"No. I think I'll go back to the Eldo for a while."

"Thanks again for everything," she said.

"Sure. No problem." He shoved his hands in his coat pockets and took a step back. "Good night."

"Good night."

She climbed the steps, but stopped on the landing outside the door to look back. Max was striding away from her down the street, his shoulders hunched against the cold. He made a romantic figure, snow falling around him.

Of course, when he'd left her at her door to go back to the bar it hadn't been terribly romantic, but then, what did she expect

from a man whose nickname was Mad Max?

Not that she was interested in romance, anyway. She'd come here looking for a change. A chance to figure out what she wanted to do with her life. Romance, she knew from experience, could mess things up.

Max had offered to be her friend; the prospect intrigued her. A woman starting over needed new friends and what woman wouldn't want a good-looking man like Max on her side?

BEFORE OPENING THE SHOP Monday morning, Max and Molly walked to the post office to collect the mail. Normally, Molly would have run and played in the fresh snow, but at the moment she was too pregnant to do much but plod along, looking up at Max from time to time with the perpetual smile goldens always wear. "It won't be long now, girl," he told her. "Our place will be puppy central." Fortunately, a number of Molly's future offspring were already spoken for. Then she was off to the vet to make sure this didn't happen again.

He passed the Eldo and thought of Casey. Who was he kidding? He'd thought of little else since he'd left her last night. She definitely wasn't the party girl or outdoorsy-type the town usually attracted. He was trying to figure out exactly how she'd ended up in C.B. When he'd spotted her at the bar last night, she'd had a desperate look in her eyes. The look of someone who was involved in something she wasn't quite sure of.

Which set off more than a few warning bells in his head. He'd

had his share of dealings with confused women before—women who wanted him to straighten out their lives for them. Or, worse, ones who thought his life needed straightening.

He reached the post office and gathered the mail. After discarding a stack of junk mail and flyers, he was left with a snowboarding magazine, two bills and two letters addressed to Casey.

That was fast, he thought. After all, she'd only arrived yesterday. But he supposed she'd given out the address as soon as she'd leased the apartment and the letters had been mailed before she even left Chicago.

He studied the return addresses. One was from Mr. and Mrs. Charles Jernigan. Her parents?

The other was from a Paul Rittinghouse. Max frowned. Brother? Cousin?

Boyfriend?

His jaw tightened at the thought and he shoved the letters into his pocket. On one hand, why should it surprise him that a woman like Casey would have a boyfriend? She was pretty and smart with a nice personality.

On the other hand, if she did have a steady boyfriend, why would she move so far away from him?

Another mystery to add to the growing list about Casey. She was a city girl who wasn't particularly interested in skiing or snowboarding or any of the other activities that led people to abandon all and move to the mountains. She obviously had been

uncomfortable as the center of attention last night, but at the same time she wasn't painfully shy or socially inept.

No doubt about it, Casey intrigued him. She might be too complicated for girlfriend material, but there wasn't anything wrong with getting to know her better.

Strictly as a friend.

CASEY TOLD HERSELF she shouldn't be surprised when she walked into work Monday morning and the first person she saw was a woman wearing a red feather boa and carrying a sequined toilet plunger. Less than twenty-four hours in Crested Butte had taught her that this was a place where she should expect the unexpected.

She was thrown a little off guard, however, when the woman in the boa introduced herself as Heather Allison—Casey's new boss. "I'm so glad to see you," Heather said after they'd exchanged introductions. "We have so much to do and I'm positively thrilled to have some help."

"I'm happy to be here," Casey said, trying not to stare at the rest of Heather's outfit, which included a purple velvet cape and a crown cut from aluminum beer cans.

"Hold this a minute and I'll get the employment paperwork you need to fill out," Heather said, handing Casey the plunger. She went to a large wooden desk and began rifling through piles of paper on the top. "I know I put them somewhere…." She tossed aside a yellow rubber duck, a pair of maracas and strings

of Mardi Gras beads. “Aha. Here they are.” She waved a sheaf of papers.

Casey could contain herself no longer. “What’s with the plunger?” she asked. “And the crown?”

Heather laughed. “You’ve arrived just in time for Flauschink—our annual end-of-ski-season festival.”

“Flauschink?” Casey tried out the odd-sounding word.

“Literally, flushing, as in flushing out winter. Hence the plunger.”

“So everyone carries these around for the festival?” Casey eyed the sequined toilet accessory.

“Not everyone. Only the king and queen. I was trying out this year’s queen’s costume when you walked in.” Heather plucked the crown off her head and placed it on Casey’s. “I think the costume committee outdid themselves this year.”

Casey watched while Heather divested herself of the royal robes. Underneath the purple velvet she wore a sensible black pantsuit. “When is Flauschink and what happens during the festival?” Casey asked.

“It’s next weekend. Closing weekend for the ski resort and the last gasp for winter tourists. As for what happens, here’s a schedule.” She thrust a flyer at Casey.

Casey read down the list of activities, eyes widening. “Polka ball, crowning of king and queen, ski race, parade, concert…” She looked up. “That’s a lot to plan for.”

“So you see why I’m so glad you’re here.” She took the plunger

and crown and stowed them in an empty file drawer. “You can fill out that paperwork later. Right now you would save my life if you could call this list of bands and confirm they’re going to be here to play next weekend. I’ve found it pays to follow up. You know musicians.”

Casey was happy to take a seat at the desk and get to work. Work felt normal—something she hadn’t experienced much of since leaving Chicago.

After Casey confirmed with all the musicians, Heather asked her to proof some ads for the summer Wildflower Festival. “It’s our biggest draw of the year,” Heather explained. “So we do a huge advertising push in newspapers and magazines.”

“So after Flauschink, we start getting ready for the Wildflower Festival?”

“Oh, before the Wildflower Festival we have Poo Fest and Bike Week, then the Wildflower Festival, the Arts and Film Festival and Vinotok—the fall festival.” Heather ticked the events off on her fingers. “Then it’s time for ski season and all the winter activities—which are too many to name right now.”

“Poo fest?” Casey asked. “You mean shampoo?”

“No. Dog poo. The snow melts and all the trails and sidewalks need to be cleaned up. A few years ago someone came up with the idea for the Poo Fest. There are games and prizes for the person or team that picks up the most pounds of poo.”

“You’re kidding.” This had to be another attempt to pull one over on the new gal.

Heather shook her head. “I swear I’m not. It’s a lot of fun. And a great way to get everyone to pitch in to clean up.”

Casey shook her head. Was there anything folks here wouldn’t celebrate?

Mid-morning, the men began showing up.

First was a young man with bright red hair. He came in clutching a brown paper bag. “Is Casey here?” he asked, looking past Heather toward Casey’s desk in the back.

“Wanted to be the first, did you, Jerry?” Heather said.

Jerry’s cheeks matched his hair. He moved past Heather to Casey’s desk and set the bag on top. “Hi, I’m Jerry,” he said. “Welcome to Crested Butte.”

“Uh, hi, Jerry.” Casey eyed him warily.

“I brought you sort of a welcome gift,” he said, nodding to the bag.

“Thanks.” She studied the plain brown bag. “Um, what is it?”

“Moose poop.”

“Okay.” Another joke on the newcomer? How was she supposed to take this?

She sent a frantic look at Heather, who marched over and snatched up the bag. “No wonder you’re still single, you dolt,” Heather said. She opened the bag and fished out a round brown patty and bit into it.

“Don’t worry,” she said in answer to Casey’s horrified look. “It’s chocolate. A local specialty.” She offered the bag to Casey. “Try one. They’re delicious.”

Casey fished out a smaller patty and sampled it. “It is good!” she said, relieved. Belatedly, she remembered the man who’d given her this gift and offered him a smile. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” He shoved his hands in his pockets and took a step back. “Well, I guess I’ll be seeing you around.”

Jerry was scarcely out the door before a burly man with a black beard walked in. He marched up to the women and offered his hand. “Bill Whitmore,” he said. “Welcome to C.B.”

“Hi, Bill,” Casey said.

“I thought you might like to have lunch,” Bill said.

Casey glanced at the clock. “It’s only 10:30.”

“Well, sure. Not now. I could come back later.”

“Casey’s going to have lunch with me.” Heather pushed Bill toward the door. “And now she has to work.”

But in between meeting Gary, Eric and Anders, Casey wasn’t able to accomplish much. “What is going on?” she asked after yet another man left the chamber office.

“It’ll get better tomorrow,” Heather said. “You’ll probably have met them all by then.”

“Met who? Are they some sort of official welcoming committee?”

Heather laughed. “I suppose you could look at it that way. They’re all single guys stopping by to check you out.”

Casey sat back in her chair, dumbfounded. “I thought I’d met them all at the Eldo last night.”

“Single women—especially young, pretty ones—definitely

have an advantage here in C.B.," Heather said. "You can have your pick of men. Only problem is, a lot of them aren't worth picking."

Casey fiddled with a pencil, turning it over and over in her hand. "I'm not sure I like that. It makes me feel—I don't know—like fresh meat in the tiger cage at the zoo."

"Don't let it get to you," Heather said. "These guys are harmless. Just lonely. They won't hassle you. And you'll never have to eat dinner alone unless you want to."

"Does that mean you don't eat many dinners alone?" Casey asked.

Heather snorted. "I eat dinner with my twelve-year-old daughter, which makes me immune to a lot of the attention you're getting."

"But you're not that much older than me," Casey said. "And you're gorgeous." Heather had curly brown hair and a classic hourglass figure. "Men should be lining up to see you, not me."

"I'm thirty-one," Heather said. "So, no, not that old. But too long in the tooth for a lot of these ski bums, and having an almost-teenager in the house scares off most of the rest of them." She sighed. "It's okay, though. There's always hope, that's what I say. And hey, I can live vicariously through you. That's why you were hired, you know?"

"Because I'm single?"

"No, but the job did come open because my last assistant got married and moved to Denver."

“Did she marry one of the local men?”

“Nope. Snagged herself a tourist. A nice businessman from the big city. So I put out the call for a new assistant and here you are.”

Casey nodded. “Is there anything else I need to know about this place? I mean, besides the dearth of single women and the abundance of weird festivals? Any unusual local customs? Places or people to avoid?”

Heather laughed and checked her watch. “It’s almost noon, what say we grab a bite to eat? I’ll fill you in on everything you need to know.”

Chapter Three

Heather locked up the office then she and Casey headed down Elk Avenue to the Teocalli Tamale. The interior of the little shop was warm after the chill outside and the air was fragrant with the smell of onions and green chili. “Hello, Patti. Ben.” Heather greeted the woman behind the order window and another diner. “This is Casey Jernigan, my new assistant.”

“Hey, Casey.” Patti nodded.

“What’ll you have?” Heather asked. She indicated the menu posted on the wall to their right. “It’s all good.”

Casey ordered a chicken burrito and iced tea, while Heather opted for a taco salad and a diet soda. Patti assembled their meals right away and the two women carried their trays to one of the tables.

“Ben Romney.” The distinguished man with thinning brown hair and kind blue eyes came over to them and offered his hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“Ben is the local orthopedist,” Heather explained. “He stays busy patching up tourists and locals alike.”

“How is Emma?” Ben asked.

Heather frowned. “At the moment she hates my guts because I refused to let her get her belly button pierced.”

“She’ll get over it,” Ben said.

“Yeah. Maybe in another five or six years.” Heather looked

at Casey across the table. “Last week she was upset because I wouldn’t let her dye her hair purple. Before that she pitched a fit because I refused to let her spend spring break in Mexico with a bunch of kids I don’t know.”

“You’re doing a good job with her,” Ben said. “She’ll appreciate it one of these days.”

“Here’s your order, Ben.” Patti walked over and handed him a white paper bag.

“Wish I could visit with you ladies more, but I’ve got to get back to work. I’ve got a young man waiting who will probably need surgery on his knee.”

“Skiing accident?” Casey asked.

Ben shook his head. “Fell off his roof shoveling snow. Happens all the time.”

Sure it does, Casey thought. Why am I even surprised? “He seems nice,” she said after Ben had left them.

“Yeah.” Heather salted her salad. “You should try the green chili sometime. It’s to die for.”

“I’ll do that.”

They were silent a moment, eating, then turned their attention to the boisterous group crowding in the door of the restaurant.

“Be still my heart,” Heather said, clutching Casey’s arm.

“What?” Then she recognized Max in the group of men. He had his back to her, busy removing his jacket and the long scarf wound around his neck. Her heart beat a little faster, seeing him. He probably had that effect on everyone.

He turned around and saw her and his grin lit his whole face. “Hi, Casey. How’s your first day at work?”

“It’s going great,” she said.

“Hello, Hagan.” Heather’s voice was pitched two notes higher than usual. Casey turned to look at her boss and held back a grin of her own at the sight of Heather’s flushed cheeks and bright eyes. So Max wasn’t the man who made Heather’s heart race.

“Hello, Heather.” A tall blond with a soft accent nodded to the women on his way to a table on the other side of the room.

“Hi, Heather,” Max said. “How’s it going?”

“Okay.” Heather turned in her chair to look after Hagan. “You two are welcome to join us for lunch,” she said.

“Thanks, but Hagan isn’t good company today,” Max said. “He’s been unlucky in love.” He winked and moved past them.

Heather faced forward again and rested her chin in her hand, lips turned down in a pout. “I know all about unlucky in love. He’s probably just mad because some snow bunny stood him up last night.”

“Is he a skier?” Casey asked.

“Ski patrol.” Heather sighed. “You should see him in his uniform. No wonder half the women on the mountain are literally falling at his feet.”

Casey’s own record with men wasn’t stellar enough that she felt qualified to give advice to Heather. She returned her attention to her food, but all the while she was aware of a certain big man seated in the corner of the room.

She was looking forward to their promised trip up the mountain to the resort later this afternoon, but she didn't know what to make of her obvious attraction to Max. Maybe it was merely a combination of his good looks and his willingness to help her out of a jam last night. He was a friendly guy, but she had no business reading anything more into it than that. After all, history had proved she was a lousy judge of what constituted romance.

"SO JUST HOW BIG was Mitzi's boyfriend?" Max asked as he and Hagan stood at the front counter.

"Very big." Hagan rubbed his jaw, which was taking on a purple tinge. "Good thing I turned or he would have broken my jaw."

"Funny how she forgot to mention this boyfriend."

"I suspect she was trying to make him jealous." Hagan studied the menu and shrugged. "It happens."

"Yeah, but games like that can get a man killed. Or at least crippled."

"Worse, I'm out twenty dollars for the binding strap." He scowled. "Women. Never trust them."

"That's what you get for dating strangers."

"And as I said before, you are not one to be giving advice about dating." He looked up as Patti approached. "Would you go out with him?" He pointed to Max.

Patti raised one eyebrow. "What? Is he your broker or

something?"

"Ignore him," Max said. "He took a punch to the jaw and it rattled his brains. Bring us a couple of specials."

"Poaching on someone else's territory, Hagan?" Patti asked.

Hagan straightened. "Why do you say that?"

Patti shook her head and began assembling their burritos.

"Why did she say that?" Hagan asked Max.

"You have a reputation, dude."

"Hmmph. At least they don't call me Mad Max."

"A name I happen to like." He frowned at his friend. He should have taken Heather up on her offer to join her and Casey for lunch. The conversation was bound to be better. He turned away. "Holler when the food gets here."

Hagan grunted and went back to brooding. Max walked over to Heather and Casey's table and took a seat. "What's new at the chamber of commerce?" he asked.

"Casey got the full treatment this morning," Heather said. "Jerry Rydell brought her moose poop and Bill Whitmore asked her to lunch."

"Isn't Bill dating Marcy over at the library?" Max asked.

Heather shrugged. "Guess he's keeping his options open."

Max grinned at Casey. "I'm sure you made a good impression on all of them." He ignored the pinch in his gut that might be jealousy. After all, he'd been the first to welcome her to town, and living across the hall from her, it was only natural he'd feel a little territorial.

“I don’t want to make an impression on any of them.” Casey shifted in her chair. “I’m sure they’re very nice guys, but I didn’t come to town on some kind of man hunt.”

“Enjoy it while you can,” Heather said. “After you’ve been here a while you’ll be just another local like me. Yesterday’s news.”

“Did she tell you a bunch of lifties serenaded her last night?” Max grinned.

“No!” Heather laughed. “I’ll bet that was a riot.”

“Sounded like a bunch of raccoons fighting over leftovers,” Max said.

Casey joined in the laughter. “It was pretty terrible,” she said. “Max ended up rescuing me and taking me home.”

“Any woman who drives halfway across the country by herself with only a houseplant for company doesn’t need rescuing,” he said. “I figured you were worn out from your trip and didn’t need the hassle of dealing with those guys anymore.”

He’d been standing by the bar, making fun of the singing when he’d locked eyes with her across the room. She’d looked exhausted and more than a little lost in the midst of the raucous crowd. What man wouldn’t have stepped in to help her?

“Well, I appreciate it, anyway,” Casey said. She rearranged her silverware, avoiding his eyes. Which was a real shame. She had beautiful eyes. The gray of a stormy sky.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the letters that had come for her this morning. “These were in the mail for you,” he

said.

She took the letters, frowning when she read the address on the first one—the one from Mr. and Mrs. Charles Jernigan. When she got to the one from Paul Rittinghouse she positively glowered. “You don’t look too thrilled with mail from home,” he said.

She glanced up at him, her cheeks flushed, then folded the envelopes in half and stuffed them into her pocket. “I’m surprised, that’s all. I mean, I just got here.”

“They must have been mailed before you left,” he said.

“You’re probably right.” Her expression brightened, but he had the impression the look was forced. “Heather has been telling me about the Flauschink Polka Ball,” she said.

“I was explaining to her she needs to come up with a costume,” Heather said.

“And I’ve been trying to explain to her I’m not really much for fancy parties,” she said. She’d attended enough overdone celebrations in Chicago to last a lifetime.

“I wouldn’t call the Polka Ball fancy,” Max said. “It’s mostly just fun.”

“Your costume will have to be something simple,” Heather said. “We’ve only got a week. And I don’t think anything in my closet will fit her.”

“What about that ball gown or whatever it is in your closet?” Max asked. The thing had taken up half her car, like one of those hoop-skirted costumes from Gone with the Wind or something.

“No.” She shook her head, her cheeks a deep pink. “That wouldn’t be appropriate at all.”

Heather gave Max a questioning look. He shrugged. Whatever was in that bag, Casey clearly didn’t want to talk about it and he wasn’t going to push it.

“Why do I have to have a costume?” Casey asked. “Couldn’t I stay home?”

“And miss one of the best parties of the year?” Max asked.

“You haven’t lived until you’ve heard the polka version of ‘Bohemian Rhapsody,’” Heather said. “Besides, we’ll need you there to help sell tickets and things like that.”

“Maybe I’ll wear what I have on and go as a normal person,” Casey said. “I can wear a sign around my neck that says Endangered Species.”

Max laughed. “That’s pretty good. But the whole point is to shake you out of normal person mode. It’ll be good for you.” She obviously had a sense of humor, but there was a certain tension about her, as if she were always reining herself in.

“Do you have a red dress?” Heather asked.

“Not entirely red, no. Why?”

“Does it have some red in it?”

She nodded. “But why do you want to know?”

Heather turned to Max. “I’ve got red heels and red fishnet hose she can borrow. And my red feather boa. She can go as Miss Scarlet.”

“Miss Scarlet?”

"From the board game Clue. Ben Romney came last year as Colonel Mustard and we all said it was a shame we didn't have a Miss Scarlet, too."

"What are you coming to the party as?" Casey asked Max.

He grinned. "You'll have to show up and find out."

"Last year he was Mr. Disco, in orange bell-bottoms and a rainbow Afro." Heather laughed. "Add a clown nose and big shoes and you could use the same outfit as a clown costume."

"I promise you will be astounded and amazed by my costume this year," Max said. He'd outdone himself, if he did say so.

"Your food's getting cold," Hagan called.

"We have to get back to work, anyway." Heather stood and Casey rose also.

"See you later, neighbor," Max said.

The smile she gave him made him warm clear-through, setting off warning bells in his brain. He did his best to ignore them. He and Casey would be friends, that's all. He didn't have any intention of taking things any further. Why ruin a good friendship with something as messy as romance?

THAT AFTERNOON, Casey waited until Heather was involved in a lengthy phone call before she slipped the letters out of her pocket. She opened the one from her parents first, already pretty sure of what it would say.

As she'd expected, the letter in turns scolded her for being so foolish and irresponsible, pleaded with her to come to her senses

and return home and reminded her how disappointed they were that she had embarrassed them so in front of all their friends.

Of course, that was what was most important, wasn't it? The impression she gave to all their friends. Never mind what she might be feeling. What she might want. Over the years she'd tried in various ways to tell her parents that she didn't want the kind of public acclaim and popularity they craved, but she could never make them understand.

And worse, they'd almost succeeded in convincing her that she was wrong, that of course she was supposed to lead the kind of life they'd planned out for her—the good marriage to a prominent member of society, the memberships in the Junior League, the League of Women Voters, the Chicago Art Project, et cetera, the house in Madison Park or the Gold Coast and a vacation home on Martha's Vineyard. Shopping at all the right stores, eating at all the right restaurants, knowing all the right people.

She'd almost believed them. Until the morning she woke up in a panic and realized that if she didn't do something soon—something drastic—she'd be trapped forever in a life she'd never wanted.

She glanced over and saw that Heather was still on the phone. She dropped the letter from her parents, along with the envelope, into the shredder and watched with relief as the missive was reduced to paper ribbons.

But when she looked at the second letter, her relief vanished,

replaced by sheer dread. Why had Paul written her? Obviously, her parents had given him her address here. Possibly they'd even encouraged him to try to talk some sense into her. Because, of course, anything she did that went against their wishes was senseless.

She stared at the envelope, at the neat, clipped handwriting. As upright and proper as the man himself.

Not that there was anything wrong with Paul, she reminded herself. He was a perfectly nice man. Good-looking. Rich. The perfect boyfriend.

Except he hadn't been perfect for her and she couldn't make anyone believe that. Not even, apparently, Paul.

She sat there, hand poised to tear open the envelope. But really, what could he say that she wanted to hear? He wasn't going to make her think differently. He wasn't going to make her go back.

Quickly, before she changed her mind, she leaned over and fed the letter, unopened, to the shredder.

Then she sat back with a sigh of relief, feeling as if she'd narrowly avoided a collision with a Mack truck.

Oddly enough, it was the same feeling she'd had when she'd made the decision to come here to Crested Butte. Everyone else thought she was crazy, but right now this was better than any sanity she'd previously known.

WHEN SHE AND MAX MET UP later that afternoon,

Casey was surprised to learn they were taking the bus up to Crested Butte Mountain resort. “I’d have to dig out my Jeep to use it,” Max said, carrying a box full of miscellaneous snowboard parts to the bus stop in front of the chamber building. “Besides, the bus is free—the tourist tax dollars at work.”

Casey wasn’t about to admit she’d never taken public transportation before, much less something like this funky painted bus full of tourists. As the aide to the mayor, her father supported public transportation, though he didn’t feel that required him or his family to use it. Casey had traveled by private car, taxi or even limousine service.

“The bus is a great idea,” she said, as she followed him into the vehicle. This one was decorated with a scene of the mountains in summer, covered in wildflowers. She settled onto the seat beside Max and looked around at their fellow passengers: a mom and dad and their three children bundled up in ski jackets and knit caps, a group of teenagers similarly dressed, a young couple holding hands and an older man dressed in a chef’s uniform, obviously on his way to work at one of the resort hotels.

The bus pulled away from the stop and Casey turned her attention to Max. “Where are you taking the box?”

“George Taylor’s, right at the base of the lifts. I didn’t need this stuff and they did, so rather than me send it back and them ordering more, we’re doing a trade.”

“So you have a good relationship with your competition.”

He gave her a duh look. “Pretty much all the business owners

up here get along. No reason not to. There's room for all of us."

In fifteen minutes the bus dropped them off in front of a soaring wood-and-steel building. "New condos," Max said. "They sell out as fast as they can build them, so they keep building more."

Casey turned to take in the tall buildings that rose on all sides. "It certainly looks different here than it does in town," she said. Rough-hewn stone, oversize timbers and artful use of rusted metal gave the buildings the feel of a Bavarian village—a very tall, very modern Bavarian village. Groups of smiling people, some carrying skis or snowboards, all bundled in colorful parkas, made their way along the walkways between the buildings and the rows of shops that sold ski equipment, clothing and souvenirs.

"The resort is really growing," Max said as they started up the sidewalk. "The condos have changed the look of the mountain, but that's progress. The tourists pay the bills and at least we've kept it confined to the mountain."

They came to an icy stretch of pavement and Max took her arm. The chivalrous gesture—or maybe it was the masculine strength of the hand supporting her—sent a pleasant warmth through her. "Thanks," she said.

"Sure." She half hoped he'd keep hold of her, but as soon as they were clear of the ice, he released her.

Past the condos, they could see the slopes, the ski lift silent, empty chairs swinging in the cold wind. "Do you ski or snowboard?" Max asked.

"I've skied some, on vacations with my parents or friends." But those trips had really been more about wearing the right fashions and making the right connections than the actual skiing.

"Now that you're living here, you'll have the chance to get really good if you want," he said.

She glanced at him. "Are you really good?"

"I do all right. I have to test out the equipment to sell it, you know."

They entered the snowboard shop. After the night chill, the interior of the shop felt almost too warm. A young woman in a pink baby-doll T-shirt layered over a white thermal underwear top waved at them. "Hey, Max. George is in the back."

A bearded young man in a leather apron hailed them from the back of the shop. "Hey, Max." He took the box from him. "Thanks for bringing these in. Sue's got a check for you."

"No problem. This is Casey. She's new in town—works at the chamber."

"Welcome to town." George shook hands with her, then turned back to Max. "Have you seen those new mono-skis I just got in?"

"No. Let me check them out."

While the men talked equipment, Casey wandered to a rack of clothing and began thumbing through the jackets, pants and knit tops. She'd definitely need to add to her wardrobe of casual clothes. Most of the suits and dresses she'd brought with her were too formal even to wear to work. Even business was a more casual

affair in C.B. than it had been in Chicago.

Max collected his check and Casey, then they emerged once more into the cold. A few snowflakes swirled around them. “Let’s grab a bite to eat,” Max said. “The Avalanche has good food.” He nodded to a restaurant across the way.

Casey started to ask if including dinner now made this a date, but refrained. And once they were seated in the restaurant, she had to admit this was like no date she’d ever been on. Max seemed to know everyone and it took fifteen minutes to order their meal because they were constantly interrupted by people. Everyone who stopped by learned that Casey was the new employee of the chamber of commerce. “I’m showing her around, helping her get familiar with the area,” Max said.

“Cool,” his friends said. Or “Welcome to C.B.” No knowing looks or winks were exchanged. Nothing to suggest this was anything more than two friends enjoying a meal.

But it wasn’t exactly like a meal with one of her girlfriends, either. Max ordered what she and her friends had always called “man pizzas”—pies piled with meat and every other topping available. “Is that okay with you?” he asked belatedly.

She shrugged and unfolded her napkin across her lap. “Sure.” When in Rome and all that.

Their pizza arrived and the traffic around their table died down. “Do you know how many snowboarders it takes to change a lightbulb?” Max asked between bites of pizza.

“No, how many?”

"Three. One to change the bulb, one to videotape it and one to say 'Awesome, dude!'"

She hadn't expected this and struggled to keep Diet Coke from coming out her nose as she laughed.

"How many ski instructors does it take to change a lightbulb?" Max continued.

She shook her head, laughing.

"Six. One to change the bulb and five others to say 'Nice turn.' 'Nice turn.' 'Nice turn.'"

She groaned. "That's bad."

"One more and I promise I'll stop." He helped himself to another slice. "What are a snowboarder's last words?"

She shook her head. "I can't even guess."

"Dude! Watch this!"

She dissolved into giggles again. It wasn't that the jokes were so funny, but that he looked so delighted to be sharing them with her. Their eyes met and she felt the definite sizzle of attraction.

She looked away and fussed with the napkin in her lap. Now this definitely didn't feel like any date she'd had before. None of the men she went out with acted silly or went out of their way to amuse her. And she'd never experienced this sudden shift from laughter to lust. Was it the altitude, the novelty of her surroundings or something else entirely?

They finished eating, Max consuming the lion's share, then walked back to the bus stop. It had stopped snowing again, but the wind had picked up. The icy chill seemed to slice right

through Casey's coat. She wrapped her arms across her chest and shivered. "I can't believe it's this cold in April," she said.

"Nights can be cold here into the summer," Max said. He put his arm around her and pulled her close in a hug. "Let me warm you up."

It was a friendly gesture, but an intimate one, too. It felt good, his strong arm encircling her, the warmth from his body radiating to hers. She raised her eyes to meet his and found him studying her intently. "What is it?" she asked.

"You're not like most of the women I've met up here," he said, his voice soft and low.

"Is that a bad thing?"

"No. I like it. I mean, I like you. You're…your own person." Their eyes remained locked and she wondered if he would kiss her. Part of her thought she wouldn't be able to stand it if he didn't—and part of her wanted to run away if he did.

But after a moment, he withdrew his arms. "Here comes the bus," he said.

They found a seat on the bus and he avoided looking at her again. Instead, he directed his attention out the window. "There are some great trails up there," he said, indicating a snowy forest-service road. "Good fishing in the lakes, too."

"I don't fish," she said. "But I suppose some of the people who come into the chamber do. I'll keep that in mind."

"That paved path you can barely see is the Hike and Bike trail," he said, indicating a trail on their left. "It goes all the way

from Crested Butte up to the resort."

"I'll have to try it sometime." She kept her eyes on him, but he continued to avoid her gaze. She wondered if that moment of intimacy back at the bus stop had unnerved him even more than it had unsettled her.

When they reached Crested Butte, they climbed off the bus and walked up the street in silence. Neither said anything until they were in the hallway to their apartments. "Thanks for showing me around tonight," she said.

"Anytime." His earlier easiness had returned. "And if you need anything in your apartment or whatever, let me know."

"The apartment's fine," she said. "Very nice."

"Good night." He nodded and turned toward his door.

She stared after him, amusement warring with confusion. For someone Trish swore was a ladies' man, Max certainly hadn't made any moves tonight. He'd been exactly what she needed—a good friend.

Of course, she thought, as she unlocked her door and went inside, what she needed and what she wanted weren't necessarily the same thing. She'd have to be careful to not let her suddenly-wide-awake libido get the better of her common sense. Better to get a handle on this new life she was creating for herself before she wandered off into the dangerous territory of a new love interest.

Though when she was ready to head off into that particular wilderness, a mountain man like Max might be the perfect guide.

Chapter Four

Casey decided that if someone combined a Halloween party with a square dance and a junior prom, the result would be the Flauschink Polka Ball. It was definitely nothing like the fancy balls she'd endured in Chicago, she thought as she and Heather joined the crush of people at the entrance to the Eldo while the oompah beat of "Roll Out the Barrel" poured from the open doors.

Heather wore a black leotard and tights, and had fastened two large white dots to her torso. "I'm a domino," she explained. "The two-spot."

Casey had succumbed to Heather's badgering and dressed as Miss Scarlet, complete with a red feathered headdress, red boa, red fishnet stockings and stiletto heels, and a long black cigarette holder unearthed from the prop department of the community theater troupe. Since Casey didn't smoke, Heather had stuck a bubble wand in the end of the holder. She'd handed Casey a plastic bottle of bubble solution. "You'll be a hit," she declared.

Okay, so it was kind of fun blowing bubbles over the heads of the assorted clowns, cowboys, devils, angels, snowmen and the other characters that converged inside the Eldo.

Casey had scarcely gotten her bearings when a man wearing a red long underwear top, rough canvas pants, suspenders and a bushy black beard grabbed her hand. "Let's dance," he said.

Casey resisted. “I don’t know how to polka,” she protested.

“Then it’s time you learned.” The man—she decided he was supposed to be a miner—swept her onto the dance floor and led her in a somewhat controlled gallop across the room.

“Who are you?” she shouted over the insistent polka beat.

“Bill Whitmore. We met at the chamber.”

Of course. She’d mistaken the beard for a fake, but now realized he’d let it go untrimmed to add to the authenticity of his outfit. “Someone told me you had a girlfriend,” she said as they started back across the room.

“That’s okay. She’s dancing with someone else.”

When the song ended and Bill released her, she was gasping for breath. “Guess you’re not used to the altitude,” Bill said, delivering her to a table shared by Heather, Trish, Bryan and Zephyr.

“Guess not,” she wheezed, dropping into a chair. If she’d had the breath, she might have added that she wasn’t used to being dragged around at a gallop, while wearing high heels, either.

“We ordered you a drink.” Heather pushed a plastic cup toward her.

Casey had drained half the cup before she realized the fruit punch was heavily spiked. “Maybe I’d better stick to water,” she said, pushing the cup away.

“We’ve got that, too.” Trish handed her a bottle.

Casey twisted off the cap and searched the crowd for familiar faces. She’d half expected Max to offer to ride with her over to

the Eldo, since walking even that short distance in heels was out of the question, but she hadn't seen him since he'd locked up his shop that afternoon.

"He's not here yet," Heather said.

"Who?" Casey asked.

"Max. That is who you were looking for, wasn't it?"

She hoped everyone would mistake the flush on her cheeks for the effects of her dancing. "I'm curious what his costume might be," she said.

"There's Dr. Ben." Trish, dressed as a flapper in a white silk minidress and rolled stockings, waved at a man in a familiar beer-can crown and purple cape.

As he approached, the good doctor saluted them with his plunger/scepter, which also doubled as a holder for a can of beer. "You're the Flauschink King!" Casey exclaimed.

"Yes, I do have that dubious honor." He turned to Heather. "You're a very lovely…uh…what exactly are you?"

"I'm a domino," she said, exasperated.

"Where's your queen?" Zephyr asked. He'd added a silver lamé jacket to his usual baggy jeans and introduced himself as a rock star.

Ben looked around, then a smile broke out. "Here she comes now." He waved and Patti, the waitress at the Teocalli Tamale, glided over. She wore a tie-dyed T-shirt and ripped jeans beneath her royal robes, and tie-dyed streamers decorated her scepter.

"Dig the tie-dye, your majesty," Zephyr said, giving her a

thumbs up.

“Thanks.” Patti curtsied.

“Anybody seen Max?” Ben asked.

They shook their heads. “We’re all waiting to see his costume,” Bryan said. He was dressed as a chimney sweep, in top hat and tails, carrying a broom. “Do you know what it is?”

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