



ONE HOT
FORTY-FIVE

BJ DANIELS



INTRIGUE...

B.J. Daniels

One Hot Forty-Five

Аннотация

Surrendering to the last Corbett bachelor...A woman in trouble was like the call of a siren for any of the Corbett boys. And while Dede was in over her head, she was off-limits to Lantry Corbett. Until a wild Montana blizzard traps the pair together and Dede finds the protection she needs in Lantry's strong arms. But with a killer after them, Lantry will need the help of the whole Corbett clan to mete out justice in Whitehorse before it's too late.

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Lantry dragged her to him, encircling her with his strong arms ...

Her lips parted, opening for him, and she felt the tip of his tongue sweep over her lower lip. It had been so long since she'd felt desire, felt it run like a fire through her veins, felt it blaze

across her skin.

She would have been shocked had she thought about how badly she wanted this man, but at the moment all reason had left her. Her body ached with a need for this cowboy and Dede threw all caution to the wind as he swept her up and carried her to the loft.

About the Author

BJ DANIELS wrote her first book after a career as an award-winning newspaper journalist and author of thirty-seven published short stories. That first book, *Odd Man Out*, received a 4½ star review from *RT Book Reviews* magazine and went on to be nominated for Best Intrigue for that year. Since then she has won numerous awards, including a career achievement award for romantic suspense and many nominations and awards for best book.

Daniels lives in Montana with her husband, Parker, and two springer spaniels, Spot and Jem. When she isn't writing, she snowboards, camps, boats and plays tennis.

Daniels is a member of Mystery Writers of America, Sisters in Crime, International Thriller Writers, Kiss of Death and Romance Writers of America.

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This one is for Danni Hill and her wonderful bookstore, Promises. Thanks for letting me be a part of it.

Chapter One

Every nerve in Dede Chamberlain's body was tense as she lay on the narrow bed in the barred, locked room. She listened to the late-night sounds: weeping, an occasional scream, the scrape of a chair leg at the nurses' station down the hall.

Dede knew better than to fall asleep. She'd heard that a new orderly had been hired, and she knew what that meant. She hadn't seen him yet, but she'd heard about him through the whispers of the other patients. A big guy with light gray eyes and a scar on his left cheek. Claude.

She didn't know his last name, doubted he would have used his real one for this job anyway. But she knew Claude would come for her tonight now that only minimal staff were on duty.

But there was no chance of escaping this place. After she'd escaped from the Texas facility, they hadn't taken any chances with her up here in Montana. They'd put her in the criminally insane ward under maximum security, assuring her she couldn't get out—and no one could get to her.

And they thought *she* was the one who was crazy?

The men after her *would* get to her. There was no escaping them—not while she was locked up.

The air around her seemed to change. She sensed it, the same way she had sensed her life coming unraveled just months before. No one had believed her then; no one believed her now.

Dede leaned up on one elbow, the metallic taste of fear in her mouth, a taste she'd become intimately familiar with since she'd discovered just how far her husband would go.

Battling back the fear, she vowed she wouldn't make it easy for Claude when he came to kill her. It was all she had left—she would give him one hell of a fight.

From down the hall, she heard a door open and close with the careful stealth of those who lived by secrets and lies. Dede sat all the way up, listening to the cautious squeak of shoe soles as someone crept down the hallway in her direction.

Another door opened with a soft click; another pair of shoe soles sneaked down the hallway.

Furtively Dede rose from the bed and padded to the door to peek out through the bars into the dimly lit hallway.

Two figures moved as quietly as cockroaches. She recognized them as patients and started to turn away. Whatever they were up to, she wanted no part of it.

But then one of them saw her.

From down the hall, Violet Evans shot her a warning look and touched her finger to her lips before dragging it dramatically across her throat.

Dede had seen her the day she'd been captured and brought in. Violet had watched her through the bars of her window. After spending the last month in a psych ward, Dede recognized madness. But when she'd met Violet's gaze that day, she'd known that she'd just seen true insanity.

“Who is that woman?” Dede had asked the armed orderly taking her to her room.

“Violet Evans. We all watch out for that one.”

Violet was a raw-boned woman, late thirties, with straight brown hair and a plain face. The other patient beside her now in the hallway was a large buxom woman with a visage like a bulldog. Both seemed to be carrying what looked like a bright red blanket over one arm—only Violet had one over each arm.

As Violet motioned to someone down the hall at the nurses’ station on the other side of the steel bars, Dede felt her stomach roil. She’d heard that Violet had tried to escape from here once before and it had gone badly. She was sure it would be worse tonight and wanted no part of it.

Dede started to step back as Violet came alongside her door. But before she could move, Violet stepped in front of the barred, open window. For the first time, Dede was glad that she was locked in.

She touched her finger to her lips to let Violet know she’d gotten the message loud and clear and wasn’t about to give them away. Anyone with a brain could see that the woman was dangerous.

Violet nodded slowly, and Dede saw what she was carrying. Not a blanket. Two plush Santa Claus suits. Dede frowned. Were the costumes from the Christmas program she’d heard about that patients on the other side of the hospital were practicing for? But how did Violet—

The sudden blare of the fire alarm made Dede jump.

But it was the closer, quieter sound that sent her heart racing: the soft clunk of her cell door unlocking.

Through the bars of her window, Dede saw Violet smile and mouth, “You’re coming with us.”

The door swung up, and Violet reached in, grabbed her by the wrist and dragged her out into the hallway. Violet shoved a Santa costume at her before giving her a shove toward the confusion at the end of the hallway.

“Come on, Texas escape artist,” Violet said. “Let’s see if you can get out of *here* alive.”

LANTRY CORBETT WASN’T USED to the phone ringing in the wee hours of morning. Unlike his brother Shane, who was a deputy sheriff, Lantry’s business didn’t require middle-of-the-night calls.

That’s why it took him a few minutes to realize what had awakened him.

“Yeah?” he said after fumbling around half-asleep and finally snatching up his cell phone.

“Lantry?” Shane’s voice made him reach for the lamp beside the bed. The light came on, momentarily blinding him. His bedside clock read 3:22 a.m. His pulse took off, and he sat up, scaring himself fully awake.

“Sorry to call you so late, but one of your clients has been arrested and is demanding to see you.”

“*What?*” He threw his legs over the side of the bed and

dropped his head to his free hand. “You scared the hell out of me. I thought something had happened to ...” He shook his head as he tried to shake off the fear that this call was about their father.

It had been a crazy thought, since the family had turned in early down at the ranch’s main lodge, and none of them would have been out on a night like this.

Lantry padded barefoot to look out the front window of his cabin toward the main ranch house a good quarter mile away. Nothing moved, no lights shone, no sign of life. Everyone was in bed asleep—but him and his brother Shane.

Snow covered everything in sight, and more was falling, making the night glow with a white radiance. For a moment, he stared at the snowflakes suspended in the ranch yard light outside, wondering what he was still doing in Montana.

“Lantry, are you listening to me?”

He hadn’t been. “There’s some mistake. No client of mine is in your jail cell. All my former clients are in Texas.” Which was where he should be—and would be, once Christmas was over.

“Not this one. She has the Texas accent to prove it,” Shane said. “Look, this is kind of a special case, or I wouldn’t have called you at this hour. They’re coming for her at first light to take her back.”

“Back to Texas?”

“Back to the state mental hospital here first, then back to the mental facility she escaped from in Texas.”

Lantry let out a curse. “A *mental patient*? Why would you

believe her when she said she was my client?"

"She asked for you by name."

He shook his head, still half-asleep he assumed, since this wasn't making any sense. "Who is this woman?"

"Dede Chamberlain."

Lantry let out a string of curses. "The woman's *crazy*. Why do you think she's been locked up? You call me in the middle of the night for this?" He started to hang up.

"She says it's a matter of life and death—yours. She swears your life is in danger because you were involved in her divorce."

Lantry couldn't believe this. "I represented her *husband* in the divorce. I've never even laid eyes on this woman, and I can't imagine why *I* would be in danger. Frank Chamberlain was extremely happy with the job I did for him." Lantry thought of how well paid he'd been. "The only danger I might be in is from his lunatic ex-wife. Just keep her locked up until the hospital comes to take her back."

"She said you might need convincing. If you refused to see her, she said to tell you to have someone check the brake line on your wrecked Ferrari."

"My wrecked *Ferrari*?"

"I know, you don't have a Ferrari," Shane said.

No, but he *had* owned a Lamborghini. That was, until the accident just before he'd left Texas. His stomach lurched at the memory of losing control of the car. He'd been lucky to get out alive.

“I’ll call her a court-appointed attorney,” Shane was saying. “Sorry to have woken you for nothing. But she was so convincing, I felt I had to call.”

“What time did you say they were coming to get her?”

JUST BEFORE FIVE O’CLOCK, Lantry walked into the Whitehorse, Montana, sheriff’s department brushing snow from his coat. “Is Dede Chamberlain still here?”

Shane looked up in obvious surprise to see him standing in his office doorway. “Yes, but I didn’t think you were interested in representing her. Something change your mind?”

“Can I see her or not?” Lantry asked.

“You might want to work on your bedside manner.”

“I’m a divorce lawyer, not a doctor, and after being rudely awakened, I couldn’t get back to sleep.”

Shane picked up a large set of keys. “I had forgotten you get a little testy when you don’t get your rest.”

Lantry didn’t take the bait as he followed his brother through the offices toward the attached jail. He nodded to a deputy who didn’t look like he was out of high school, obviously a very recent hire given the fact that his uniform looked straight out of the box.

Shane led Lantry through a door and down a hallway between a half-dozen cells. All but one was empty. He noticed that Dede Chamberlain had been put in the last cell at the end of the row and guessed that was probably because she’d been disruptive and they hadn’t wanted to hear it.

Lantry had dealt with his share of young wives married to rich

older men. He knew the type. Privileged, spoiled, demanding, born with a sense of entitlement.

As he neared the former Mrs. Frank Chamberlain's cell, he saw a small curled-up ball under what looked like red fake fur. He cleared his throat, and she sat up looking sleepy-eyed for an instant before she became alert.

Lantry had never laid eyes on the woman before and was more than a little surprised. Dede Chamberlain had already been locked up in the Texas mental facility by that time so the only person Lantry had dealt with was her lawyer. When he'd handled her husband's side of the divorce, he'd assumed the fiftyish Frank Chamberlain hadn't been far off base when he'd claimed his younger wife was a gold-digging, vindictive, crazy bitch who was trying to take all of his money—if not his life.

Having seen his share of crazed trophy wives, Lantry had put Dede Chamberlain in the same category. He'd expected Botoxed, health-clubbed and hard as her designer salon acrylic nails.

That's why he was taken aback now. This woman looked nothing like the ex-wives he'd dealt with during his career.

Dede Chamberlain had the face of an angel, big blue eyes and a curly cap of reddish-blond hair that actually looked like her original color. There was a sweet freshness and innocence about her that he'd always associated with women from states that grew corn.

But if anyone knew that looks could be deceiving, it was a

divorce lawyer.

She blinked at him as if surprised to see him, then rose to come to the bars. “Thank you so much for coming down here, Mr. Corbett,” she said in a voice that was soft, hopeful and edged with maybe a little fear.

“I’m not here to represent you.”

“You’re not?” She lost the hopeful look.

“If you weren’t already locked up and facing life in prison or worse, I would have you arrested for whatever you did to my *Lamborghini*.” He stopped and frowned. “Why are you wearing a Santa Claus costume?”

She waved a hand through the air. No acrylic salon fingernails. Not even any polish on her neatly trimmed bare nails, he thought, distracted for a moment.

“The Santa suit? It’s a long story,” Dede said. “But you probably shouldn’t hear about it since you aren’t my lawyer. But for the record, I never touched your car. You can blame Frank for that.”

Lantry shook his head. “Why would your ex-husband and *my* client, who I might add I got a huge settlement for, want to destroy my car?”

“I can understand your confusion, Mr. Corbett. But that’s why I had your brother call you. Your life is in danger because of something my ex-husband was involved in.”

Lantry nodded, wishing he hadn’t bothered to come down here. What had been the point? The woman had escaped from a

mental institution. Two mental facilities, actually, and had shown a history of fanatical behavior on the verge of homicidal during the divorce. Had he expected reason from this woman?

He shook his head and turned to leave.

“Why do you think I’m in Whitehorse if not to warn you?” she said to his retreating back. “Why come all the way to Montana? Why not just take off to some place where no one could find me and save my own neck? Isn’t that what you would have done?”

That stung, but he couldn’t deny the truth of it. He stopped walking away and turned to look back at her, something in her words making him hesitate.

“I would be dead right now if it hadn’t been for the two inmates who broke me out with them from the state hospital,” Dede said.

“Instead, you came here to *save* my life.”

She nodded, obviously missing the sarcasm in his tone—or ignoring it. “My motives weren’t completely altruistic,” she said. “I’m hoping you can save us both. But if they—”

He held up his hand to stop her. “Who’s *they*?” he asked, waiting for her to say she didn’t know so he could walk out without feeling the least bit guilty. “I thought you said *Frank* was behind this death wish for me?”

“Actually, it’s two childhood friends of Frank’s,” she said. “I only know them as Ed and Claude. But when they showed up in Houston, that’s when Frank began to change. I could tell he was afraid of them, but it was as if they had some kind of hold on him.”

This all sounded like a bad B movie, and Dede Chamberlain was writing it from somewhere inside her demented brain.

Lantry had heard his share of pre-divorce stories over the years. He didn't want to hear Dede Chamberlain's, didn't want to feel any sympathy for her. Marriage was a choice, and she'd stupidly married Frank.

Those big blue eyes filled with tears. She bit her lower lip as if fighting to hold them back. "I know those men are why Frank turned on me—and why they're now trying to kill you."

He couldn't help but ask. "Didn't you question him about what was going on?"

"He said I was imagining things. But one night after he'd had a few drinks, he seemed to be the old Frank I'd fallen in love with. He said that he'd believed a man could change, could overcome his past, even his upbringing. I said I believed that too, but he said we were both wrong. That his past had come back to drag him down, and there was no escaping it."

"What does any of this have to do with him trying to kill you or me?" Lantry asked impatiently.

"Didn't you ever ask yourself why it wasn't enough for Frank to just divorce me? He had me committed so no one would believe anything I said."

And it was working, Lantry thought.

"Last week Frank called me and warned me they would try to kill me and that I had to get out of the hospital."

Lantry rubbed the back of his neck. His head hurt, and he

needed sleep. “You do realize how crazy this all sounds, don’t you?”

She nodded. “They’re counting on you not believing me. That’s why you have to get me out of here so—”

Lantry let out a laugh. “I don’t think so. I’ll take my chances with Frank and his boys. But thanks.”

“They tried to kill you once when they rigged your Ferrari,” she said grabbing the bars of her cell, calling after him as he started to turn away again.

“*Lamborghini*,” he said, turning back to her.

“Whatever. All those kinds of cars look alike to me,” she said and glanced at her watch. “We don’t have much time, Mr. Corbett. I’m your last hope. Once they kill me, there won’t be anyone who can save you.”

Why was he still listening to this woman? Because of an uneasy feeling that her story was just crazy enough to be true.

“How did you get to Montana anyway?” he demanded, wanting to trap her in a lie so he could wash his hands of this whole business and get back to bed. “Frank took all the money, the cars, the houses—”

“I have my own money, Mr. Corbett.” There was a hard edge to her voice. “I didn’t marry Frank for his, no matter what he led you to believe.”

Lantry couldn’t hide his surprise. He had wanted to believe she was a crazy gold digger. It made what Frank did to her easier to be a part of. “Even if I believed that Frank’s buddies tampered

with my car, they had other chances to kill me after that. So why haven't they tried?"

"I suspect they didn't know where to find you," she said. "Ed has got to be in Whitehorse by now. Claude is either still at the hospital or on his way here. If I have to go back in the mental hospital, he'll kill me. He came close in Texas. I'd be dead right now if Violet and Roberta hadn't broken me out. I know all this is hard for you to believe—"

The cell-block door opened, and his brother stuck his head in, motioning to him.

"Hold that thought," Lantry said to Dede, shaking his head at how foolish he was to buy into any of this. So the woman had her own money and she was no dummy, her story was still preposterous.

"We just got a call," Shane said. "A stolen vehicle believed driven by one of the patients Dede Chamberlain escaped with has been spotted. The patient, Violet Evans, is from here. The sheriff and I are going out there now. Are you about through with your client?"

"She's not my client," Lantry snapped irritably. His cell phone rang. He checked it. "I need to take this."

"Deputy Conners will be here in case you get any ideas about breaking her out," Shane joked.

Lantry mugged a face at his brother and took the call as the cell-block door clanged shut. "So, what did you find out?"

"How about 'Hello, James, sorry to wake you too damned

early in the morning and ask you to track down my wrecked car.”

“Sorry.” James Ames was a close friend and a damned good mechanic. “You found it? And?”

“The brake lines weren’t cut.”

So it was just as he’d suspected. Dede Chamberlain was delusional.

“The steering mechanism was hinky, though.”

“*Hinky?*” He glanced down the line of cells at Dede, then turned his back to her.

“I’ve never seen one torqued quite like that from an accident,” James said. “What did you hit?”

“Nothing. I just suddenly lost control of the car. Are you saying it had been tampered with?” Lantry said, keeping his voice down.

“Only if someone was trying to kill you.” James laughed as if he’d made a joke. “I guess in your profession that’s always a possibility, though. Guess they missed you this time.” He was still chuckling when Lantry hung up.

He glanced back at Dede again. She was holding on to the bars, watching him with that hopeful look on her angelic face again. Damn.

As he walked back to her cell, he pictured Frank Chamberlain, a handsome, well-to-do, powerful man in Houston who didn’t need to resort to murder to get what he wanted. “You say Frank called to warn you. But if Frank wanted to protect you, why didn’t he break you out himself?”

“How did Frank tell you he made his fortune?” she asked, the change of subject giving him whiplash.

“A killing on Wall Street.”

She smiled ruefully. “He told me his grandmother left him the money.”

Lantry had never cared how his clients made their money as long as he got paid. Frank Chamberlain had paid right away. The check had gone through, and Lantry had put the case behind him and gone to Montana for a family meeting on the Trails West Ranch, where his father and new wife had just settled. He hadn’t planned to stay so long, but he’d gotten involved in some family legal business and then it was almost Christmas....

“Frank lied to both of us, and worse, involved us in his past.” Dede met his gaze with a challenging look. “You’re starting to believe me, aren’t you?”

The woman didn’t know a Lamborghini from a Ferrari. Did he really think she knew the brake line from the steering mechanism?

“Even if I bought into this, the state is sending someone to pick you up in—” he glanced at his watch “—less than—”

Her bloodcurdling scream made him jump back. She began to rattle the bars, screaming at the top of her lungs.

“What the hell are you doing?” he demanded and reached out to stop her.

She grabbed the front of his shirt and the strings from his bolo tie. He heard fabric rip as he tried to pull away, the bolo

tie tightening around his neck. The door to the sheriff's office clanged open, and the still-wet-behind-the-ears deputy came running toward them.

It all happened so fast. Lantry made the mistake of trying to calm her, afraid he would hurt her if he pulled away too hard. Dede had wound her fingers into the fabric of his shirt and was hanging on to his bolo tie as if it were a lifeline.

The deputy jumped into the middle of the ruckus.

Lantry didn't see her get the deputy's gun. It just suddenly appeared in Dede's hand, pointed at the two of them at the same time the screaming stopped.

In the deafening silence that followed, all Lantry could hear was the blood pounding in his ears as he stared at the woman with the gun.

Dede was so calm now he shuddered to see that she knew her way around weapons and probably the steering mechanisms on Lamborghinis as well. He couldn't believe how he'd been taken in by her. Probably the same way poor Frank Chamberlain had.

The deputy had turned a sickening shade of green.

"Take it easy," Lantry said, not sure if the words were meant for Dede or the deputy or himself. "Don't do anything rash." How could she do anything more rash than what she'd just done short of shooting them both now at point-blank range?

She barked out instructions to the green deputy, who did as he was told. "Now put the plastic cuffs on the lawyer. Loop them through that fancy belt of his."

“Like hell,” Lantry said.

“I’m sure you don’t want to see anyone get hurt here, do you, Mr. Corbett?”

He glared at her.

She pointed the deputy’s pistol at the young man’s heart.

“Make sure they are good and tight.”

Lantry had no option. He couldn’t take the chance she would shoot the deputy.

“Now open the cell,” she said, still holding the gun on the deputy. “Hurry up. We don’t want to see any innocent people get hurt because you didn’t move fast enough.”

As instructed, the deputy opened the cell and traded places with her. Dede closed the cell door, keeping the pistol on Lantry, and took the keys.

“Come on, Mr. Corbett. We’ll be leaving now. Cross your fingers that no one tries to stop us. As crazy as I am, who knows what I might do?”

Lantry bit down on a reply and, with the gun barrel pressed into his back, let her lead him out of the sheriff’s department and into the snowy, still-dark early morning.

Chapter Two

There were no cars in the parking lot other than Lantry's pickup and the deputy's beat-up old Mazda, both covered with snow. The blizzard Lantry had been warned about on the news had finally blown in.

"Just a minute." Dede reached into his coat pocket and dug out his cell phone and keys. She hit the automatic lock release, the lights of the pickup flashing on.

As Dede walked him to his pickup, wind whirled the large, thick flakes around them as if they were in a snow globe.

He could imagine how ridiculous the two of them looked. Him in handcuffs tethered to his belt and a petite woman in a Santa costume holding a gun on him.

But unfortunately, there wasn't anyone around at this hour—and in the middle of a blizzard—to see them.

"You don't want to do this," Lantry said as they reached his pickup. "This is only making your situation worse."

"A hotshot lawyer like you? I'm sure you can get me off without even any jail time," Dede said, keeping the pistol pressed into his back.

"You can't possibly think that I can make all of this go away. You pulled a gun on a sheriff's deputy and escaped from two mental hospitals and a jail cell."

"I did what I had to do," she said, pressing the gun barrel into

his back. “When the time comes, I know you can make a judge understand that. Anyway, what would you have done under the same circumstances?”

He didn’t know. He thought of his brother Dalton’s criminally insane first wife. The law didn’t always protect people. Oftentimes it was used against the person who needed and deserved protection the most.

Dede took him around to the driver’s side and opened the door. “Get in and slide across the seat. If you think about doing anything stupid, just think about your part in helping Frank take everything—including my freedom from me—in the divorce.”

He climbed in and slid across the seat, keeping what she had said in mind. He had helped put this woman away—just not well enough, apparently.

She followed, never taking the gun off him and leaving him little doubt that she really might shoot him if he tried to escape.

Shifting the weapon to her left hand, she inserted the key and started the pickup, then hit the child locks and reached over to buckle him in. “Just in case you’re thinking about jumping out.”

As if he could reach the door handle the way she had him hog-tied.

The wipers swept away the accumulated snow on the windshield. The glow of Christmas lights on the houses blurred through the falling snow, a surreal reminder that Christmas was just days away.

Dede turned on the heater, then shifted the truck into gear

and, resting the pistol on the seat next to her thigh, drove away from the sheriff's department.

Her composure unraveled him more than even the gun against her thigh. This woman must have nerves of steel. For just a moment, though, he thought he saw her hands trembling on the wheel, but he must have imagined it given the composed, unwavering way she had acted back in the jail.

They passed only one vehicle on the way out of town. A van with a state emblem on the side, but the driver was too busy trying to see through the falling and blowing snow to pay them any mind.

Lantry consoled himself that the deputy would soon be found in the cell and a manhunt would begin for the escaped prisoner and her hostage.

"You'll never get away with this," he said, his throat dry as she took one of the narrow back roads as if she knew where she was going.

He recalled that she'd spent the past twenty-four hours before her arrest with Violet Evans, a woman from the area. It was more than possible that Dede had gotten directions from the local woman.

"I suppose all this seems a little desperate to a man like you," she said quietly.

"A *little* desperate?" He looked over at her, then out at the storm. He could feel the temperature dropping.

The weatherman had forecasted below-zero temperatures and

blizzard conditions. Residents had been warned to stay off the roads because of blowing and drifting snow and diminishing visibility.

Lantry had little doubt that the roads would be closed soon, as they had been earlier in the month during the last winter-storm warnings.

“You know, it’s funny,” Dede said as she drove. “Thanks to Frank, I’ve been forced to do things I wouldn’t have even imagined just months ago. I suppose that *is* nuts, huh?”

Lantry studied her, not wanting to know what had pushed her over the edge. “Would you have really shot that deputy?”

“Of course not. What do you think I am? That deputy never did anything to me. Unlike you,” she added. “You helped Frank get me locked up in a mental ward.”

Lantry didn’t want to go down that road. The wind rocked the pickup. Snow whipped across the road, forcing Dede to slow almost to a crawl before the visibility cleared enough that she could see the road ahead again.

The barrow pits had filled in with snow. Only the tops of a few wooden fence posts were still visible above the snowline.

“My brother will be combing the countryside searching for me,” he said. Outside the pickup window he could see nothing but white. There were no other tracks in the road now. No one would be out on a night like this. *No one with a brain*, he amended silently.

“Shane will call in the FBI since kidnapping is a federal

offense,” he continued. “This time they’ll lock you up and you’ll never get out. Do you have any idea where you’re headed?”

He glanced over at her when she didn’t answer. Her angelic face was set in an expression of concentration and determination.

“The best thing you can do at this point is turn around and go back,” he said. “If you turn yourself in, I’ll do everything I can to make sure you get a fair hearing.”

“I’m touched by your concern, Mr. Corbett. But I’m crazy, remember? *If* I get caught, they’ll just put me back in the looney bin and throw away the key, and then the men after me will kill me. By then, they will have murdered you, so you’ll be of little help.”

She shifted down as a gust of wind rocked the pickup and sent snow swirling around them.

“But if we don’t get caught,” she continued, “I might be able to keep us both alive. So in the grand scale of things, kidnapping you seems pretty minor, don’t you think?”

He hated that her logic made a bizarre kind of sense. She wasn’t going to turn around and take him back, that much was a given.

In the rare openings between gusts, blurred Christmas lights could be seen along the eaves of ranch houses. But soon the ranch houses became fewer and farther between, as did the blur of Christmas lights, until there was nothing but white in the darkness ahead.

They were headed south on one of the lesser-used, narrow,

unpaved roads. Between them and the Missouri Breaks was nothing but wild country.

“What now?” he asked as the wind blew in the cracks of the pickup cab and sent snow swirling across the road, obliterating everything.

“You’re going to help me save our lives—once I convince you how much danger you’re in.”

It wasn’t going to take much to convince him of that, Lantry thought as he noted the gun nestled between her thighs and the Montana blizzard raging outside the pickup.

DEDE GRIPPED THE WHEEL AND fought to see the road ahead. Mostly what she did was aim the pickup between the fence posts—what little of them wasn’t buried in snow on the other side of the snow-deep barrow pits.

Between the heavy snowfall and the blowing fallen snow, all she could see was white.

She didn’t need Lantry Corbett to tell her how crazy this was. But given the alternative ...

Nor did she want to admit that the lawyer’s arguments weren’t persuasive. There was a time she would have believed everything he said and been ready to turn her life over to him, thinking he would save her.

But this wasn’t that time. Too much had happened to her. And too much was at stake. A part of her wished she’d been honest with Lantry back at the jail, although she doubted it would have swayed him anyway.

She couldn't let herself forget who this cowboy was or the part he'd played in bringing them both to this point in their lives.

This Lantry Corbett, though, looked nothing like the man she'd only seen on television. This blue-eyed cowboy hardly resembled the clean-shaven, three-piece designer-suited lawyer who she'd been told would eat his young.

She'd thought she had the wrong Lantry Corbett when she'd rolled over on her cot in jail earlier and had seen the cowboy standing outside her cell. This man wore a black Stetson, his dark hair now curled at the nape of his neck—not the corporate short haircut he'd sported in Texas—and he'd grown a thick black mustache that drooped at the corners and made him look as if he should have been from the Old West.

Maybe even more surprising, he looked at home in his worn Western attire. This was no urban cowboy, and the clothing only made him more appealing, accentuating his broad shoulders and slim hips. Even the way he moved was different. Tall and lanky, Lantry had walked into the jail with a slow, graceful gait in the work-worn cowboy boots and Wrangler jeans that hugged those long legs.

He had been nothing like that ultraexpensive lawyer she'd seen stalking across the commons of his office high-rise with a crowd of reporters after him.

No, for a moment in the jail, she'd been fooled into thinking she was wrong about the cutthroat divorce lawyer turned cowboy—until he opened his mouth.

Only then did she know she had the right man.

She kept her attention on the road—what she could see of it—and the blizzard raging outside the pickup, wishing there was another way.

VIOLET EVANS ALWAYS KNEW SHE'D come home one day. She'd thought about nothing but Whitehorse since she'd been locked up.

True, she had planned to come home vindicated. Or at least have everyone believe she was cured. But that hadn't happened.

In the passenger seat of the stolen SUV, Roberta began to snore loudly.

Violet knew everyone in four counties was looking for her. She'd become famous. Or infamous. Either way, she liked the idea of her name on everyone's lips. They'd all be locking their doors tonight.

She smiled at the thought, imagining the people who'd wronged her over the years. They would be terrified until she was caught. Once, they'd just made fun of her. But now they would have new respect for her.

Still, it bothered her that they all thought something was wrong with her. No wonder they'd been quick to send her away to a mental hospital after that unfortunate incident with her mother. How different things would have been if they had believed her when she'd tried to explain why she'd tried to kill her mother that day.

She shoved away the disturbing images from the past. But one

thought lingered. If Arlene loved her ... If she'd saved her from her awful grandmother ... If she'd tried to help her with the scary thoughts in her head ...

A mother is supposed to save you. Arlene Evans had failed to save her oldest daughter, so what right did Arlene have to get married and be happy?

"No right at all," Violet's dead grandmother said from the backseat. "Her idea of saving you had been to marry you off."

Violet thought of the humiliation and embarrassment when no man had wanted her—and worse, the disappointment she'd seen in her mother's face.

"If Arlene hadn't tricked my son Floyd into marrying her and had you three kids—"

"Can you just shut up?" Violet said, wishing she could cover her ears. She'd heard this from her grandmother since she was a girl. Grandmother always causing trouble, stirring things up between them, then standing back and saying, "See? See what I mean about this family?"

Roberta stirred in the passenger seat. "What's going on?" She glanced in the backseat, then at Violet, frowning. "You aren't talking to your dead grandmother again, right?"

"I was talking to myself. I need you to run a little errand for me," Violet told her as she parked near Packys, a convenience store on the edge of town.

She had skirted Whitehorse, which wasn't difficult since the town was only ten blocks square and she knew all the back roads.

The first thing she needed to do, though, was find out everything she could about her mother's upcoming Christmas wedding. It wasn't like she'd gotten an invitation.

"You're going to run in and get me the local newspaper and the shopper—those are the area bibles when it comes to what's going on," Violet told her.

Roberta groaned and complained, but finally got out and went in. She was wearing a pair of blue overalls and a flannel shirt and looked enough like a local that she shouldn't have any trouble, Violet figured.

Getting a change of clothing had been easy since Violet knew which residents would be gone this time of year and which ones locked their doors. They'd tossed out the Santa costumes after tossing out Dede Chamberlain.

It had amused Roberta to dump Dede on the main street of Whitehorse wearing the Santa suit.

When Roberta returned from inside the convenience store with the newspaper and free shopper, Violet drove down the street the few blocks past town. She pulled over in front of Promises bookstore, gift shop and antique store—closed now—and took the papers from Roberta.

Snapping on the dome light, she scanned for what she knew had to be there. Whitehorse, Montana, was so small that weddings, baby and wedding showers, and birthday parties were advertised in the paper and open to everyone. Her grandmother had already said that Arlene would invite the whole town to show

off the fact that she'd caught another man.

To her dismay, Violet didn't find anything about the wedding and was about to give up when she saw the wedding shower announcement.

There was no address as to where the shower was being held, since it was unnecessary. Instead all that was listed was the name of the person who was hosting the get-together. Pearl Cavanaugh. If you didn't know where the Cavanaughs lived, then you had no business at the shower.

"What the hell?" Violet said, thinking she must have read it wrong. "Pearl Cavanaugh is throwing a shower this afternoon for my mother? This has to be a misprint."

"I thought you said nobody in town liked your mother."

Violet shot Roberta a look that shut her up. Maybe it was a pity shower. Still, it seemed odd. Violet couldn't shake the uncomfortable feeling that everything had changed since she'd been gone.

She read it again and noticed something she hadn't seen before. It said in case of bad weather, the shower would be held at the Tin Cup, the restaurant out of town on the golf course.

Violet had heard about the winter-storm warning on the radio. She couldn't imagine worse weather.

Her thoughts returned to her mother and the shower. It was amazing enough that her mother had found another man when Violet hadn't even found one. And he was a man with money, from what she'd heard. She consoled herself with the assurance

that Hank Monroe couldn't be much of a man.

"So, are we going to your mother's shower?" Roberta asked, reading over her shoulder.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world. But first there's somewhere we have to go."

ARLENE TOUCHED THE WEDDING dress hanging from her closet door.

She felt like Cinderella about to go to the ball. She closed the closet door as the phone rang. All morning she'd feared that Pearl would cancel the shower. After all, with this storm coming in ...

"Hello?"

"Hi, beautiful."

She melted at the sound of Hank's voice. That she'd been given a second chance was such a blessing. He'd changed her. Not that she didn't have a long way to go.

She still had to bite her tongue not to gossip or have uncharitable thoughts. Hank laughed at her attempts to be the perfect woman.

"Arlene, I love you exactly as you are." That alone amazed her. But she wanted to be better for Hank. His love had already made her a better person.

"I hope I didn't wake you," Hank said now.

"No, I was up admiring my wedding dress." Hank had bought it for her, saying she deserved her dream wedding. She and Floyd, her first husband and the father of her children, had gotten married by the justice of the peace. A shotgun wedding because

she'd been pregnant with her first born, Violet.

Looking back, it was clear Floyd had never wanted the children. Nor did he care about them even now. He hadn't even been to see his own grandson.

Arlene was so thankful that Hank loved the baby and had gone out of his way to help her daughter Charlotte and son-in-law, Lucas, make a home for their son.

"Then you haven't seen the news," Hank said, dragging her from her thoughts.

Arlene felt her heart drop. "No, why?" Her first thought was that the shower was cancelled. But from the sound of Hank's voice, she knew it was more serious than that.

Her worry intensified. Instinctively she knew it must have something to do with Bo. In the past, most news, especially bad news, was often about her son, Bo. But Bo was gone.

She still couldn't believe what he'd done to bring about his own death. For months now, she'd mourned his loss, knowing she had failed him by spoiling him, just as she'd failed her daughter Violet by not spoiling her enough.

"Honey, it's Violet. She's escaped from the state institution. There were three of them. One has already been caught, so I'm sure—"

"Ohh." She sat down hard in the middle of the floor, the phone clutched in her hand. "*Violet?*"

Her oldest daughter. The culmination of all her mistakes as a mother. Hank kept assuring her that she hadn't made Violet what

she'd become. That there had been something wrong with Violet, something genetic. Just as she couldn't blame herself for the way Bo had turned out after growing up without a father present.

Arlene couldn't help but feel that if she'd been a better mother, if she'd insisted Floyd take more of a part in raising the kids, if she'd been able to stand up to Floyd's horrible mother and not let that old woman near her kids ...

"I want you to come stay with me until Violet is caught," Hank was saying.

Caught? How was it possible to raise a child that would one day have to be caught like a rabid dog?

"Hank, what about Charlotte and the baby?" Little Luke was a year old now, but still Arlene thought of him as a baby.

"Violet won't hurt her sister or her nephew, and Lucas will be home from his ranch job up north. You don't have to worry about them."

"You don't know what Violet's like. She's so angry. She blames everyone for her unhappiness." She realized she was crying.

"If you're that worried, I'll have Lucas, Charlotte and Luke move in here with us. There's plenty of room."

Arlene felt sick. "You know why she escaped *now*, right before the wedding. She—"

"I won't let her stop the wedding."

She loved Hank more than life and knew how capable he was of taking care of her. But he didn't know Violet and what *she* was

capable of. Arlene did. “Maybe we should put off the wedding.”

“No,” Hank said. “If she isn’t caught before the wedding, then I’ll see that security is stepped up. I just want to make sure that you’re safe until then. I’ll be down to pick you up. Pack just what you need until the wedding. Has the storm hit there yet? It’s snowing really hard up here. I think it’s moving south in your direction, so bundle up.”

“Hank—”

“Arlene, I’m not taking no for an answer. I’m on my way there now.” He hung up.

Not that it would have made a difference to argue with him. She knew she couldn’t talk him out of it, and maybe it would be best if she and Violet didn’t cross paths right now. If Violet was upset about the wedding, there was no telling what she might do.

Arlene prayed that one day Violet could get well and live a normal life. But if she kept getting into trouble, she would never be released.

Going into the living room, Arlene walked over to the drapes and drew them back so she could look across the prairie as the sun crested the horizon—just as she had done for almost forty years.

AS DEDE DROVE THROUGH THE swirling snow, Lantry realized they were following the brunt of the storm south. The wind had kicked up, the temperature on the thermometer between the visors showing five below zero. He could no longer tell if it was snowing or if the snow in the air was being kicked

up by the wind.

He hadn't seen a light for miles, and the secondary road she'd taken was getting progressively worse. The pickup was bucking drifts. If it wasn't for catching sight of the top of an occasional fence post on each side of the barrow pit along the narrow, unpaved road, he would have doubted they were even still on a road.

"I'm curious," Dede said, breaking the silence. "What made you become a divorce lawyer?"

"Excuse me?"

"Don't you feel guilty taking advantage of two devastated people who are fighting for their lives?"

He growled under his breath, but settled back into the seat. "Don't you mean trying to kill each other over their *assets*? Not exactly their lives."

She shot him a scowl.

"Watch the road!" he said as the pickup hit a drift, snow cascading over the windshield.

"You've never been married, have you?" she said as visibility improved a little. "So you don't know what it's like to get divorced."

"Do we have to talk about this now? You really should be keeping your attention on the road." She had shifted into four-wheel low, the pickup slowly plowing its way through the snow. All he could figure was that she planned to cut across to Highway 191 once she was far enough south.

“Divorce is heartbreaking—even if you’re the one who wants out of the marriage,” she said as if he hadn’t spoken. “When you get married, you have all these hopes and dreams—”

“Oh, please,” Lantry snapped. “You married Frank because he was rich and powerful.”

The moment the words were out, he regretted them—and not just because she touched the gun resting between her thighs. He had seen the wounded look on her face. He didn’t want to be cruel, but he also couldn’t take much more of this.

“I married Frank because I *loved* him,” she said quietly.

“My mistake.” He was glad when she put both hands back on the wheel.

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised you don’t believe in love,” Dede said, still sounding hurt.

Lantry warned himself to treat this woman with kid gloves. Who knew what she’d do next? And yet, she was so annoying. This whole situation was damned infuriating.

“It isn’t love I don’t believe in, it’s marriage,” he said into the hurt silence that had filled the pickup cab. “Any reasonable person who’s seen the statistics would think twice before getting married, except that people in love always think they’re going to be the ones who make it.”

“But if you never gamble on love—”

“Marriage isn’t a *gamble*. It’s like playing Russian roulette with all but one of the chambers full of lead. Do you realize how many marriages end in divorce? Fifty percent of first marriages, sixty-

seven percent of second marriages and seventy-four percent of third marriages.”

“Have you always been this pessimistic?”

“Statistics don’t lie,” he said. “Most first marriages end after seven years. So do second marriages. Only thirty-three percent reach their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Half of all married people never reach their fifteenth anniversary. Only five percent make fifty years.”

“I believed I was in that five percent.”

“Even after what you’d been through?” He looked over at her as if she’d lost her mind, then remembered she had. “You thought Frank was the right person, which proves how blind love is. That’s the reason why I am never getting married. My life is much safer without a spouse, and so are my assets.”

She shot him a sympathetic look. “That’s pitiful.”

“I consider it intelligent.”

“I still believe in marriage,” she said stubbornly. “I’ve always loved those stories about married couples who die of old age within days of each other because the spouse can’t stand to let the other one go without him or her.”

He stared at her profile in the dash lights. “I’m astounded after your marriage to Frank that you can still wax romantic about marriage.”

“When he put that gold band on my finger, I planned to wear it to my deathbed, the ring wearing thinner and thinner with the years.” She shook her head. “I was wrong. But that doesn’t mean

that the institution of marriage is doomed.”

He couldn't believe her, given what Frank had put her through. She actually had tears in her eyes.

“Come on, tell the truth. You pawned your engagement and wedding ring as quick as you could after the divorce without a second thought.”

“I never even considered the monetary value.”

“So where're the rings?” He saw her expression and burst out laughing. “You *did* pawn them.”

“I had to use the rings to get out of the mental hospital in Texas. It was all I had to offer at the time.” She glanced over at him, then back at the road. “Why can't you believe that I loved Frank?”

That was the problem. He *did* believe it. What amazed him more than anything was that she *still* loved the man.

THROUGH THE FALLING AND BLOWING snow Violet could barely make out Old Town Whitehorse. The wind whipped the fallen snow into sculpted drifts, and the air outside the stolen SUV had an icy-cold weight to it that made it hard to breathe.

Violet cut the engine and stared down the hill at her mother's house. The day had turned bright with the earlier dawn and the falling snow.

“I don't understand what we're doing here,” Roberta said. “Aren't the roads going to blow in? Maybe we should find some place to stay for a while.”

“I'm going down to my house to get us some warmer clothes,

food and money.”

“What if your mother is home?” Roberta asked. “Maybe it’s a trap.”

That was the problem with hanging out with a schizophrenic.

Violet watched a large SUV pull into the drive. She picked up the binoculars she’d stolen along with clothing from one of the houses they’d visited earlier.

She watched a large man climb out and go into the house. A few minutes later, he came out with a suitcase, went back in and came out with a long garment bag and carefully put that into the backseat. Her mother’s wedding gown?

A few moments later, her mother came out. She saw Arlene look around as if she knew Violet was close by. Maybe her mother knew her better than she’d thought.

Arlene seemed to hesitate as if she didn’t want to leave. Finally, she got into the SUV and the two drove away. Violet had seen the man driving. The fiancé, no doubt. He looked ... nice. Bigger and better looking than she’d expected.

Violet started to get out.

“You sure no one’s home?” Roberta asked, looking down at the house through dim winter light. The temperature had dropped quickly inside the SUV while they’d been waiting.

Violet rolled her eyes. “Didn’t you just see them drive off?”

“Still ...”

“All the lights are off. They’re gone, okay?” she snapped. She’d come to regret bringing Roberta along. “Stay here.”

“What should I do if you don’t come back?” Roberta asked.

“I *will* be back.” Violet pulled the key from the ignition and climbed out. She was going home.

LANTRY WATCHED THE ROAD ahead—what little he could see of it—and listened to Dede talk about her marriage, trying to distract himself from thinking about what this woman might have planned for him.

“Frank changed,” Dede was saying. “One day I just woke up, and I was lying next to a stranger.”

“If I had a dollar for every time I’ve heard that,” he said.

“I’m sure you got more than a dollar every time you heard it.” The pickup broke through another large drift that had blown across the road. Fortunately, the roads out here were fairly straight since it was getting harder and harder to see where the roadbed lay between the fences.

“It made me wonder why Frank married me,” she said.

That sexy body, Lantry thought but was smart enough not to say anything as she drove deeper into the storm and farther from civilization.

The snow was piling up. At least a foot had fallen and was still falling. The weather conditions were worsening to the point that he was becoming even more anxious. Where the hell was she taking him?

“You’re going to love this,” she said, “but I think Frank married me because I was so normal.”

“Funny,” he said. “You know you really don’t seem like a

woman who is running from killers.”

“Because I made one little joke?”

“*Little* is right.”

“Oh, I would have bet you had no sense of humor in your line of work.”

“I’m a lawyer, not an undertaker.”

“Right, you bury people alive.”

“Could we discuss the reason you’ve kidnapped me instead of my chosen profession, please.” He was having a hard time concentrating on the conversation. Snowflakes thick as cotton were blowing horizontally across the road, obliterating everything.

Dede had slowed the pickup to a crawl and now leaned over the steering wheel, straining to see.

“This is insane,” he muttered under his breath. “You don’t even know where you are.”

He’d been watching the compass and temperature gauge in the pickup. The temperature outside had been steadily dropping as she drove south toward the Missouri Breaks—into no-man’s-land—and the road was nearly drifted in.

If she planned to hook back up with Highway 191 south, she’d missed the turn.

“Dede—” He’d barely gotten the word out when a gust of wind hit the side of the pickup as the front of the truck broke through a large drift. The drift pulled the tires hard to the right.

Lantry felt the front tire sink into the soft snow at the edge

of the road. Dede was fighting to keep the snow from pulling the pickup into the deeper snow of the barrow pit, but it was a losing battle.

Snow flew up over the hood and windshield as the truck plowed into the snow-filled ditch.

Lantry had seen it coming and braced himself. The pickup crashed through the deep snow, coming to an abrupt stop buried between the road and a line of fence posts and barbed wire.

He heard Dede smack her head on the side window since the pickup didn't have side air bags.

The only other sound was that of the gun clattering to the floorboard at his feet.

Chapter Three

Violet wasn't surprised to find the front door of the farm house unlocked. No one in these parts locked their doors—except when she was on the loose. Had her mother left the door open on purpose?

She gripped the knob as she pushed gently and the door swung in, the scents of her childhood rushing at her like ghosts from the darkness.

The brightness of the falling snow beyond the open curtains cast the interior of the house in an eerie pale light, making it seem even creepier, the memories all that more horrendous.

She stood for a moment, breathing hard in the dim light, then fumbled for the light switch. The overhead lamp came on, chasing away the shadows, forcing the ghosts to scurry back into their holes.

Violet moved quickly down the hall toward her old room and turned on the light. She hadn't expected her mother would keep her room exactly as it had been. She'd anticipated that Arlene might have boxed up her stuff and pushed it into a corner.

The room had been turned into a playroom for a child. Violet stared. She could tell that her mother had decorated the room. As she caught the scent of baby powder, she felt tears flood her eyes.

The realization hit her hard. Her mother had gotten rid of her—and her things. Arlene had never planned for her oldest

daughter to come home again.

Violet swallowed the large lump in her throat only to have it lodge in her chest. There was nothing here for her.

“DEDE?”

She was slumped over, hands still gripping the wheel.

“Dede?”

She lifted her head slowly, looking a little dazed as she shifted her gaze from the snow-packed windshield to him. “What happened?”

“We went in the ditch. Shut off the engine. The tailpipe’s probably under the snow. The cab will be filling with carbon monoxide.”

She took a hand off the wheel to rub her temple. It was red where she’d smacked it on the side window. Fumbling, she turned off the engine, pitching them into cold silence.

“Dede, you need to get these handcuffs off me.”

She didn’t move.

“We can’t stay here. I saw a mailbox back up the road. There must be a farmhouse nearby. If we stay here, we’ll freeze to death. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Her gaze went to her lap. He saw recognition cross her expression as she realized the gun was gone. She raised her eyes to him and saw that he’d managed to free the plastic cuffs from his belt, unsnap his seatbelt and retrieve the gun from where it had fallen on the floorboard. He’d stuck the gun in the waist band of his jeans.

“I wouldn’t have shot you,” she said quietly.

“I guess we’re about to find out.” He held out his cuffed wrists to her. “There’s a hunting knife under the seat. I need you to cut these off. Unless you want to die right here in this barrow pit.”

She met his gaze, held it for a moment, then reached under the seat, pulled the knife from its leather sheath and cut the plastic cuffs. Lantry rubbed his wrists, watching her as she put the knife back. She looked defeated, but he’d seen that look before and knew better than to believe it.

He tried his door. Just as he suspected, it wouldn’t move. Snow was packed in around the truck. Dede’s side, he saw, would be worse since snow was packed clear up past her window.

“We’re going to have to climb out my side through the window. But first ...” He turned to dig through the space behind the seats for what little spare clothing he carried. This was his first winter in Montana.

His stepmother, Kate, had lived here her first twenty-two years and knew about Montana winters. She’d told him numerous times to take extra clothing, water, a blanket and food each time he ventured off the ranch.

He wished now that he’d listened to her. All he had was a pair of snow pacs that he kept in the car in case he went off the road and a shovel in the bed of the truck in case he had to dig himself out.

There was no digging the pickup out of this ditch, especially in this blizzard. But at least his feet would be warmer in the pacs

than in his cowboy boots.

He tugged off his boots and put on his pacs. All the time, he could feel Dede watching him, that desolate look in her eyes.

“You’re going to turn me in,” she finally said.

He looked up at her from tying the laces on the pacs. “We can figure things out once we get to the house back up the road.”

He dug around behind the seat again and found an old hat with earflaps and a pair of worn work gloves. “Here, wear these. I’m afraid that’s the best I can do.” He glanced at her Santa suit. The feet on it were plush black fake fur with plastic soles.

“Give me your feet,” he said. She eyed him with suspicion but did as she was told. Even with the thick fabric of the costume, he was able to slip his boots over it, making the cowboy boots fit well enough to get her to the house back up the road.

“Ready?” He pulled on his gloves, reached over and turned the key to put down his window. Snow cascaded in. He dug through the snow until he could see daylight and falling snow. “Come on.”

“IS EVERYTHING ALL RIGHT?” Roberta asked as Violet tossed an armload of clothing into the backseat, handed her a couple boxes of crackers and some salami and cheese, and slid behind the wheel.

“Perfect.”

“Are those *your* clothes?”

“They’re my mother’s, if you must know. I had to borrow a few of her things.” Violet gave her a look, daring her to ask what had happened to her own clothes.

Roberta eyed her but was smart enough not to cross that line. “So what now?”

“We hang out until it’s time to go to my mother’s wedding shower, what else?” Violet snapped.

“Cool,” Roberta said. “I love wedding showers.”

Violet cut her eyes to her fellow escapee and questioned her own sanity for bringing Roberta along. True, Roberta had helped get the Santa costumes, since they weren’t allowed real clothing on the criminally insane ward, and she had stood guard while Violet had stolen the SUV.

It had been Roberta’s idea that they steal the Santa costumes for the upcoming Christmas show. “They will be warmer than our regulation hospital scrubs, and who is going to pull over three women dressed as Santas?” But Violet was beginning to think it was about time to ditch Roberta. All that kept her from it as she drove away from her former home was the fact that she might need Roberta in the near future.

“They say you’re the company you keep,” her dead grandmother said from the backseat with a chuckle. “In this case, two crazy peas in a pod.”

“Shut up,” Violet snapped.

Roberta looked over at her. “Your dead grandmother again?”

“That Roberta’s a sharp one, all right,” Grandma said. “Sharper than you, since going to your mother’s shower is one of the dumbest things you’ve ever come up with. What’s the point?”

Violet glared into the rearview mirror at her grandmother for

a moment, then concentrated on the road. The snow was coming down so hard now that if she hadn't known the road, she would have ended up in the ditch.

She drove back to Whitehorse and turned onto the road to the Tin Cup. It surprised her how many cars were parked in the lot. She parked on the highway side on a small hill facing the large pond just off the road and cut the lights.

In the restaurant, she could see decorations hanging in front of the windows and people moving around behind the thin drapes.

"I thought we were going to a shower?" Roberta said.

Violet shot her a look. "We wait here for my mother."

"Then we follow her and run her off the road, drag her out of her car and beat her senseless," Roberta said with a smile. "How does that sound?"

Violet didn't answer as she helped herself to some of the neatly cut cheese and salami. It had been wrapped in the refrigerator, the boxes of crackers on the table with the note propped up against one of the boxes.

I'm sorry. The cheese and salami was all I had on hand.

Her mother had left her food, knowing she would come by the house. Knowing she would be hungry.

"Don't get all sentimental," her grandmother said from the backseat. "You should be in there at that party, eating that good food, not out here eating cheese and crackers."

The bite in her mouth turned to sawdust. Violet swallowed, hating that her grandmother was right. The unfairness of it all

made her want to strike out at someone. That someone would have to be her mother.

DEDE DIDN'T TRUST LANTRY, BUT she didn't want to freeze to death in his pickup in a snowbank, either. She had little choice but to follow him. Lantry had the gun and, for the time being, she would have to go along with whatever he said.

She slithered out the window, crawling across the top of the wind-crusting drift to the edge of the road where Lantry lifted her up onto the more solid ground of the roadbed.

It was snowing harder than ever. The wind whipped the stinging icy flakes around her, freezing air biting at any bare flesh it could find.

"Cover your face and stay close," Lantry yelled over the wind as he motioned for her to follow him.

She squinted into the falling snow, then drew the costume up so only her eyes were uncovered. The cold and wind made her eyes tear. The boots on her feet made walking difficult.

Keeping to the tracks the pickup had made, she followed Lantry. But within a dozen yards, the wind had blown in the tracks and she found herself plowing through the drifts behind him, thankful for the moment that she wasn't alone out here in this storm.

Ducking her head against the bite of the snow and wind, she was at least glad for the thickness of the plush Santa suit and her hospital-issued cotton scrubs underneath. Following him, she put one foot in front of the other, trying not to think about the cold

or her fear of what would happen once they reached the house he'd said would be back up the road.

Just as she'd done as a young girl, she counted her blessings to keep her mind off the cold and exhaustion that made each step a trial. At least she wasn't locked in a cage, and the men after her hadn't caught her. Yet.

That was as far as she could get on blessings. She was cold, tired, hungry, thirsty and scared. As badly as she couldn't wait to reach the house and get out of the bitter cold and snow, she dreaded getting anywhere that had a phone.

She didn't know how far they'd walked. She'd lost track of time, concentrating only on putting one foot in front of the other. The cold had numbed her senses, and she was beginning to believe Lantry had lied about seeing a mailbox, when he touched her arm, startling her since she hadn't realized he'd stopped.

He motioned for her to follow as he held two strands of barbed wire apart so she could climb through the fence. Then he broke a trail through the snow. Ahead, she caught a glimpse of a house through the driving snow and thought she might burst into tears with relief.

No lights glowed behind the windows of the two-story house. No Christmas decorations adorned the front yard or hung from the eaves. Was it possible the house was deserted? Just as she started to latch on to that hope, she heard a horse snort and saw three ghostlike shapes appear out of the storm next to a wooden corral fence.

The horses had a layer of snow on the quilted blankets covering their backs. As they trotted off, she saw that the road into the house was drifted in and didn't look as if it had been used for a while. Maybe the home- owners had only gone away for the holidays, leaving enough water and hay for the horses until they returned.

She slogged through the snow, the drifts to her thighs, the cold seeping into her bones. Just a little farther. She stumbled, her legs no longer willing to take another step.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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