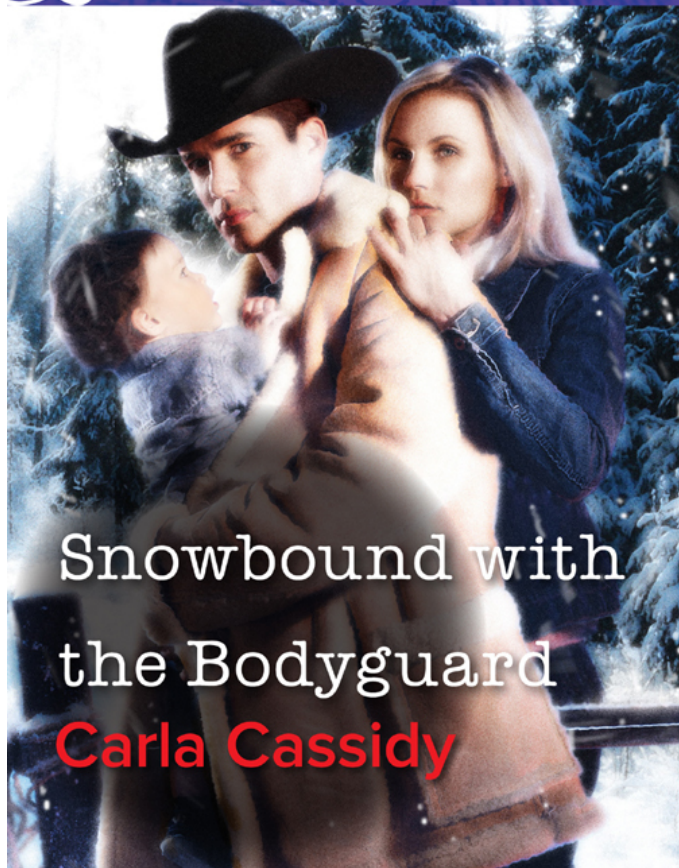




Romantic Suspense
INTRIGUE



Snowbound with
the Bodyguard
Carla Cassidy

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Содержание

Snowbound With the Bodyguard	5
Table of Contents	6
Prologue	8
Chapter 1	12
Chapter 2	26
Chapter 3	42
Chapter 4	58
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	60

Snowbound With the Bodyguard

Carla Cassidy



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Table of Contents

[Cover Page](#)

[Title Page](#)

[About The Author](#)

[Prologue](#)

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

[Epilogue](#)

[Copyright](#)

Carla Cassidy is an award-winning author who has written more than fifty novels. In 1995, she won Best Silhouette

Romance from *Romantic Times BOOKreviews*. In 1998, she also won a Career Achievement Award for Best Innovative Series from *Romantic Times BOOKreviews*.

Carla believes the only thing better than curling up with a good book to read is sitting down at the computer with a good story to write. She's looking forward to writing many more books and bringing hours of pleasure to readers.

Prologue

“Order up.” Smiley Smith, owner and short-order cook at Smiley’s Café, banged the small bell on the counter to punctuate his words.

Janette Black wiped her hands on her cheerful red-and-white apron, then walked over to retrieve the Thursday special.

She grabbed the plate and served it to the man seated at the long counter. “Here you go, Walter.” She smiled at the old man who came in every Thursday afternoon regular as clockwork for Smiley’s meatloaf.

“Thank you, honey. Can I bother you for another cup of coffee?” Walter offered her a sweet smile.

“For you, Walter, it’s no bother.” She turned around and went to get the coffeepot, grateful that the lunch rush was over and she only had two more hours in her shift. Then she could go home and snuggle her little boy and visit with Nana until it was time for her to be back here first thing in the morning.

“How’s that grandmother of yours?” Walter asked as she poured his coffee.

Janette’s heart warmed at thoughts of her grandmother. “She’s okay. We have her heart condition under control. She tires easily, but she’s doing just fine.”

Walter laughed. “She’s a corker, that one. It will take more than a couple of strokes to keep her down.”

As Janette began to wipe down the countertop, she smiled. Her grandmother wasn't just a corker, she was the woman who had raised Janette from the time she was three and the woman who was now helping Janette raise her little boy. Nana's last stroke had been nearly a year ago, but she had astounded the doctors with her recovery.

Janette was just giving the shiny surface a final swipe when the tinkle of the bell over the front door indicated another diner arriving.

She looked up and her blood froze. There were three of them, all wearing the khaki uniforms of law enforcement. Sheriff Brandon Sinclair led the way, swaggering in followed by two of his trusted deputies.

There were only two cafés in Sandstone, Oklahoma, and she'd chosen to work at Smiley's because the other place, Lacy's, was where Sinclair and his men usually ate their lunch.

Sheriff Sinclair surveyed the café like a king overseeing his domain, his ice-blue eyes narrowing just a touch as his gaze landed on Janette.

Take a table, she mentally begged. If they sat at the table, then Heidi, Janette's coworker, would wait on them. Janette had spent the past year of her life doing everything possible to avoid contact with the sheriff.

As he and his deputies headed toward the counter, her stomach bucked with a touch of nausea and her heart began to beat the rhythm of panic.

She couldn't lose it. Not here. Not now. She refused to let him know how he affected her, knowing that he would relish her fear.

He's just another customer, she told herself as the three seated themselves at the counter. "Can I take your orders?" she asked, surprised to hear her voice cool and collected despite all the emotions that quivered inside her.

"Coffee," Sinclair said. "What kind of pie is good today?"

"Apple," Janette replied tersely, then added, "the apple is always good."

"Then let's make it coffee and pie for all of us," Sinclair said.

Janette nodded and turned to get the coffeepot. She could do this. As long as she didn't look at him too long, as long as she didn't get close enough to smell his cologne. She had a feeling if she got a whiff of that cheap, cloying smell she might vomit.

She filled their cups, trying to ignore the way Sinclair's eyes lingered on her breasts. Her throat tightened and her heart banged harder against her ribs.

"Never guess what I heard through the grapevine," Sinclair said to his deputies.

"What's that, Sheriff?" Deputy Jed Billet asked.

"I heard that Janette has a little baby boy. What is he, about five months old, Janette?" Sinclair gazed at her knowingly.

She turned to get their pie, her hands trembling as she opened the display case that held the desserts. He knew. Dear God, he knew.

"Gonna be tough, being a single parent," Deputy Westin said.

As she placed the pie in front of Sinclair he reared back on the stool. “A boy. There’s something special about a boy, don’t you think so, Jed? I mean, I love my three little girls, but I always dreamed about how great it would be to have a son. Unfortunately, all my wife could pop was girls. Still, a boy needs a father, don’t you agree?”

A roar went off in Janette’s head. She had to escape. She had to take her son and leave Sandstone because she knew what evil Sheriff Brandon Sinclair was capable of, and as long as she remained in Sandstone he had the power to do whatever he wanted to do.

If he decided he wanted her baby boy, she knew he’d find a way to get him.

Chapter 1

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but I just got word that the bus isn't coming."

Janette blinked and stared up at the man in charge of the Cotter Creek bus station. She straightened in her chair as she realized she must have dozed off. She wrapped her arms around her still sleeping son and gazed at the man with confusion.

"Excuse me?" she said.

"The bus. It's not coming. It's been held up by weather."

"By weather?" Dulled by sleep, she stared at him as if he were speaking a foreign language.

He nodded. "Ice." He pointed out the window. Janette followed his finger and gasped in surprise as she saw the icy pellets falling from the sky. The ground was already covered with at least an inch.

Where had it come from? When she'd arrived at the bus station two hours ago the skies had been thick with gray clouds, but there hadn't been a hint of snow. Of course the last thing on her mind when she'd left Sandstone had been the weather forecast.

She looked back at the man and tried to swallow against the sense of panic that had been with her since she'd packed her bags and left Sandstone that afternoon. A friend of her grandmother's had driven her the thirty miles to Cotter Creek, where a bus to

Kansas City ran every other day. It was supposed to run today.

“Will it be here tomorrow?” she asked.

“Depends if the weathermen are right or wrong. They say we’re in for a blizzard, but they’re wrong more often than they’re right.” He shrugged his skinny shoulders and pulled a stocking cap over his head. “You best get settled in someplace for the night. I’ve got to close down here. Check back in the morning and I’ll know more about the schedule.” He was obviously in a hurry, tapping his heel as he looked at her expectantly.

“Of course.” She stood, grateful that Sammy still slept in his sling against her chest. She didn’t want to show how scared she was, didn’t want to do anything that might draw unnecessary attention to herself.

She’d find a pay phone, call the nearest motel and get a room for the night. Hopefully she’d still have time to get as far away from Sandstone as possible before Brandon Sinclair even knew she’d left the small town.

She grabbed the handle of her large suitcase and draped the diaper bag over her shoulder, still groggy from the unexpected catnap.

She was barely out the door before the bus station, little more than a shack, was locked up behind her. The ice that fell had coated the sidewalk and created shiny surfaces on everything else in sight. Under different circumstances she might have found it beautiful.

With Sammy safely snuggled beneath her wool coat, she

looked up and down the street. She didn't know Cotter Creek well. Perhaps there was a bed-and-breakfast someplace nearby where she could spend the night.

A new disquiet soared through her as she eyed the deserted streets. It was just after six but it was as if the entire town had packed their bags and left. There wasn't a person or a car on the street.

She should have asked to use the phone in the bus station. She should have asked the man where she could get a room for the night. But the nap had dulled her senses, and he'd hurried her out too fast for her to think clearly.

The sight of a phone booth in the distance rallied her spirits. Cotter Creek was near a major highway, and that meant there had to be a motel somewhere nearby.

Pulling the suitcase behind her, she hurried as fast as the slick concrete would allow toward the phone booth, feeling as if luck was on her side as she spied the small phone book hanging on a hook just inside the door.

She stepped into the booth and closed the door behind her, grateful to be out of the cold wind and stinging ice. With cold fingers she thumbed through the book until she found the page with the motel listings. Make that one listing. The Cotter Creek Motel.

Digging change from her purse, she felt Sammy stir as if the rapid beating of her heart disturbed his sleep. She drew a deep breath to steady her nerves.

She'd wanted to get as far away as possible as quickly as possible from Sandstone and Brandon Sinclair. Okay, so she couldn't get on the bus tonight. She'd cool her heels in a motel room and catch the bus the next day. Although she hated to part with a dime of the money that was neatly folded and tucked into a side pocket in her purse, she really didn't have a choice.

She *had* to get out of town tomorrow. Thirty miles was far too close to the devil and his minions. She wouldn't be satisfied until she was a thousand miles away. Once she got settled in a new town, she'd send for Nana and the three of them would build a new life where Brandon Sinclair couldn't bother them.

She dropped the change into the slot and punched in the number for the Cotter Creek Motel. A man answered on the third ring. "No room at the inn," he said.

"Is this the Cotter Creek Motel?" she asked, her hand tightening on the receiver.

"Yeah, but if you're looking for a room, we're full up. They've shut the highway down up north and I've got a houseful of travelers. I've even rented out my sofa in the lobby." He sounded positively gleeful. "Sorry." He hung up.

Janette held the receiver for a long moment, her heart pumping with panic once again. She hung up and frantically thumbed through the skinny phone book, looking for a listing of a bed-and-breakfast, a rental room, anywhere she could get a warm bed for the night. There was nothing.

She wanted to call her grandmother and ask her what to do.

Where to go. But she'd only worry Nana, and that was the last thing she wanted to do.

Besides, Janette was an adult. She had to handle this. She was twenty-four years old and a mother, and the most important thing in her life at the moment was little Sammy. She had to get him someplace safe and warm.

She leaned her head against the cold glass of the booth and watched as the ice began to turn to snow and pick up in intensity. What was she going to do? She and Sammy couldn't spend the night out in the elements.

Desperation filled her and she felt a panic attack coming on. The palms of her hands grew slick with sweat as her throat seemed to constrict. She closed her eyes and drew in deep breaths, forcing the attack away. She didn't have time to be weak now. Sammy needed her, and she needed to get him someplace safe for the night.

She opened her eyes once again. The clouds and ice were creating an early twilight. She straightened as she saw a light shining from a window of one of the storefronts in the next block.

Where there was light there might be somebody who could direct her to a place for the night. She checked to make sure her coat was securely fastened to keep Sammy as warm as possible, pulled up her hood and tied it beneath her chin, then stepped out of the phone booth and into the wind that had begun to howl with fierce intensity.

She kept her gaze focused on the light, a beacon of hope. It

didn't take long for her gloveless fingers to turn numb and her cheeks to burn with the cold. Ice pellets pinged on the sidewalk and her bare skin.

She walked slowly, carefully, not wanting to fall on the slick walkways. Before she reached the radiating light, she saw the shingle that hung above the doorway. West Protective Services.

She knew that name. She frowned thoughtfully, then remembered. There had been an article in the paper not too long ago, a human interest story about the family who owned and operated a bodyguard business. The article had described the family as honorable, trustworthy people who put their lives on the line for their clients.

If she remembered the article correctly, they had been instrumental in cleaning up Cotter Creek when a development company had tried to take ranch land and had hired people to kill the ranchers.

You have to trust somebody, a little voice whispered in her head. She had no other choice. Once again she felt her throat closing up, a quickening of her heart and a sense of doom that portended one of her panic attacks.

Not giving herself a chance to second-guess her decision, she started for the door. She reached for the door handle just as a man barreled out and into her.

He bumped her with just enough force to cause her to lose her footing on the slippery sidewalk. She felt herself careening backward, but before she could fall, two big strong hands grabbed

hold of her shoulders and steadied her.

“Sorry. Are you all right?” His deep voice was nearly carried away by the wind.

She looked up into the greenest eyes she’d ever seen. In an instant she assessed him. Shockingly good-looking, bold features, tall, with broad shoulders beneath a thigh-length black coat. He looked at her as if she were an apparition blown from the North Pole.

She had no idea if she could trust this man or not. Under any other circumstances she would never ask a stranger, particularly a man, for help. But she was out of options. “Please...I need help.”

All Dalton West wanted was to get home and out of the snow. He’d been absorbed in paperwork and hadn’t noticed the weather until he’d gotten up to stretch and had realized the forecasted storm was upon them. He’d hurriedly shut down the computer and turned off the coffeepot, his only goal to get to his nearby apartment. The last thing he wanted was to be snowed in at the office.

But with this woman looking at him with eyes the color of a summer Oklahoma sky, eyes that were filled with both desperation and wariness, he reopened the office door and ushered her inside. She swept past him, pulling a large suitcase behind her as she entered.

As he stepped back inside she turned to face him. “I...you protect people, right?”

He nodded, wondering what she was doing out in the snow.

“That’s my job.”

“I want to hire you for the night...to protect me.”

“Protect you from who?” he asked.

She gave a nervous laugh. “Not who...what. I need you to protect me from the weather. I arrived here in Cotter Creek a couple of hours ago to catch the bus, but it seems the bus isn’t coming this evening. I need a place to stay for the night, but the motel is all booked up.” At that moment the sound of a crying baby came from beneath her coat.

She unfastened the buttons to reveal a tiny boy in a blue coat. Dalton didn’t know much about babies, but the little guy looked to be only a couple of months old. As his blue eyes landed on Dalton, he grinned and bounced in his sling.

“This is my son, Sammy, and I’m uh...Jane Craig. I was hoping you could find us a room or something for the night,” she said. “I can pay you for your trouble.”

There had been just enough hesitation before she spoke her name that Dalton sensed she was lying. She had a pretty face, heart-shaped with those big blue eyes and pale eyebrows that arched perfectly above them. Her trembling full lips were a faint shade of blue, indicating to him that she had already been outside too long.

Why would she lie about her name? Or had he just imagined that moment of hesitation? Business had been slow enough lately that maybe he was looking for mystery where there was none.

“I’m Dalton West,” he replied, then frowned and looked

out the window where the blowing snow was creating almost whiteout conditions. He could think of several places he might be able to get her a bed for the night, but none of them were within walking distance, and nobody in their right mind was going to get in a car to come and pick her up.

There was really only one alternative, and it wasn't one that made him a happy man. "Look, I have an apartment two blocks from here. You can stay there for the night and I'll bunk downstairs with my landlord."

It was obvious from the expression on her face that she didn't like the idea. Dalton raked a hand through his hair and tamped down an edge of impatience. He certainly could understand her reticence. She was a young woman alone with a baby and he was a virtual stranger. In her circumstances he wouldn't be thrilled by his suggestion.

"Oh, no...I couldn't," she began.

"Look, Jane. I'm a bodyguard by profession. I make a living protecting people. You'll be safe for the night. Besides, I don't know what else to tell you. We're out of options." His glance went back out the window, then he looked back at her. "And we need to get going before we can't get out of here."

She hesitated another minute. "I'll hire you for the night to protect me. We'll keep it a business deal."

"Fine. You can write me a check when we get to my place." It was obvious to Dalton that she couldn't afford their usual fee. Her coat was worn and her shoes looked old. This was not a woman

rolling in dough.

As she rebuttoned her coat to protect her son from the elements, he grabbed hold of her suitcase.

They stepped back out into the howling wind and stinging snow, and Dalton fought the impulse to take her by the elbow to help her keep her balance on the slick sidewalk. There was something about her posture, something about the look in her eyes that warned him she would not appreciate it.

The howling wind made conversation next to impossible so they trudged side by side in silence, heads bent against the mix of ice and snow falling from the sky.

It was difficult to pull the suitcase on its wheels through the thick snow that blanketed the ground. Instead Dalton picked it up by the handle to increase their pace.

The two-block walk seemed to take an eternity. He breathed a sigh of relief as they turned off Main onto Maple Street. He could barely see just ahead the white two-story house with the wraparound porch he called home.

Normally, Dalton didn't mind being snowed in for a day or two. He was a solitary man who enjoyed being alone, but it looked as if at least for the short-term he'd be spending his snow time with his landlord, George.

When they reached the house he motioned toward the staircase that led up the outside. His apartment was the top floor. She went up the stairs before him as he hefted the heavy suitcase up stair by stair.

At the top he unlocked the door, then opened it and gestured her inside. He followed just after her, flipping on the interior light and welcoming the warmth the place offered.

He turned to look at her. Her lips were now completely blue and she trembled almost uncontrollably. "Let's get out of these wet coats and shoes," he said.

The whole scene felt a little surreal. The snow outside, a mysterious woman and baby...it was like the setup of some ridiculous movie.

He unbuttoned his coat and watched her do the same. Her gaze didn't meet his but rather swept around the room like a rabbit hunting for a safe burrow.

He followed her gaze, taking in the place he'd called home for the past two years. When George's wife had died five years ago, the old man had renovated the house with this apartment upstairs. It was a way for him to keep his house and not feel so alone.

The apartment was roomy, with a nice-sized living room, a small but fully functioning kitchen, a half bath off the laundry room and a large bedroom with a full bathroom. Dalton had furnished it in a minimalist, functional style. But as he saw it through another's eyes he realized it was a cold space, with little personality.

He frowned and took her coat from her to hang in the small utility room off the kitchen. "Make yourself comfortable," he said and gestured to the sofa. "I'm just going to put these wet

things in the other room.”

He left her there, hung the wet coats on hangers to dry, then returned to find her still standing in the center of the room, rubbing the baby’s back as he once again slept.

“Where were you headed?” he asked.

She jumped at the sound of his voice, as if she’d momentarily forgotten he was there. “Uh, Kansas City. I was going to visit my sister.”

Again he had a gut feeling she wasn’t telling him the truth. She refused to hold his gaze and even though the room was warm, her lips trembled slightly. And he realized she wasn’t cold. She was afraid.

“Look, why don’t we just get you settled in. The kitchen is there.” He pointed to the doorway. “If you want anything to eat feel free to help yourself. I’ll just go change the sheets on the bed then I’ll be out of your hair.” He started toward the bedroom but stopped as she called his name.

“If you just tell me where the sheets are, I’ll change the bed. And I need to pay you.”

“The sheets are on the bottom shelf in the bathroom, and it really isn’t necessary for you to give me any money.”

“Yes, it is,” she countered, and her chin rose with a show of stubbornness. “It’s important we keep this a business transaction.”

“Fine,” he replied. He named a nominal fee and watched as she opened her purse and carefully withdrew the amount in cash.

"I'll just get a few things together then I'll head downstairs," he said as he took the money from her. He shoved the bills into his pocket, then grabbed her suitcase and wheeled it into his bedroom. He gathered a small overnight bag, then returned to the living room where she still stood in the center of the room, as if frozen in place.

"You should find everything you need for the night, but if you need anything you can't find, I'll write down my cell phone number and leave it on the kitchen table."

She gave an imperceptible nod of her head. "I %h; Thank you for this. I wasn't sure what I was going to do."

"You'll be fine here for the night and we'll sort things out in the morning."

"Thank you again," she said, then disappeared into the bedroom and closed the door behind her. He heard the click of the lock being turned.

Dalton stared at the closed door for a long moment. His family would probably tell him he was crazy for allowing a stranger to take up residence in his place even for one night. But they hadn't seen the vulnerability, the sheer desperation that clung to her closer than her coat.

Besides, what was she going to do? Tuck his television under one arm, her son under the other and run out into a blizzard? There was nothing here for her to steal that wasn't insured. He didn't know if he believed that she'd told him her real name or her destination, but he knew for sure that she'd needed someplace

warm and safe and she'd found it here.

He went into the kitchen and wrote his cell phone number on a sheet of paper and left it on the small oak table. Then he wrote his own home phone number down and returned to the bedroom door and knocked. She opened the door, her eyes wide and wary.

"I just wanted to let you know there's leftover roast beef in the refrigerator if you get hungry and there's extra blankets on the shelf in the closet if you need them. If you need to call your sister to let her know where you are, here's the phone number." He held out the slip of paper.

"Thank you, I'm sure we'll be fine." One hand snaked out to take the piece of paper from him. "I guess I'll see you in the morning." She closed the door again but not before Dalton saw something flash in her other hand, something silver like a blade.

A knife?

Every instinct he owned shot to high alert. He'd been trained to look for trouble, and he had a horrible feeling he'd just invited trouble into his home.

Well, he couldn't do anything about it now. He headed for the interior staircase that led downstairs to George's living quarters.

He would have to face it—her—in the morning.

Chapter 2

She saw the red lights flashing in her rearview mirror and glanced down at her speedometer. Damn. It looked like she was going to get a speeding ticket.

She supposed she was lucky that she hadn't gotten one before now. Two nights a week she'd been making the twenty-five mile drive from Sandstone to a local community college, taking classes to eventually take the GED test. She always drove too fast on this particular stretch of deserted highway.

Pulling over to the side of the road, she wondered how many extra hours she'd have to work to pay for this particular mistake. As if money wasn't already tight enough.

Glancing in her rearview mirror once again she saw the patrol car pull to a stop just behind her. The flashing red light went off, as did the headlights. As the driver's door opened she recognized Sheriff Brandon Sinclair getting out of the car.

She fumbled in her schoolbag for her license as he approached the side of her car. She rolled down her window and offered him a small smile. "Sheriff Sinclair," she said.

"Turn off your lights and get out of the car," he told her.

She frowned, but didn't think about not doing as he asked. As she got out of the car Sheriff Sinclair smiled. "Well, well, don't we look all sexy in that little skirt," he said, and there was something in his eyes that made her suddenly afraid.

Janette awoke with a gasp, heart pounding as she sat up and stared wildly around the unfamiliar room. The large mahogany dresser and the navy overstuffed chair weren't hers. She wasn't in her room. Where was she?

Then she remembered. She was in Cotter Creek, in Dalton West's bedroom. Sammy slept peacefully next to her on the king-sized bed. She lay back down and shoved the last memories of her nightmare away.

The large bed had been a luxury after years of sleeping on a twin in her tiny bedroom in the trailer where she lived with Nana. Despite the luxury, sleep had been a long time coming. She'd jumped and tensed at each moan and groan of the unfamiliar house. Even when she had finally fallen asleep, it had been a night of unrelenting nightmares.

Surely by noon or so the streets would be cleared of whatever snow had fallen overnight and the bus would finally arrive. It had to come today. She needed to get as far away from here as possible.

When the streets are cleared, he'll come looking for you, the little voice whispered in her head. She felt like a fish in the bottom of a barrel, far too close, far too easily caught.

She'd left the bedroom only once during the night, to make a bottle for Sammy. Knowing that he would probably sleep for another hour or so, she got out of bed and headed for the adjoining bathroom. She wanted to be dressed and ready to leave as soon as possible.

It wasn't until she stood beneath a hot spray of water that she thought of the man who had allowed her into his home. In another lifetime, under different circumstances, she might find herself attracted to him. He was certainly easy to look at, with that thick dark hair and those gorgeous green eyes.

He reminded her of another man—a man who had not been quite as handsome but had devastated her, bitterly disappointed her at the time she'd needed him most.

She didn't need a man in her life. She and Sammy and Nana would be fine. All she had to do was get out of this town and decide where they would all begin a new life, far away from the reaches of Sheriff Brandon Sinclair.

After showering she wrapped herself in one of the large fluffy towels and walked over to the window for her first look outside.

She gasped as she saw that the storm hadn't passed by but instead seemed to be sitting right on top of the little town of Cotter Creek. It was impossible to discern street from sidewalk. Snow had transformed the earth into an alien landscape where nothing looked as it was supposed to.

There weren't just a couple of inches on the ground, there was at least a foot and a half and it was still falling from the gray, heavy sky.

Janette knew someplace in the back of her mind that it was beautiful, that the world looked like a winter wonderland, but all she could think was that the snow was a disaster, big fat fluffy flakes of doom falling from the sky.

Trapped. She was trapped there, and the only faint comfort was that if she were trapped by the weather, then so was Sheriff Brandon Sinclair.

She turned away from the window and crouched on the plush rug to open her big suitcase. The first thing she saw inside was the bright-red book bag she'd thrown in at the last minute. Inside were the books she'd bought to study for her GED and the tape recorder she'd used in class.

It had been more than a year since she'd opened the bag that now represented not only the dream she'd once had for herself of getting more education, but also the worst night of her life.

She hadn't opened the bag since the night she'd been pulled over for a speeding ticket, and she didn't open it now. She set it on the floor and dug out a pair of jeans and her favorite blue sweater. She didn't have a lot of choices as she'd packed only a minimum of clothes for herself. Most of the suitcase contents were cans of powdered formula, cereal and diapers and clothing for Sammy.

Once she was dressed and had brushed out her long, wet hair, she eyed the phone on the nightstand. She should call Nana and let her know what was going on. The old woman would worry if she didn't hear from Janette. Thank goodness the call wasn't long distance, Janette thought as she punched in her grandmother's number.

Nana answered on the second ring and Janette pressed the phone to her ear as if to get closer to her grandmother. "Nana,

it's me."

"Janette, honey, where are you?" Nana asked. "Did you get off before this storm?"

"No, I'm still in Cotter Creek."

"At the motel?" Nana asked.

"The motel was already full by the time I found out the bus wasn't coming. The snow was coming down and I didn't know what to do, but then I saw a light on in the West Protective Services office." Janette twisted the phone cord around her little finger. "I hired Dalton West to be my bodyguard and he brought me to his apartment for the night."

"Are you safe there?" Nana asked, her voice filled with concern.

Janette considered the question. "Yes, I think I'm safe," she finally replied. It was odd, but having survived the night she did feel safe.

"I've heard about those Wests," Nana said. "Supposed to be good solid men. I'm just grateful that you and that precious little boy are away from here and not out in this storm someplace."

Janette glanced toward the window and frowned. "It looks like I'm going to be stuck here for a while." She twisted the phone cord more tightly around her finger. "Has anyone been by to ask about me?"

"Nobody, honey. The storm moved in and nobody is going anywhere at the moment. Don't you worry none. He'll never know from me where you went and by the time he makes his way

here to ask questions you'll be far out of his reach."

"Let me give you the phone number here, just in case you need to reach me." Janette read the number off the piece of paper Dalton had given her the night before. "I'll call you when I'm about to board the bus. Maybe they'll get the streets cleared by tomorrow."

"You just take care of yourself and Sammy. Don't worry about things here. I got my friends at the trailer park to take care of me and I'll be fine as long as I know you're fine."

Janette unraveled the cord from her finger. How she wished she could crawl through the phone line and feel her grandmother's loving arms around her, to go back to a time when she didn't know about fear, about evil.

Afraid that she might cry if she remained on the phone much longer, she quickly said goodbye then hung up. Checking to make sure that Sammy was still sleeping soundly, she arranged the bed pillows on either side of him then walked to the bedroom door.

She hesitated before turning the knob to step out of the room. She'd told Nana she was safe, and at the moment she *felt* fairly safe, but she'd also been unaware of any danger on the night Sheriff Sinclair had pulled her over on the side of the road.

As much as she'd love to stay holed up in the bedroom until the bus pulled in, that was impossible. She hadn't eaten since lunch the day before and her stomach was protesting its neglect in loud angry growls.

The scent of freshly brewed coffee greeted her as she opened

the bedroom door, letting her know she was no longer alone in the apartment.

Energy surged through her as all her senses went on high alert. Her feet whispered against the living-room rug as she moved toward the kitchen.

She hesitated in the doorway. Dalton stood at the stove with his back to her. A white, long-sleeved jersey clung across his broad shoulders and worn jeans hugged the length of his legs. He was barefoot and his hair was rumpled like he'd just crawled out of bed.

A sizzling noise was quickly followed by a whiff of bacon and Janette felt the nerves in her stomach calm. It was hard to be frightened of a barefoot man frying bacon.

She must have made some sort of sound for he whirled around to look at her. "Good morning," he said. "There's coffee in the pot if you're interested."

"I'm interested," she replied.

He gestured to the coffeemaker on the counter. "Cups are in the cabinet above."

She walked over to the cabinet, retrieved a cup, then poured herself some coffee. She carried it to the table and sat, unsure what else to do.

Dalton turned back around to flip the bacon. Janette was aware of a tension in the air, the tension of two strangers sharing space.

"It looks like you're going to be stuck here for at least another

day or two,” he said.

“Maybe I could find another place to go to,” she offered.

Once again he turned around to face her. “It would take me half the day to shovel enough snow just to open the outside door. Trust me, nobody is going anywhere today.” A muscle in his jaw tensed, letting her know that he wasn’t particularly happy about the unforeseen circumstances.

“I’m sorry about all this,” she said. He’d never know just how sorry she was that she was stuck here in Cotter Creek.

“We’ll just have to deal with it,” he replied, then turned his back on her once again.

Taking a sip of her coffee, she had a vision of Brandon Sinclair tunneling his way through the snow to find her. She mentally shook the thought out of her head.

Once again she stared at Dalton’s back. He was a fine-looking man and so far he’d been nothing but honorable. He made a living protecting people. Maybe she could tell him. Maybe she could tell him the truth. The thought of telling somebody and having them believe her was wonderful.

“How about an omelet?” he asked. “I’m making myself one and can split it with you.”

She felt bad, that this man was not only having to share his personal space but also his food. Still, she was starving and it seemed silly to refuse. “That sounds good,” she agreed.

Once again she sipped her coffee, watching as he prepared the ingredients for the omelet. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

she asked.

“No thanks, I’m used to doing things my way,” he replied.

“Tell me about this business of yours. I read an article not too long ago about West Protective Services. If I remember correctly it’s a family business, right?”

He nodded. His tousled hair made him appear less daunting than he had the night before. “It was started by my father, Red West. Eventually all of us started working for the business.”

“All of you?”

“I’ve got four brothers and a sister. Joshua is the youngest and he just got married to Savannah, who owns the local newspaper. Then there’s Clay, who met his wife when he was on assignment in California. They have a little girl, Gracie. There’s Tanner, the oldest. He and his wife, Anna, just had a baby.”

Janette felt herself relaxing as he talked. Not only did he have a nice, deep voice that was soothing, but it was obvious from the affection in his voice as he spoke that the West family was a close one. It was easier to trust a man who loved his family.

“Then there’s Meredith. She recently moved to Kansas City with her fiancé, Chase. She and Chase are planning on coming back here in March to get married. Finally there’s Zack. He doesn’t work for the family business anymore. He married Katie, the woman who lived next door to our family, and he’s the sheriff of Cotter Creek.”

Any hope she might have entertained of being truthful with Dalton West crashed and burned. *He’s the sheriff of Cotter Creek.*

The words echoed inside her head.

There were only thirty miles between Cotter Creek and Sandstone. There was no reason for her not to believe that Brandon Sinclair and Zack West were not only acquaintances but also perhaps friends. She had no idea how far-reaching the good-old-boy network was in the state of Oklahoma.

One thing was clear. For as long as she was stuck in this apartment, she couldn't tell Dalton the truth. Her very life and the life of her son might depend on her keeping her secrets.

At that moment, as if he'd awakened and sensed his mother's despair, Sammy began to cry from the bedroom.

Dalton drew a deep breath as "Jane" hurriedly left the kitchen to get her son. He was exhausted, having spent the night on George's tiny sofa after hours of listening to George talk. And the old man could definitely talk.

He'd already been feeling a little irritable when he'd climbed the inside staircase back to his apartment. As if spending an evening with George hadn't been enough, he was now stuck in his apartment with a stranger, a woman whom, he had to admit, stirred something inside him just by being there. A woman who'd had a knife in her hand the night before.

Could he really blame her for wielding a knife? After all, as much as she was a stranger to him, he was a stranger to her. She'd had no idea what kind of a man he was, what she'd been walking into when she'd entered his apartment.

He cut the omelet in half and placed it on two plates, then

added the bacon and put the plates on the table.

She couldn't know that he was a solitary man who didn't particularly enjoy sharing his space, his world, with anyone. Even though he found her amazingly attractive, all he wanted was for her and her son to move on.

She returned to the kitchen, her son and a bottle in one arm and a box of powdered cereal in the other. "I need to make some cereal for Sammy. Do you have a small bowl I can use?"

Dalton got out the bowl, then watched as she tried to maneuver with the wiggly baby in her arms. "You want me to hold him while you get that ready?" he asked reluctantly. He didn't particularly like kids, had only thought about having a couple once, a long time ago, but it had been nothing more than a foolish dream.

"Thanks." She smiled at him for the first time, a real, open genuine smile that unexpectedly shot a flash of heat through his stomach.

As she offered the baby to him, Sammy seemed to vibrate with excitement and offered Dalton a wide, drooling grin. As soon as Dalton had him in his arms, Sammy reached up and grabbed hold of his nose, then laughed as if finding the West nose vastly amusing.

"He likes you," Jane observed as she measured out the rice cereal and added warm formula.

"You sound surprised," Dalton replied.

"I am. He's usually not good with strangers, especially men."

“What about his father?” Dalton asked as she stirred the cereal, then set the bowl on the table.

Her eyes darkened. “His father isn’t in our life.” To his relief she took the baby back and sat at the table.

For the next few minutes they sat in silence. She alternately fed Sammy and herself while Dalton ate his breakfast.

Sammy laughed and smiled at Dalton every time Dalton looked at him. He had to admit, the kid was cute with his tuft of dark hair and blue eyes. Dalton finished eating before Jane, or whatever her real name was. “Do you need to call your sister in St. Louis to tell her you’ve been delayed?”

“I already did,” she replied.

Dalton stared at her. She’d told him the night before that she was on her way to visit her sister in Kansas City. Women interested him, but a woman with secrets definitely intrigued him.

He didn’t call her on her slip, but instead leaned back in his chair and watched as she finished feeding Sammy. He didn’t want to be intrigued by her. He wanted the snow to melt quickly and her and her cute baby to move along on their way to wherever. However, the weather report that morning hadn’t been exactly favorable for her to make a quick escape out of his house.

Taking a sip of his coffee, he gazed out the window where the snow still fell in buckets. At least she didn’t seem to be a chatterer. She didn’t expect him to entertain her with lively conversation.

Silence had always been Dalton’s friend. Growing up in a

household with a rambunctious bunch of siblings had made him appreciate his solitary life now. Odd that he suddenly found the silence strangely stifling.

“We’re lucky we still have power,” he finally said to break that uncomfortable silence. “The news report this morning said that half the town is without power and phone service.”

“That’s terrible,” she exclaimed.

“Most folks around this area are prepared for situations like this. They have wood-burning fireplaces or generators that will be cranked up. We Oklahoma people are solid stock and know how to deal with an emergency.”

She frowned. “I certainly wasn’t prepared for this particular emergency.”

“According to the weather report I heard the snow is supposed to end by nightfall. If that happens, then first thing in the morning the locals will get out and clear the streets.”

“It can’t happen fast enough for me,” she replied. She looked up from Sammy, her blue eyes dark and troubled. “I’m sorry I can’t get out of your hair right now. I know when you offered me a place to stay last night you had no idea that I’d still be here today.”

Dalton shrugged. “We’ll just have to make the best of it.”

“I just hope if they get the streets cleared in the morning then the bus comes tomorrow afternoon.” There was a thrum of desperation in her voice.

“Surely your sister will understand the delay.”

“Of course.” She averted her gaze from his and focused on her son in her arms. “I’m just anxious to get gone.”

“Is this a vacation trip?”

She kept her gaze firmly on her son. “Yes. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen my sister and she hasn’t met Sammy, so I thought it would be nice to take a trip to visit her. I suppose it was foolish to plan a trip in late January. But babies are only babies a short time.”

She was rambling, and it was Dalton’s experience that people who rambled were usually hiding something. She seemed to realize what she was doing for she suddenly clamped her lips closed and frowned.

Getting up from the table she started to grab for her plate. “I’ll take care of that,” he said.

She gave him a grateful nod, then once again disappeared from the kitchen. Dalton remained seated at the table. He sipped his coffee and looked out the window. Although he stared at the snow, his mind was filled with those blue eyes of hers.

At thirty-three years old, Dalton had worked the family business for twelve years. He’d spent that time studying people, and the assessments he made of those people sometimes made the difference between life and death.

Jane Craig was lying. He’d seen it in those impossibly blue eyes of hers. Secrets and lies. There had been something in her eyes that had looked not only like quiet desperation, but also screaming fear.

His mind whirled with all kinds of possibilities. Who in their right mind planned a bus trip in the Midwest in January? Especially with an infant? He could write off the appearance of the knife the night before as a wary woman in the home of a stranger. But what was she doing with a wicked-looking knife like that in the first place?

Secrets and lies. What he was suddenly eager to find out was whether her secrets and lies could be the difference between life and death, and whether the snowy conditions had suddenly made him a player in a drama he wasn't prepared to face.

Sheriff Brandon Sinclair stared out the window and silently cursed the snow. He'd been in a foul mood since the day before, when he'd gone back to the diner to have a little chat with Janette and discovered she'd up and quit her job, just like that.

He'd been on his way to the little rattrap trailer where she lived with her grandmother when a six-car accident just outside of town had required his immediate attention. By the time he'd finished up, the ice had begun to fall in earnest.

He tried to ignore the sound of his three daughters playing in the middle of their living-room floor. He hadn't thought about Janette Black since the night they'd had sex over a year ago.

Then yesterday morning he'd heard the rumor that she had a little baby boy, a rumor that had been confirmed when he'd spoken with her at lunch.

Since that moment, he couldn't get her—or more precisely the boy—out of his mind. *His son*. He knew in his gut that the kid

was his.

“Brandon, honey, your breakfast is waiting,” Brandon’s wife, Sherrilyn, spoke from someplace behind him.

He grunted but didn’t turn around. Sherrilyn was a good woman. She’d come into the marriage not only crazy about him, but with the kind of respectability and a trust fund that Brandon had desired. She kept the large house neat and tidy, tried to anticipate his needs before he knew them and was an adequate if boring bedmate.

She loved being the sheriff’s wife, and while Brandon was feared and respected by the community, Sherrilyn was loved for her charity work and big heart.

But, when it came to giving Brandon what he’d wanted most in life, she’d failed miserably, pumping out three girl babies instead of the boy he desperately wanted.

“Mommy, Susan won’t share,” Elena, his youngest, whined from the living room. She was always whining about something. Girls whined. Girls cried, and he had three of the whiniest, weepiest girls in the county.

He narrowed his gaze as he turned away from the window and headed for the kitchen. As soon as the snow stopped, he’d get that boy. He didn’t much care what he had to do, but eventually that little boy would be living with him, being raised by him. Boys needed their daddies, and if the only way to get that kid was over Janette Black’s dead body, well then that could be arranged, too.

Chapter 3

Janette stayed in the bedroom with Sammy for most of the morning. She played peekaboo with him, laughing as he grinned and squealed at her antics. When he started to get sleepy, she picked him up in her arms and sat in the chair near the window, rocking and singing softly to him until he fell asleep.

She placed her lips against Sammy's downy hair, drawing in the sweet baby scent of him. He was her heart, this little boy. Before his birth she had loved him, but nothing had prepared her for the depth of her love for him now.

Her heart squeezed as she thought of the threat that felt ominously close, a threat to this baby and their future together. She would do whatever it took to keep him safe and away from the man who was his biological father. She shoved aside thoughts of Sinclair, unwilling to allow the chill that thoughts of him always produced to consume her.

She was conscious of the sounds of Dalton in the next room. It was a good thing he'd told her about his family before she'd confessed what was really going on.

She should have known it wouldn't be safe to tell him the truth. Bodyguards probably had to work closely with law enforcement officials. For all she knew, Brandon Sinclair could be a drinking buddy of the entire West clan.

When Sammy was sleeping soundly, she gently laid him in the

middle of the big bed and tucked the pillows around him to stop him from rolling anywhere. She stood for a long moment staring down at the baby who owned all of her heart.

She would do whatever it took to keep Brandon Sinclair away from Sammy. She would run to the ends of the earth, hide for the rest of her life if that's what it took.

You're nothing but trailer trash, Janette. Nobody is going to believe you if you ever tell. Those were the last words she'd heard from Sinclair that night on the highway. He hadn't spoken to her again or even looked at her until yesterday in the café when he'd told her he knew she had a son.

She'd tried to be so careful during her pregnancy. Thankfully she'd gained little weight and had been able to hide her condition until her eighth month. It was only then that she'd told the people who'd noticed that she was pregnant that she'd had a fling with a man passing through town. Because she believed Sinclair—nobody would ever believe her if she told the truth.

Tired of being cooped up, she finally left the bedroom and entered the living room, where Dalton sat in a chair reading a book as a saxophone wailed the blues from the stereo. She wasn't concerned about the noise waking Sammy. From the time he'd been born he had slept like the dead, undisturbed by loud noises.

Dalton looked up and nodded at her. "Are you ready for lunch?" he asked and closed his book.

"No, thanks. I'm fine." She gestured to the book on his lap. "Please, don't let me interrupt you."

“You aren’t. It isn’t a very good book, anyway.”

She glanced to the overflowing bookcase against one wall.

“You must read a lot.”

“I enjoy reading,” he agreed. His piercing green eyes seemed to peer directly inside her. “What about you? Are you a reader?”

She sat on the edge of the sofa. “I’d like to be, but there never seems to be enough time. Between taking care of Sammy and my job there aren’t many hours left in the day.”

“What kind of job do you have?”

“Right now I’m a waitress, but that’s not what I want to do for the rest of my life.” She hesitated a moment, then continued, “I had to drop out of high school my junior year because my nana...my grandma got sick, so the first thing I need to do is get my GED.”

She wasn’t sure why she told him this. It was more information than he’d asked for and she was certain he didn’t care what her future plans might be.

Those direct green eyes of his held her gaze. “Your grandmother is important in your life?”

“Definitely. She raised me. It was just me and her, and of course my sister,” she hurriedly added. She’d never been a liar, and the lies she now found herself spouting bothered her more than a little bit.

“What about your parents? Where are they?”

“Who knows? I never knew my father and when I was three my mother dropped me off at Nana’s house and we never heard

from her again. Nana told me she was a troubled woman with drug problems. I think she's probably dead by now."

Janette had long ago made peace with the fact that her mother had been unable to parent her. At least she'd been unselfish enough to put her in Nana's care, where she'd been loved and looked after.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said, and she was surprised by the touch of empathy she heard in his deep voice. "My mother was murdered when I was just a boy."

"That's horrible," she exclaimed.

He shrugged. "You deal with the bumps life throws you." He stood suddenly, as if to end the conversation of that particular topic. "Are you sure you aren't ready for some lunch? I'm going to make a sandwich."

"I guess I could eat a sandwich," she agreed and got up to follow him into the kitchen. Once again she found herself sitting at the table while he fixed the meal. "I need to give you more money," she said. "You're feeding me and everything. I feel terrible about all this."

He smiled then, and the power of his smile shot a wave of heat through her. It was the heat of a woman intensely aware of an attractive man. It shocked her, but she embraced it, for it was something she hadn't felt for a very long time, something she'd thought Brandon Sinclair had killed.

"I think I can manage to feed one slender woman for a couple of days without declaring bankruptcy," he said.

She returned his smile. "I just want you to know that I appreciate it." She glanced toward the window where the snow appeared to be slowing down. Surely by tomorrow she could leave.

She gazed back at Dalton. "So, I guess your dad raised you, then? It must have been quite a challenge, considering how many of you there were."

Once again he grinned, transfusing his rather stern features with an unexpected warmth. "Ah, Dad had a secret weapon. He hired a cantankerous old cowhand as a housekeeper. Smokey Johnson not only threatened to beat our butts if we got out of line, he followed through on his threats often enough to make us take him seriously."

Despite his words it was obvious he held a lot of affection for the cowhand turned parental figure in his life. For the first time since she'd stepped out of the bus station yesterday evening, some of the tension that had coiled inside her eased.

"Ham and cheese okay?" he asked.

"Perfect. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Nah, sit tight. I can handle it. Besides, if you work as a waitress I doubt you get too many people offering to wait on you."

She laughed. "That's the truth." He smelled nice, like minty soap and a touch of sandalwood, and she felt herself relax just a little bit more.

"Is your sister older or younger than you?"

The question came out of left field but reminded her that

she couldn't let her guard down for a minute. "Older," she said. "Why?"

"Just curious." He walked over to the table with their lunch plates. "What would you like to drink? I can offer you milk, water or a soda."

"Milk would be nice."

He rejoined her at the table a moment later with two tall glasses of milk. For the next few minutes they ate in silence. "From what you told me earlier it sounds like all of your brothers and your sister are married and having kids. Why aren't you married?" she asked to break the uncomfortable quiet.

A flash of darkness momentarily chased across his green eyes. "I guess after growing up with a houseful of people I've discovered in my adult years that I enjoy my solitude," he replied. "I like living alone and not having to answer to anyone and have no plans to ever get married."

He took a drink of his milk, then continued, "What about you? I'm assuming things didn't work out with you and the baby's father?"

She looked down at her sandwich and pulled off part of the crust. "No, we tried to make it work. He's a great guy and everything, but we just weren't good together." She looked at Dalton once again and forced a small smile to her lips. "But thankfully we have managed to remain good friends."

How she wished this were true. How she wished that Sammy's father was a good man who could help her instill the right

qualities in their son instead of a monster who would taint the innocence of the little boy.

Dalton leaned back in his chair and studied her. “You’re a pretty woman. I’m sure you won’t have any problems finding some special guy to share your life.”

There was nothing in his voice to indicate he was flirting with her in any way, but she touched a strand of her hair self-consciously. She hadn’t felt pretty in a very long time and she was surprised to discover that his comment soothed a wound she hadn’t realized she possessed.

“I’m in no hurry at the moment to make any commitment to anyone,” she replied. “I just want to be able to take care of my son and myself.”

At that moment the phone rang, jolting every nerve in Janette’s body. What if it was Dalton’s brother, the sheriff? What if Dalton mentioned that he had a young woman and a baby staying with him?

What if Sinclair had already begun the search for her and had contacted Dalton’s brother? Horrible scenarios went off in her head, mini-movies of doom.

As Dalton started to rise to answer, she grabbed him by the forearm and held tight. Her heart beat so hard, so fast she wondered if he could hear it. “Please, please don’t tell anyone I’m here.”

His eyes pierced her with a sharpness that was almost painful. He didn’t answer but instead pulled his arm out of her grasp and

walked over to the phone.

“Hello?” he said, his gaze never leaving Janette. “Yeah, hi, Dad. I was just eating lunch.”

As Dalton continued his conversation, he never broke eye contact with Janette. The tension that had dissipated earlier crashed back through her, twisting in her gut like a deadly Oklahoma tornado.

His voice remained pleasant as he carried on his conversation with his father. When he finally hung up he returned to the table and reached out to grab her forearm as she had done his.

“Now, Jane,” he said, his voice deceptively calm. “You want to tell me just what the hell is going on?”

Dalton stared at the woman and tried to ignore how fragile, how warm, her slender arm felt beneath his grasp. Her stunning blue eyes were wide and darted around the room as if seeking somewhere to run, to escape. She tried to pull her arm free from his grip but he held tight, just as she had a moment earlier.

“Talk to me,” he said. “Tell me why you don’t want me to mention to anyone that you’re here.”

This close he could smell the scent of her, clean with a touch of honeysuckle fragrance. She closed her eyes and he couldn’t help but notice the length of her eyelashes. She tried to pull away from him again and this time he let her go.

She wrapped her arms around herself as if she were cold and looked at him. “I’m sorry. I lied to you before.” She looked down at the table.

He frowned. "Lied about what?"

She got up as if she wanted as much distance from him as possible, but he had a feeling that what she was really doing was giving herself time to think. He wasn't at all sure he was going to believe anything that fell out of her mouth at this point.

Moving to stand next to the window, she turned to face him. "I lied about Sammy's father. He isn't a nice man. He...he used to beat me. He was abusive and I needed to get away."

There was a tremble in her voice, a timbre of fear that made him want to believe her. "You think he's looking for you?"

Again she wrapped her arms around her middle. "You can bet on it. And if he finds me he'll hurt me. He might hurt Sammy."

"That's not going to happen here," Dalton said firmly. He offered her a smile. "After all, you've hired me as your personal bodyguard and I promise you I'm damned good at what I do."

She didn't return his smile and that, along with the darkness in her eyes, made him believe her. "Is that why you carry a knife?" he asked.

She raised a pale eyebrow. "How do you know about that?"

"I saw it last night when you opened the bedroom door."

She returned to the table and sat, her gaze going out the window. "I won't let him hurt me again." She looked back at Dalton and there was a hard glint in her eyes. "I just want to get out of here. Once I get to my sister's I'll be just fine."

"What's this guy's name?" Dalton asked.

"What difference does it make?"

He shrugged. “Just curious. I know most of the families in this area. Just thought I might know him.”

She blinked once...twice. “His name is Billy Johnson. I doubt if you know him. He’s not from around here. His family is from someplace back east.”

Once again he had the feeling she wasn’t being completely honest with him. Did he care? If he were smart he would stop asking questions now. In the next day or two she wouldn’t be his problem.

“I’d better go check on Sammy,” she said and rose from the table.

He watched her hurry away, unable to stop himself from noticing how the worn jeans fit snugly across her shapely butt. He was acutely aware of the fact that physically he was attracted to her, but that didn’t mean he wanted to be pulled into her life drama.

He got up from the table, carried their lunch dishes to the sink and began to rinse them. As he worked, his thoughts drifted to his last assignment.

It had been over a year since Dalton had worked a case as a bodyguard. Her name had been Mary Mason, she’d lived in Tulsa and she, too, had been the victim of domestic violence. He’d worked for her for almost four months, guarding her between the time she’d filed for divorce and the divorce proceeding itself, which had been expedited by a judge sympathetic to her situation.

Mary had known the statistics, that in these kinds of cases the most dangerous time for an abused wife was in the weeks prior to the divorce.

In those four months, he'd fallen head over heels in love with her and she had appeared to feel the same way about him. They had forged a bond that he thought would last the rest of their lives. They'd made plans for a wedding after her divorce, laughing as they created a fantasy event fit for a king and a queen.

It wasn't until the day after the divorce proceedings that the fantasy exploded. Mary told him she needed some time to regroup, that he should return to his home in Cotter Creek and give her a little time alone.

He'd understood the request, had encouraged it, so certain was he that they would be together. He'd called her often, they'd e-mailed, but after only a month he'd received a Dear John letter. She'd fallen in love with another man. They were getting married. Dalton had made a wonderful temporary hero, but that's all he had been.

He scowled as he put the dishes in the dishwasher. The whole thing had left a bad taste in his mouth, a heartache that had been long in healing. Since that time he'd worked the office, answering the phones and keeping the books. He preferred dealing with paperwork instead of people.

Footsteps sounded on the inside staircase that led from George's place upstairs to Dalton's. A moment later, a knock sounded on the back kitchen door.

Jane might not want anyone to know she was here, but it was already too late to keep that piece of information from his landlord.

George would have thought it damned odd that Dalton wanted to sleep on his sofa if Dalton hadn't told the old man that he'd given harbor from the storm to a young woman and her baby.

He opened the door to see George wearing hot pads on his hands and carrying a fresh pie. "Had some canned apples and thought it was a good day for some pie and coffee." He swept past Dalton and into the kitchen, where he deposited the pie on the table. "So, how about making us some coffee to go with this work of art." He pulled out a chair and sat.

Dalton grinned. "Feeling a little cabin fever, George?" He got a pot of coffee ready to brew.

"I hate being cooped up. You know me, Dalton, I'm a social kind of man. Sitting and listening to my own thoughts bores me to death. Where's your houseguest?"

At that moment Jane appeared in the doorway with Sammy in her arms. She froze at the sight of George. "Jane, this is my landlord, George, from downstairs," Dalton said.

George popped up from the chair and walked over to where she stood. "Jane, nice to meet you. And who is this little fellow?"

Sammy took one look at George's big, silly grin and screwed up his face. He wailed as if George were the devil himself and burrowed closer to Jane's chest.

"Oh my." George quickly stepped back.

"I'm sorry," Jane said. "He's hungry. I was just going to fix him a bottle."

Dalton realized she not only held the boy in her arms, but also juggled a bottle and a can of powdered formula mix, as well. Short of putting Sammy on the floor, it was going to be next to impossible for her to hold him and make the bottle.

"Want me to take him?" he asked and gestured to the crying child.

She shot him a grateful look. "If you don't mind. It will just take me a minute to get this ready."

He nodded and took Sammy from her. Almost immediately Sammy not only stopped crying but grinned at Dalton as if the two were best buds.

"Would you look at that?" George exclaimed. "That boy is plum crazy about you."

"He'll be a lot crazier about that bottle," Dalton replied, grateful a moment later when Jane took her son back. She sat at the table, Sammy in her arms sucking on his bottle with obvious contentment.

"George brought up a freshly baked apple pie," Dalton said as he got out coffee mugs from the cabinet.

"Hmm, that sounds good. Apple is my favorite." She offered George a tentative smile.

"My missus, God rest her soul, loved my apple pies. Always told me if God served pie in heaven, then he'd be serving mine," George replied. "Guess this snowstorm took you by surprise."

“Definitely,” she agreed.

George could talk, and that’s what he did for the next hour. Sammy finished his bottle and fell asleep. Dalton sat and sipped his coffee as George entertained Jane with colorful descriptions of people in town, humorous stories of his misspent youth and his fifty-year marriage to the woman who had owned his heart since he was sixteen.

Dalton had heard the stories before. What he found far more interesting than George’s conversation was watching Jane interact with the old man.

As she listened to George, she looked relaxed. Her long blond hair was so soft-looking, so shiny, it made a man want to reach out and touch it, coil it around his fingers, feel it dance across his chest. The first time she laughed aloud, Dalton was shocked by the pleasure that swept through him. She had a great laugh, one that would easily evoke smiles in others.

Although she visited with George in general terms, he noticed that she gave nothing of herself. She didn’t mention family or friends, didn’t speak of her hometown or her job.

Irritated with these kinds of thoughts, he got up to pour himself another cup of coffee, then returned to the table. He didn’t want to think about how sweet she smelled or how her lips were just full enough to tempt a man.

She’d given no indication that she might be up for a short, reckless affair to pass the time until she got on the bus out of town. And the last thing he wanted was any kind of an emotional

entanglement with any woman. She'd be gone soon, and that was that.

It was just after three when George finally got up from the table. "It's been a real pleasure," he said and smiled at Jane. "There's nothing nicer than spending a snowy afternoon in the company of a beautiful woman. Unfortunately, at my age, a good nap is also a pleasant way to spend the afternoon, and I'm past due mine."

She offered him a sunny smile. "Thank you for the pie, George. Your wife was right. It was the best I've ever eaten," she replied.

George beamed as if kissed by an angel.

"George, have you mentioned to anyone that I'm here?" Jane asked.

"Can't say I have." George scratched the top of his head. "Haven't talked to anyone except Dalton since this storm moved in."

"I would appreciate it if you wouldn't mention it to anyone." She flashed him a bright smile. "I'm kind of hiding out from somebody."

George's eyes lit up. "Ah, a woman of mystery. Your secret is safe with me." He started to turn to head out the way he had come, but paused and pointed to the window. "Would you look at that?"

Both Dalton and Jane looked through the window where the snow had finally stopped and the sun peeked out from behind the

last lingering gray clouds.

Chapter 4

“You think the bus will run tomorrow?” Janette asked Dalton. The three of them were in the living room, having just eaten supper. He was seated in the chair and she was on the sofa. Sammy was gurgling happily from a blanket on the floor.

“Doubtful,” he replied.

For the past hour they’d heard the sounds of plows starting the storm cleanup and each grind of gears had been like music to her ears. She just hoped and prayed she got out of there before Sheriff Brandon Sinclair somehow discovered where she was.

“Although most of the locals who have plows will be out and have our streets cleaned, it will probably be at least another day or so before the highways are completely cleared and the bus can show up.” He gazed at her curiously. “Surely you can’t be afraid that your boyfriend will find you here. You didn’t know you were going to be here, so how could he know?”

“Logically, I know that, but emotionally, I just have this terrible need to get out of town, to get as far away as possible,” she replied. “I just want to stay safe.”

“I told you that you’d be safe here,” he said. “When that bus comes, I’ll personally see you safely aboard and in the meantime nobody is going to harm you while you’re in my home.”

A new burst of gratitude filled her. She’d taken a terrible chance coming into the home of a stranger, but Dalton had

proven himself to be nothing other than a good, honorable man. She leaned back on the sofa. “So, what do you do when you aren’t bodyguarding?” she asked. She’d been in his home for twenty-four hours but didn’t really know anything about him.

“I mentioned before I like to read, and when the weather’s nice I do a little work at the family ranch.”

“Family ranch?” She could easily imagine him, long legs astride a powerful horse, a cowboy hat pulled down low over his brow.

“My dad has a huge ranch north of town. It’s become something of a family compound. My brother Tanner has a house on the property, and Clay and his wife, Libby, have been talking about building there.”

“Hmm, that sounds nice. It must be wonderful to have such a close, loving family unit. I used to wonder what it would be like to have a whole mess of siblings.”

He laughed, a deep low sound that warmed her. “Believe me, it’s not as wonderful as it sounds. You wait in line for the bathroom, you wait to be served at the table, you share everything you’re given and there’s incessant noise.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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