

A man in a brown cowboy hat and a tan, fur-lined coat is smiling and looking down at two babies he is holding. The baby on the left is wearing a red velvet jacket and a white bonnet. The baby on the right is wearing a grey quilted jacket and a yellow hood. They are in a snowy mountain landscape with a blue sky. A red banner at the top contains the text "Love Inspired HISTORICAL".

*Love Inspired* HISTORICAL

*The Sheriff's  
Christmas Twins*

KAREN KIRST

# **Karen Kirst**

## **The Sheriff's Christmas Twins**

### **Аннотация**

Holiday Baby Blessings

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He touched her shoulder, and she whirled on him.

"I have to be honest, Shane. I hate that you see me as a burdensome child. Every time you sigh and huff and roll your eyes, I'm tempted to throttle you."

He stared at her. "I'm sorry."

He was sorry that he wasn't a different man, one who knew how to trust and love and have normal relationships. He was sorry he hadn't done a better job of hiding his unease around Allison.

She began to dig in her reticule, her frustration evident. He pulled the key from his pocket and held it up.

"Looking for this?"

When she went to snatch it from him, he held it out of reach.

“For the record, I don’t see you as a burdensome child.”

“Oh?” Her chin jerked up, her hair gleaming in the night.

“How do you see me, Shane?”

He strove for a rare moment of honesty between them. The fact she couldn’t see his face helped. “As an intelligent, caring, gorgeous woman who makes me wish I was a better man.”

KAREN KIRST was born and raised in East Tennessee near the Great Smoky Mountains. A lifelong lover of books, it wasn’t until after college that she had the grand idea to write one herself. Now she divides her time between being a wife, homeschooling mom and romance writer. Her favorite pastimes are reading, visiting tearooms and watching romantic comedies.

The Sheriff’s Christmas Twins

Karen Kirst



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For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

—Romans 8:38–39

To Teresa Bensch, sweet cousin and friend.

And to editor extraordinaire Emily Rodmell.  
Your guidance makes all the difference.

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December 1886

Gatlinburg, Tennessee

“We have a situation at the mercantile, Sheriff.”

Shane Timmons set the law journal aside and reached for his gun belt.

The banker held up his hand. “You won’t be needing that. This matter requires finesse, not force.”

“What’s happened?” His chair scraped across the uneven floor as he stood and picked up his Stetson. “Did Quinn catch a kid filching penny candy?”

“I suggest you come and see for yourself.”

Unaccustomed to seeing Claude Jenkins flustered, Shane's curiosity grew as he shrugged on his coat and followed him outside into the crisp December day. Pedestrians intent on starting their holiday shopping early crowded the boardwalks. Those shopkeepers who hadn't already decorated their storefronts were draping the windows and doors in ivy and holly garlands. On the opposite side of the street, they passed a vendor hawking roasted chestnuts, calling forth memories of bitter Norfolk, Virginia, winters and a young boy's futile longing for a single bag of the toasty treat.

Shane tamped down the unpleasant memories and continued on to the mercantile. Half a dozen trunks were piled beside the entrance. Unease pulled his shoulder blades together as if connected by invisible string. His visitors weren't due for three more days. He did a quick scan of the street, relieved there was no sign of the stagecoach.

Claude held the door and waited for him to enter first. The pungent stench of paint punched him in the chest. The stove-heated air was heavy and made his eyes water. Too many minutes in here and a person could get a headache. The proprietor, Quinn Darling, hadn't mentioned plans to renovate. The first day of December and unofficial kickoff to the holiday fanfare was a terrible time to start.

His gaze swept the deserted sales counter and aisles before landing on a knot of men and women in the far corner.

"Why didn't you watch where you were going? Where are your

parents?”

“I—I’m terribly sorry, ma’am,” came the subdued reply. “My ma’s at the café. She gave me permission to come see the new merchandise.”

“This is what happens when children are allowed to roam through the town unsupervised.”

Shane rounded the aisle and wove his way through the customers, stopping short at the sight of statuesque, matronly Gertrude Messinger, a longtime Gatlinburg resident and wife of one of the gristmill owners, doused in green liquid. While her upper half remained untouched, her full skirts and boots were streaked with paint. Beside her, ashen and bug-eyed, stood thirteen-year-old Eliza Smith.

“Quinn Darling,” Gertrude’s voice boomed with outrage. “I expect you to assign the cost of a new dress to the Smiths’ account.”

At that, Eliza’s freckles stood out in stark contrast to her skin. “One moment, if you will, Mr. Darling,” a third person chimed in. “The fault is mine, not Eliza’s.”

The voice put him in mind of snow angels and piano recitals and cookies swiped from silver platters. But it couldn’t belong to Allison Ashworth. She and her brother, George, wouldn’t arrive until Friday. Seventy-two more hours until his past collided with his present.

He wasn’t ready.

His old friend, George Ashworth, had written months ago

expressing the wish to spend Christmas with him. He'd agreed, of course—it had been years since he'd seen George and longer still since he'd clapped eyes on Allison. As tempted as he'd been to deny the siblings, the memory of their father and his generosity had prevented him.

Edging two steps to his left, Shane gained a clear view of the unidentified female. His jaw sagged. Gertrude Messenger should consider herself fortunate because this woman had suffered the brunt of the mishap. The oily green mixture covered her from head to toe. Her face was a monochrome mask. Only her eyes—the color of emeralds and glittering with indignation—and lips were untouched.

Gertrude stared. “That girl was right beneath the ladder when it happened.”

She put a protective hand on Eliza's shoulder. “That may be so, but I believe it was my foot that snagged the ladder and caused the can to tip over. I offer you my sincere apology. And of course, I'll make reparations for the damage.”

“Your apology doesn't change the fact I'm standing here dripping in paint!”

“See what I mean?” Claude leaned close to murmur in Shane's ear.

As a lawman, his duties ranged from unpleasant to exasperating to downright perilous. This sort of dilemma was far from typical.

Quinn held his hands out in a placating gesture. “I regret this

incident ever happened, ladies. It was my hired man who left the unopened can on the ladder unattended. I'll pay for cleaning services, as well as provide enough store credit for replacement fabric and shoes, hats, ribbons. Whatever you need."

The older woman glared down her patrician nose. "This dress is beyond saving. Besides, how am I to be expected to walk the streets looking like this?" Spotting Shane, she summoned him with an imperious flick of her fingers. "It's about time you got here, Sheriff. I want this woman arrested."

Eliza and the stranger gasped in unison. Moving closer to Quinn, Shane was careful to avoid the oozing globs on the gleaming floorboards. Belatedly removing his hat, he addressed Mrs. Messinger.

"And what, exactly, am I to charge her with?"

"Public mischief."

The stranger ripped her gaze from Shane to gape at the older woman. "I am not a criminal."

"Your clumsy disregard for your surroundings is a danger to others."

"I believe that's exaggerating things a bit, Mrs. Messinger," Quinn intervened. To the other woman, he said, "What did you say your name was, ma'am?"

She shrunk back. Even with her features concealed, Shane sensed her distress. His senses sharpened. Years of dealing with those who disregarded the law had nourished his already suspicious nature. Was she hiding something?

A blob of paint dripped from her chin and splattered on the floor. “Introductions can wait, wouldn’t you agree? Do you have a place where I can clean up in private?”

“My wife’s seamstress shop is in the back. Nicole will provide you with something suitable to change into,” Quinn offered.

Her gaze slid to Shane and then darted to the side. Definitely suspicious. When she started to move away, he clamped a hand on her arm. “You’re not going anywhere until you state your name and business here.”

“I see you still enjoy being difficult, Shane Timmons,” she challenged, eliciting gasps from the spectators.

He released her at once. He should’ve heeded his initial response. Her voice had been familiar for a reason. The strands of her hair that weren’t coated in paint seemed to pulse with the sun’s rays. Those distinctive flaxen locks, combined with wide green eyes and crimson lips, reminded him of Christmases past. Bittersweet holidays with a temporary family that had magnified his outsider status.

“Allison. You’re early.”

A single, green-tinted eyebrow lifted. “After more than a decade apart, that’s the only thing you can think of to say?”

The tips of his ears burned. The crowd pressed closer, no doubt delighted by this unexpected turn of events. He hadn’t divulged much about his past. Wasn’t anything to boast about.

Wesley, one of the new shop assistants and most likely the reason for this debacle, appeared with a damp cloth. She thanked

him with a graciousness that attested to her generosity of spirit, one of a dozen admirable traits he'd witnessed during his time at Ashworth House.

He was suddenly tongue-tied, as if he were fourteen again and being introduced to his new sister of sorts for the first time. David Ashworth had brought Shane to live with him and his children—sixteen-year-old George and twelve-year-old Allison—in their grand estate located on exclusive Peyton Avenue. While George had been cautiously welcoming, Allison had greeted him like a long-lost friend. He hadn't known what to make of the effervescent, fair-haired dynamo. Still didn't apparently.

“Um, welcome to Gatlinburg?”

\* \* \*

This wasn't how she'd envisioned her first encounter with Shane Timmons.

Allison was supposed to be showing her former infatuation how mature and sophisticated she'd become. Shane was supposed to take one look at her and regret all those times he'd dismissed her as unworthy of his friendship. Nothing in her imaginings had prepared her for this!

A rogue drop rolled to her eyebrow, and she hurriedly swiped at it, refusing to look down to inventory the damage to her person. She might be tempted to cry.

The distinguished, raven-haired store owner looked confused. “You know her?”

Another man peeked around Shane's shoulder. “You're the

sheriff's first visitor. Not a single soul has come to see him in all these years."

A third person piped up. "How do you know each other?"

"Is she a special lady friend, Sheriff?"

The skin around his right eye twitched. It used to do that when he was annoyed.

"Go on about your business, folks," he instructed without taking his eyes off her. "Nothing more to see here."

Most everyone shuffled to various sections of the mercantile, only pretending to shop. Quinn led a protesting Mrs. Messinger to the shelves containing the fabric bolts and began pointing out selections. Eliza lingered.

"Th-thank you, Miss Ashworth."

"You've nothing to thank me for, Eliza." She smiled for the girl's benefit. "Hopefully the next time we meet will be under better circumstances."

Dipping her head, she rushed for the exit. Allison wished she could follow her. How ridiculous she must look! Beneath the paint, her cheeks burned with humiliation. At least that was hidden from his view.

"I wasn't expecting you until Friday," Shane accused in a strained voice. "Where's George? Clarissa and the kids? I thought you were all set to travel together."

After all this time, Allison had expected at the very least a polite welcome. Disappointment compounded her embarrassment. "Do you mind if we discuss this after I've

cleaned up?” She indicated the damp cloth. “I’d like to get this off before it dries.”

Shane took hold of her arm again and, keeping a more-than-was-required amount of space between them, maneuvered her between the counters and into a darkened hallway.

Unable to deny herself the pleasure, she drank in his profile. The boyish appeal she remembered was a thing of the past. His features were lean and taut, his cheekbones more defined, his jaw a line of defiance. His piercing azure eyes emitted a subtle but very real warning—don’t come too close, don’t try to unearth buried secrets, don’t cross the line of separation he maintained between himself and the rest of the world. Framed by a light beard, even his mouth appeared hard. Sculpted and slightly fuller than many men’s, Shane’s was set in a perpetual frown.

He was the type of man who expected bad things to happen. Thanks to his poor excuse for a mother, he’d long ago lost the ability to look for good in the world. The hope she’d harbored that he had overcome his unfortunate beginnings flickered out.

At the end of the hallway, one door appeared to exit the building and another led to the seamstress shop. He rapped lightly before swinging it open. The woman who greeted them was everything Allison was not—statuesque, slender and in possession of the beauty that inspired men to pen sonnets. With inky black curls, flawless skin and unusual violet eyes, Nicole Darling must’ve had scads of men making fools of themselves in order to win her favor. Allison had long ago accepted that she

didn't have that effect. Most men liked her. The problem was they saw her as a chum, not a potential wife. The handful that had been interested in her romantically over the years hadn't been able to measure up to the one who'd deemed her irrelevant.

Nicole's sincere greeting faltered when her gaze encountered Allison. Her shock was quickly masked, but it made Allison dread peering into a mirror. Shane explained what had happened and left to fetch a wagon in which to load her trunks.

Contrary to her composed demeanor, Nicole turned out to be gracious and kind. She assisted Allison out of her ruined dress and located a cleaning solution that rid her skin of most of the paint. Washing her hair would have to wait until she reached the house Shane had arranged for her and her family to rent. Nicole riffled through the racks of clothing and found a plain black skirt and matching gray-and-black-striped blouse that a customer had decided against purchasing. The skirt was several inches too short and the blouse fit her like a circus tent. Fortunately, the cape Nicole lent her covered the ill-fitting clothes. Shane was pacing the hallway by the time she was presentable. Well, as presentable as she possibly could be.

His gaze swept her up and down, his thoughts a mystery. "The wagon's this way."

Instead of heading to the mercantile's main entrance, he led her out the rear exit and down a steep flight of stairs. The deserted lane was edged by a wide, fast-moving river over mossy rocks of varying size. The opposite bank was a steep,

tree-covered hill. Most of the trees were forlorn versions of themselves, their twisted branches bare, but plenty of pines and other evergreens were sprinkled throughout.

She surveyed the team of fine-looking horses hitched to the wagon. Their giant hooves stamped the winter-hardened earth and their breaths created white clouds. At the stairs' base, she took a moment to inspect the shops' rear facades and the livery beside the mercantile.

“Is this where the deliveries are made?”

He nodded and, giving her a boost onto the high seat, circled the horses and climbed up beside her. “I thought this route would be less of a hassle.”

“Meaning, you’d rather no one else see us together quite yet,” she retorted, old hurts rising to the surface.

He grimaced. “You’ve no idea what small towns are like. Every bit of news is blown out of proportion. I can guarantee half the town will have us engaged by nightfall.”

Engaged to Shane Timmons? A fluttering sensation flared in her middle, one she resolutely ignored. Once upon a time, she’d been enamored with this man and desperate for his approval—something he’d never offered.

“You wouldn’t have to dodge their questions if you’d simply told them about us.”

“I considered it.” With reins in hand, he called a sharp command and the conveyance jerked into motion. “My friends, the O’Malleys, know our history. I told them that I lived with you

and George for a time.”

“Do they know why?”

His lips pursed. “Only that my mother couldn’t care for me.”

“You mean wouldn’t.”

His eyes turned stormy, and she regretted her words. She allowed herself to study his uncompromising jawline and the strong cords of his neck visible above his coat collar.

He turned his head slightly. “What?”

“Nothing. I’m simply adjusting to the fact that I’m actually here with you.”

A vein in his temple throbbed.

“Not here with you,” she amended. “Here in the same state. The same town, even. I wasn’t sure I’d ever see you again, to be honest. You weren’t planning to return to Virginia, were you?”

“There’s nothing for me there.”

Allison winced. One thing about Shane, he didn’t mince words to spare her feelings. “Your home is there.”

“Ashworth House was not my home.”

Because you wouldn’t let it be, she was tempted to retort.

She could still recall the moment her father had relayed the news that a young employee of his, an orphan in desperate need of assistance, was coming to live with them. While George had been resistant to the idea, Allison had seen an opportunity to help someone less fortunate. She’d been excited about having another sibling. Older and of a serious bent, George was no longer interested in her childish pursuits. But then Shane moved

in and it soon became apparent that he didn't trust either of them. What Allison had never been able to fathom was why Shane had tolerated George, who did little to encourage a relationship, and yet rebuffed her attempts at friendship.

During the five years that he lived with them, she'd tried to earn his confidence, a bit of her heart breaking with each fresh rejection. He hadn't been unkind...just resolute in his indifference. Shane had tolerated her as if she were an annoying puppy begging for scraps of affection.

Shane hadn't liked her. It appeared he still didn't.

Ignoring the pinch of sadness, she resolved to make the best of her time in Tennessee. She was here for the month of December, the most exciting weeks of the entire year. She wasn't about to let a surly lawman spoil her Christmas.

## Chapter Two

He hadn't meant to hurt her feelings. Shane noticed the resignation in her eyes before she averted her face. His commitment to speak the truth, a product of having lived with a drunken mother who'd thought nothing of making promises she didn't intend to keep, sometimes made things difficult for others.

He guided the horses onto a rutted lane flanked by trees. The prickly air stole beneath his collar, making him long for his office and a mountain-sized cup of hot coffee.

"Why did you come alone?" he said.

"That wasn't my plan, trust me. A problem arose in our Riverside factory the evening before our departure, and George

had to postpone his journey. He insisted I come on ahead so that you wouldn't be disappointed." She said that last bit with a touch of sarcasm. "He suggested Clarissa and the children come with me, but she preferred to wait and travel with him. She didn't want to risk spending the holidays apart."

From George's missives over the years, Shane had learned that his friend had married Clarissa Smothers. Their union was marked with respect, commitment and love. He was happy for George. If he experienced a twinge of envy whenever he read about their life together, he made sure not to dwell on it.

That George had been delayed was not welcome news. He and his brood were supposed to provide a buffer. Without them, Shane had no choice but to interact with Allison. He'd be responsible for getting her settled, seeing to her comfort, entertaining her.

"Did he say when he might arrive?"

"He promised to right matters as quickly as possible and send a telegram letting us know his arrival date."

They traveled up a shallow incline. The Wattses' farm came into view, and Allison sat up straighter, her lips parting at the sight. Satisfaction raced through him. He'd always admired this particular homestead. When he'd heard the owners would be spending their holiday in another state, he'd approached them about renting it for his visitors.

Situated in the middle of a clearing, the white clapboard farmhouse with green shutters and shingled roof stood framed

by forested hills that gave way to steep mountains. A fallow vegetable garden was situated on the right, a modest-sized barn behind that. The corncrib, smokehouse and toolshed had been built alongside a snake-and-rail fence.

“Oh, Shane, this is such a charming place. How many bedrooms does it have?”

“Four. George assured me that would be plenty.”

“It will do nicely. The three older children will want to be together, and George Jr. will stay with his parents. Thank you for making the arrangements.”

“The Wattses decided to spend this winter with their son and his family in South Carolina. They were pleased it wouldn’t be left empty.”

He slowed the wagon to a halt directly in front of the house. Quickly descending, he walked to her side and helped her down, reminded again how he’d always towered over her, taller, bulkier, stronger. She’d complained about her diminutive stature and healthy figure, but compared to him, she was dainty. If he was of a mind to, he’d have no problem tossing her over his shoulder and carrying her about without working up a sweat.

From the start, Allison had evoked a powerful desire to protect and shield. A startling and unusual reaction for a boy who’d only ever looked out for himself.

As her soles reached the brown, patchy grass, her fingers tightened where they rested on his shoulders. He examined her uplifted face, taking note of her fuller lips, more pronounced

cheekbones, creamy, dew-kissed skin. The years had been kind to her.

He'd recently passed his thirty-second birthday, which meant she'd soon be thirty. Thirty. It hardly seemed possible. In his mind, she'd remained forever seventeen—naive, optimistic, generous to a fault and completely unaware of her allure.

She took hold of his right hand and, snatching off his buckskin glove without permission, examined his palm. "I'm glad there's nothing wrong with your hand."

"Why would there be?"

"I thought you might've injured it and that was why you didn't write to me."

The arrow hit its mark. "I'm not much of a writer."

Her jutting chin challenged him. "You wrote to my brother."

"I couldn't ignore his letters."

"And yet you had no problem ignoring mine."

Her crushed velvet gloves caressed his knuckles. He frowned at the pleasurable sensation. "I didn't get any from you."

"I wrote you. Once." She released him.

"I'm sorry, Allison. I never received it."

She reached past him and retrieved her leather satchel. "It's all right. I doubt you would've answered me, anyway."

Shane stood mute as she spun, her too-large cape scraping the ground, and marched to the porch. He'd wondered if she'd changed in the intervening years since he'd seen her. Here was his answer. The old Allison wouldn't have uttered such a thing to

him. She wouldn't have voiced what they both knew—he treated her differently than everyone else.

It wasn't fair. Or rational. The knowledge didn't, wouldn't, change his behavior. The reason he'd kept his distance and hadn't initiated contact with her after he left was simple—the part of him that his father's abandonment and mother's reprehensible behavior hadn't managed to blacken with disillusionment and pain, the part protected and nourished by hope, whispered lies whenever she was near.

The first lie had come the moment he met her. Here is a girl you can trust. She wants to be your friend. Let her in.

Thankfully, he'd recognized the untruth immediately and had taken action to thwart her efforts. More lies followed as the years passed, tempting him to relax his guard and give her a chance. He'd resisted. Better to hurt her feelings temporarily than to destroy her life with his cynicism and bitterness.

\* \* \*

She was going to have to be more circumspect. Letting Shane know how his ongoing disregard had wounded her was not in the plan. It wouldn't be easy, but she was determined to present a friendly yet indifferent front. She could be kind without being too personal...if she really, really tried.

Allison had a good life. A loving family. Wonderful friends. Satisfying work. A supportive church. He didn't need to know that she ached for a husband and babies to love. He would never know that sometimes, when she was alone, she'd daydream about

a different life, one in which he had top billing. Her favorite recurring dream featured Shane at Ashworth House, begging her forgiveness and professing his undying devotion. She especially relished the apology bit—finally hearing an explanation for his dislike would be most satisfying.

“Allison?”

She turned from the bench swing. By the look on his face, this wasn't the first time he'd called her name. “Sorry. I was woolgathering.”

He waited for her to enter first. Pulling her cape panels closer together, she wandered about the room, studying photographs of the elderly couple who'd built a life here. They looked like nice, hardworking people. Their home was tidy, the furniture in good condition, handmade rugs, curtains and a quilt thrown over the sofa back providing splashes of bright color. The window views were like paintings of pastoral perfection. She could easily envision the landscape's beauty during spring, summer and autumn.

“When George told me you'd moved here, I purchased a book about Tennessee. The photographs don't do it justice.”

Crouched at the fireplace, he arranged a pile of kindling. “You should see the mountains when it snows.”

“Is it likely to while I'm here?”

“Hard to say.” He lifted his shoulder, causing the brown duster to bunch between his shoulder blades. “The winters are unpredictable. Some years we hardly get any. Others we get snow

and ice.”

“I hope it does. My niece and nephews would enjoy a white Christmas.”

“As would you,” he observed.

“I won’t deny it.”

She recalled the first winter he’d spent with them. He’d been walking alone in the estate garden, as was his custom, and had come upon her making snow angels. She’d implored him to join her. He’d gone so far as to lie in the snow beside her when he’d suddenly jumped up and stormed off. It was as if he wouldn’t allow himself to experience even a moment’s joy.

“Promise me something. If it snows before I leave, promise you’ll make snow angels with me. Just once.”

He pivoted slightly in order to stare at her over his shoulder. “I’m a grown man, Allison.”

“Are you immune to a little fun, Sheriff?”

He blinked at her use of his title. “Life isn’t about fun. It’s about duty and hard work and being a responsible citizen.”

“You don’t believe that.” Surely he didn’t.

The wood in the stacked-stone fireplace glowed orange as the flames took hold. Waving out the match, Shane discarded it. “It’s not a tragedy.”

“The tragedy is you don’t recognize what you’re missing.”

With a noncommittal grunt, he removed his wheatcolored hat and balanced it atop the caramel-and-white-print sofa. He finger-combed his short locks into place. His hair changed with the

seasons—sun-kissed blond in spring and summer and dark honey in the colder months. She hadn't seen him with a beard before. She wasn't sure she liked it. The stubble made him seem even more stern, more remote, than she remembered. One side of his coat gaped open, and the badge pinned to his dark vest glinted. Considering his profession, looking dangerous and formidable was no doubt a good thing.

“What about you?”

Allison had drifted to the dining room threshold. Gripping the doorjamb, she turned back to find he hadn't moved.

“What about me?”

“From what George tells me, you make little time for fun yourself.”

Astonishment arrowed through her. “What did he say?”

“That you've been working for the company for nearly a decade. You're good at what you do, and the employees respect you. However, he's worried that between your work, charity organizations and the time you spend doting on his kids, you're neglecting your personal happiness.”

“He's never indicated such a thing to me.”

“Are his concerns well-founded?”

“Of course not.”

He advanced toward her, stopping in the middle of the multicolored rug. “Why aren't you married? I thought for sure one of your many admirers would've snatched you up as soon as you were of age.”

She considered how to answer. Admitting that no man could hold a candle to the enigmatic, hurting young man he'd once been was out of the question.

"I could ask the same of you. You're thirty-two and still unwed."

"I'm not the marrying kind, and we both know it. You, on the other hand, were born to be a wife and mother." As soon as he'd said the words, color etched his sharp cheekbones. "You know what? Forget I asked. It's none of my business."

"It's all right." Some part of her that yet smarted from his rejection prompted her to reveal the next part. "In truth, there is someone special. His name is Trevor Langston. As soon as I return to Virginia, I'm going to accept his offer of courtship."

She'd resisted for foolish reasons. Coming face-to-face with her past had shown her that. Shane wasn't interested in any sort of relationship. Trevor, on the other hand, had been unwavering in his desire to court her.

Shane's features remained a blank mask, but the skin around his eye twitched. What was he irritated about? He didn't care about her or her life.

"Who is he?" His voice was even. Cool. Unaffected. "Would George approve?"

"My brother is aware of his interest. Trevor works with us. He's a wonderful man. Solicitous, dedicated, too smart for words..." She trailed off, realizing she was describing his assets in terms of his value as a company employee.

“I assume he’s from a respectable family?”

“His family and ours have been friends for many years. We met at church, believe it or not. His sister and I have many common interests.”

“Does he treat you well?”

She cocked her head to one side. “For someone who hasn’t bothered to contact me in more than a decade, you’re awfully curious about my romantic prospects. Why is that?”

“No particular reason. If you don’t wish to discuss him, we won’t.”

He started up the stairs. “Come on up and choose your room so I’ll know where to put your luggage.”

“Wait.”

His fingers flexed on the polished banister. He sighed again, something she noticed he did a lot around her. Come to think of it, he used to do it at Ashworth House, too. What about her vexed him so?

Allison went to stand at the base of the stairs, waiting for him to turn and look at her. When he did, she said, “Who his family is doesn’t matter to me as much as what kind of man he is. His character. His beliefs.”

A muscle jumped in his cheek. “That’s nice.”

“I’m not finished.” Tired of skirting around the issue, she climbed the steps until she was one below him. Standing sideways, he leaned against the wall, aiming for a casual pose that didn’t fool her. “You said you’re not the marrying kind. Why

not?”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m not discussing this right now. I’ve got to get you settled and swing by the mercantile for perishables since I didn’t have time to stock the kitchen. There’s nothing much to eat here, and it’s nearly noon.”

When he would’ve continued on upstairs, she put a hand on his forearm. “Allowing your mother’s poor decisions and ill treatment to keep you from having a family is wrong, Shane.”

His eyes turned flinty. “You’ve been in town an hour and you’re trying to tell me how to live my life? You know nothing about me save for whatever tidbits your brother’s told you. So we lived under the same roof for a few years. That doesn’t make you an expert on what I need, Allison Ashworth.”

### Chapter Three

He’d blundered. Again. George would have his hide if he knew.

The image of David Ashworth’s craggy face entered his mind, and he felt ashamed. David had extended mercy to Shane when he’d least deserved it—instead of hauling him off to jail for stealing from one of his stores, David had offered him a paying job. And months later, when the older man learned that Shane’s mother had died, their home had burned and Shane was sleeping in a makeshift camp at the edge of town, he’d taken him home and made him a part of his family.

Or at least he’d tried. Shane hadn’t made it easy.

He threaded his fingers through his hair. “Look, I don’t like

talking about my past. You know that.”

“I remember.”

“But that doesn’t excuse my rudeness, and I’m sorry. I know how much you enjoy Christmas and all the traditions that go along with it. This is your first holiday in Tennessee, and I want you to have a pleasant visit. So let’s agree to leave that particular subject buried, okay?”

She didn’t look happy about his request, but she eventually nodded.

The second floor was a few degrees warmer than the first, but that wasn’t saying much. He stood against the long interior wall to give her room to navigate the papered hallway and examine the rooms. The color in her cheeks was heightened, due to her vexation with him or the cold, he couldn’t determine.

After peeking in all the doorways, she entered the room to the immediate right of the stairs. “I’ll take this one. George, Clarissa and George Jr. can be at the opposite end of the hall and the older children next to them.”

“Are you still in your old bedroom at home?”

“No. Soon after their engagement, I moved to the third floor.”

Hearing the wistfulness in her voice, he said, “You liked that room. You spent hours in the window seat with your books and your diary or simply observing the world from your perch.”

“I did like it.” An adorable pleat formed between her golden eyebrows. “But having an entire floor to myself suits me. With four children and a passel of staff members in the house, I don’t

get much privacy.”

Removing the borrowed cape, she draped it over the carved footboard. Peering down at her ill-fitting clothes, she shook her head in disgust. Shane watched as she walked to the mirror above the bureau and inspected her disheveled, paint-flecked hair. In the reflective glass, her gaze found his.

“I made sure my arrival didn’t go unnoticed, didn’t I?”

“At least the color doesn’t clash with your hair.”

Turning, she attempted to smooth it. “It’s still straight as a stick, I’m afraid.”

“Curls are overrated.”

He hadn’t been able to figure out why a girl like Allison would be dissatisfied with her appearance. Her self-consciousness didn’t make sense. Her hair was the prettiest color he’d ever seen, her countenance sweet and agreeable.

“I’ll bring your trunks up and then heat some water you can use along with the cleaning solution Nicole gave you.”

She thanked him with a grateful smile, making him regret his harsh words even more. George had to get here soon. Spending time with her would be a sore test of his endurance.

Pretend she’s your sister.

Not a terrible idea, but he’d already tried that. It hadn’t worked all those years ago. Now that they were adults, it had even less of a chance of working.

A half hour later, he was checking the foodstuffs and making a mental list of necessary supplies when Allison entered the

kitchen. Dressed in her own clothes this time—a charcoal gray skirt and flattering blouse in a bold sapphire hue—she wore her hair loose. Still damp from washing, it hung in a sleek curtain to the middle of her back.

“You don’t look a day over seventeen.”

Her eyebrows rose a notch, and he wished the words unsaid.

Emitting a brief, disbelieving laugh, she said wryly, “I believe your memories are clouding your judgment.”

He pointed out where the supplies and cooking utensils were stored, as well as the kindling for the cast iron stove. Her slight frown surprised him.

“I know it’s not as large or efficient as the kitchen at Ashworth House, but it’s got everything you need.”

“It’s not that.” She’d removed her gloves in the bedroom, and her small, pale hand skimmed the pie safe’s ledge. She moved to examine the stove’s cook plates and water reservoir, a dubious expression on her face. “I never learned to cook.”

“You don’t know how to cook?”

“I’ve heated water for coffee before. That’s the extent of my culinary skills, I’m afraid.”

He should’ve anticipated this. Why would Allison apply herself to such basic chores when there were paid staff members to do it for her?

“You didn’t think to bring one of the estate’s employees to see to the task?”

“I considered it. However, it is Christmastime and they all

have families. I couldn't ask anyone to spend this most special of holidays with me instead of with their loved ones."

Of course she'd consider others' comfort above her own, even if, as in this case, it was impractical.

In the silence stretching between them, her stomach growled loud enough for them both to hear. With a grimace, she pressed her hand against her middle. "Sorry. I skipped breakfast."

Shane felt as if a noose was tightening about his neck. This wasn't how this visit was supposed to go. He'd planned on being polite, yet distant, just like the old days. He and George would catch up while the women were occupied by the children. He wasn't supposed to be responsible for her every need.

"How did you plan to eat?"

"You do have restaurants here, do you not?"

"There's the Plum Café. The quality has gone down in recent months, but the fare's passable. It's closed on Sundays."

"So I'll eat cheese and bread on those days. I'm not spoiled."

"I know that."

The Ashworths had every reason to boast—success, wealth, high standing in society. A devout Christian, David had viewed his accomplishments as blessings from God and considered it his duty to use them to help others. While they hadn't lived meagerly by any means, they hadn't hoarded their wealth. David had taught his children to love Jesus first, others second and themselves last.

"Besides, the children's nanny is coming with Clarissa, and she knows her way around a kitchen. She'll take care of the meals,

as well as the holiday baking.”

Shane found himself with two equally problematic choices. He could take her to the café and suffer the type of scrutiny he went out of his way to avoid. Or he could stay here in this isolated kitchen with her and fix something. Dodge questions from curious townsfolk or share a private meal with Allison?

In the end, her damp hair was the deciding factor. He couldn't risk her health simply because he was uncomfortable in this quiet house that presented zero opportunities to slink off to a secluded spot like he used to do.

Inspecting the cupboard's contents, he said, “Which one sounds more appealing? Pickled peaches or sweet butter pickles?”

\* \* \*

Allison couldn't recall the last time she'd shared a meal with a gentleman. Mealtimes were loud, boisterous affairs in her brother and sister-in-law's home. There were stories, jokes and laughter while the children were in attendance. Once the nanny whisked them upstairs or outside to the gardens for fresh air and exercise, the conversation turned to adult topics such as their family business, society news or happenings in the city.

Not that Shane Timmons fit her view of a gentleman. He was comprised of too many rough edges and dark secrets for that. He neither looked nor acted like the men of her acquaintance. Didn't smell like them, either. The sheriff smelled like long days in the saddle, strong coffee and virile man.

Having removed his outer coat before preparing lunch, he sat across from her in what must be typical lawman attire—trousers, vest and a long-sleeved, buttoned-up shirt, his sheriff's badge pinned over his heart. His light blue shirt was shot through with pencil-thin navy blue stripes. His vest was a coconut-shell brown that matched his trousers. Both pieces of apparel showcased his upper-body strength. Every time he lifted his coffee cup to his mouth, she watched the play of his biceps.

Before he'd left Norfolk, his physique had been whipcord lean. He'd packed on muscle in the ensuing years, and he looked solid enough to wrestle one of those black bears she'd read inhabited these East Tennessee forests. That, combined with his over six feet of height, made him a formidable adversary for the criminals who dared pass through his town.

"Are you warm enough?" He broke the silence for the first time since he'd said grace.

Heat from the kitchen stove permeated the adjoining dining room through the doorway. Lit candles positioned around the rectangular space added warmth to the ambience even if they didn't emit actual heat. Clouds had rolled in, obscuring the sun and making the candles necessary.

"Yes, thank you."

"I know this isn't what you'd call a substantial meal. As soon as we're done here, I'll leave you to unpack while I make a trip to the mercantile."

"It may not be typical, but it's filling. Besides, now I can say

I've tried pickled peaches.”

“I'm sure your friends will be impressed,” he drawled, his eyes hooded.

Besides the preserved fruit, her plate boasted corn cakes, fried ham slices and sautéed onions. While simple, the food tasted delicious.

She dabbed the napkin to her mouth. “Since I'll be here the duration of the holiday season, what can I expect in the way of celebrations?”

He lowered his fork. “That's not something I pay much attention to.”

“Does the town host a parade?” she prompted. “Are there parties? A tree-lighting ceremony?”

“No parade that I'm aware of. I'm sure there are parties, but I have no idea who hosts them. I'll have to put you in touch with Caroline Turner. Her mother is in charge of Gatlinburg's social events. Either one of them can help you.”

Frustration warred with sadness. During his years at Ashworth House, they had done everything possible to include him in their celebrations. He'd stubbornly resisted their efforts.

Folding her hands in her lap, she studied the candlelight flickering over his rugged features. “Do you actually celebrate Christmas, or do you act like it's any other day on the calendar?”

“Apart from the commemoration of Christ's birth, December 25 is like every other day of the year.” He sank against the chair, his fingers rubbing circles on the worn tabletop.

Allison wanted to ask if his view of God had changed. While Shane had believed in Him as Creator, he hadn't been able to accept His unconditional love. She struggled to find the right words, and the moment was lost.

"The weeks leading up to it are not special, magical or even particularly pleasant," he said.

"The season is about family and friends, counting your blessings and loving your neighbors."

"Charity should be year-round," he countered.

"I agree. I serve on a church committee that provides for the poor throughout the year. I've witnessed how this season magnifies their lack, however. We have to be diligent to make Christmas extra special, especially for the children."

For a split second, his mouth softened and yearning surged in the azure depths. "Where were people like you when I was a boy?"

Her breath hitched at the glimpse of unexpected vulnerability. He recovered himself all too quickly, face shuttering as he tossed his napkin atop his plate.

"I'll give you a tour of the town so you'll be comfortable navigating it on your own." Pushing to his feet, he stared down at her. "I can't ignore my duties while we wait for George to arrive."

Pricked by his words, she arched a brow. "I don't require constant supervision. I am capable of entertaining myself."

"But not cooking for yourself."

She stood and spread her arms wide. "So teach me."

His head jerked back. “You’re not serious.”

“We don’t truly know how long my brother will be delayed,” she said, sweetly. “If the café’s food is as mediocre as you say it is, it would be to my benefit to learn the basics.”

He put a hand out as if to ward her off. “Allison—”

Pounding on the door startled her. Unruffled, Shane pivoted and strode to pull it open without bothering to inquire who was on the other side.

“Ben.”

Hovering in the doorway connecting the dining room to the living room, Allison studied the visitor. A couple of inches shorter than Shane, the attractive, auburn-haired man was broader in the chest and shoulders, his legs like tree trunks. His skin was tan and freckled from the sun, his eyes green like sea glass that sometimes washed up on Norfolk’s beaches.

“Sorry to interrupt,” he said with a slight grimace. “I heard you had a lady friend in town.” His gaze sought out the room behind Shane, flaring when it encountered her. He nodded in greeting.

Shane turned sideways. A draft of cold air traveled through the room, ruffling her skirts. “Ben MacGregor, meet Allison Ashworth.”

Swiping his hat off and pressing it against his chest, he sketched a bow. “How do you do, ma’am?”

“Fine, sir. And you?”

“I’d say my day just got brighter now that you’re in it.” His grin was downright roguish.

She laughed at his outrageousness.

Shane's upper lip curled. "Ben's the resident flirt. He's also my one and only deputy. Did you need something in particular?"

The deputy didn't bother denying Shane's claim, she noticed. His eyes still twinkling, he addressed his boss. "Another fight's broken out over on the Oakley spread. Figured you'd want to ride along with me." He held a gun belt aloft.

"You figured right." Taking it from him, Shane fastened the tooled-leather strip around his waist. "Sorry I can't stay and help you clean up," he told her, his head bent to his task. "I'll come later to deliver the supplies."

Her attention snagged on the menacing-looking pistol on his hip. The pearl handle was worn smooth, the barrel long and skinny.

"I've never held a gun."

Both men stared at her.

"Can I go with you?"

Shane's expression was one of disbelief. "Of course you can't go with me. Why would you ask?"

"You're a lawman now. I'd like to see how you go about upholding the law."

While Ben shifted from one foot to the other, face averted to hide a smile, Shane leveled a formidable glare at her. "Until your brother gets here, you are my responsibility, understand? It's my task to make sure you have your fun." He smirked at the reference to their earlier conversation. "And that you stay safe

while doing so.”

“But—”

“I mean it, Allison.” Putting on his Stetson, he strode for the door. “Don’t step foot outside this house until I return.”

Without waiting for her response, he joined his deputy on the porch and closed the door behind him, fully expecting her to follow his dictate. Annoyed at his highhandedness—he wasn’t her actual brother, after all—Allison wondered what would happen if she didn’t.

#### Chapter Four

The house was quiet. Too quiet.

Shane checked the first floor. No sign of Allison. Thinking she might’ve decided to take a nap after her long journey, he ascended the stairs and peeked into her room. The bed was made, her trunks pushed into a neat row beneath the windows on the far wall. The other bedrooms were also empty.

Determined to unload the supplies as quickly as possible and get back to the jail, impatience jabbed at him as he bypassed the unoccupied outhouse.

Where had she gotten off to?

Intent on scanning the fields to his right, he almost walked smack into the smokehouse. Scowling, he sidestepped and stopped short. A female figure was crouched half inside the smokehouse’s squat entrance.

“Allison.”

She lurched. Banged her head against the wood. “Ouch!”

Scrambling outside, she rubbed the sore spot. “Did you have to startle me like that?”

“I’ve been searching everywhere for you. You weren’t in the house, the barn...” He wasn’t about to admit the trepidation that had roared to life inside him. “I thought I told you to stay inside.”

“You did.” The baleful look she shot him transformed into a grimace. “I’m not one of your locals to boss about, however.”

“What were you looking for in there?” He motioned to the smokehouse.

“Nothing. I was simply curious what was inside.”

Shane removed his gloves and, stuffing them in his coat pocket, moved to her side. “Let me see.”

“I’m fine.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” he insisted, nudging her hand aside. His fingers gentle on her scalp, he examined the spot. “It didn’t break the skin.”

She was very close, her round shoulder butting against his chest, the fruity fragrance clinging to her person inviting him closer. She was soft and warm and feminine, traits that were nonexistent in his world of crime and punishment.

“I told you it was nothing,” she whispered, her voice off-kilter.

He took a big step back, his huff creating white puffs that hovered in the air. “You’ve always been a troublesome female, you know that?”

Her chin whipped up. “Excuse me?”

“You kept your father and brother hopping to keep up with

your antics. I was thankfully too wise to join in.”

“If I was guilty of anything back then, it was trying to be your friend.”

Brushing past him in a swirl of petticoats and skirts, she marched in the direction of the house. Smoke curled from both chimneys into the gray sky above. She'd restrained her mane with a single blue ribbon, and the long ponytail bounced with the force of her steps.

He watched her for a moment before going after her, wishing for the first time in a long time that he had the kind of relationship with God that David Ashworth and his friends, the O'Malleys, had. He could sure use some divine help right then. But he'd never gotten over the feeling of abandonment that had taken root in his childhood. His pleas for his pa to come and rescue him, for his ma to truly change, for someone, anyone, to help make things better, had gone unanswered. Ignored. So he'd stopped asking.

Catching up to her at the corner of the house, he fell into step beside her, choosing to introduce a whole new subject. The past was a prickly maze of disappointment and confusion. Best to avoid it.

“I think you're gonna like what I brought for you.”

“Oh?” She got that gleam in her eye that he didn't trust. “Did you bring me a Christmas tree? A wreath? Greenery to decorate the mantel?”

His pace slowed. “Huh?”

“I think I'd like a cluster of mistletoe, as well. Maybe two.”

“What do you need all that for? You’re only going to be here a few weeks.”

“The most important weeks of the entire year.”

“Hold on.” He halted beside the wagon bed. “Why would you want mistletoe?”

Her crimson lips curved into a smile that many would find winsome. To him, it meant trouble. “You never know when an eligible suitor might pay me a visit at some point during my stay. Best to be prepared.”

Shane was like an unarmed man in an ambush as jealousy pummeled him. While she hadn’t mentioned Ben specifically, an image of his deputy and Allison locked in each other’s arms beneath the mistletoe wedged its way into his mind. Once there, he couldn’t dislodge it.

“What about Trevor Langston?” he ground out.

“Trevor and I don’t have an understanding,” she said airily. “I haven’t yet accepted his suit.”

Going to the rear of the bed, she peered into the multiple crates. He followed, irritated that she was here one day and already getting under his skin. This wasn’t supposed to happen.

“You’re leaving within a month. That’s hardly enough time to court.”

She ignored him as she continued to catalog the contents.

“I hope you’re not considering Ben. He’s not the settling-down type,” he went on. “Don’t pin your hopes on the likes of him. I mean it, Allison.”

“I’m not pinning my hopes on anyone.” Rolling her eyes, she planted her hands on her hips. “I’m teasing, Mr. Lawman. The mistletoe is for decoration...and maybe George and Clarissa. The children descend into giggling fits whenever their parents smooch. It’s quite entertaining.”

Her nose wrinkled adorably, and suddenly he was thinking about someone other than Ben kissing her beneath the mistletoe. Someone like himself.

Having reached the limit of his patience, Shane stifled a groan and, loading his arms with heavy crates, made his way to the kitchen. It took several trips to unload everything. He didn’t stay to help her unpack. Murmuring an excuse about work, he promised to swing by the following morning before beating a hasty retreat.

“Hurry up and get here, George,” he muttered.

At the livery, Milton Warring met him at the entrance, stained fingers tugging at his scraggly beard.

“What’s on your mind, Warring?”

“I’ve found evidence of a trespasser.”

Shane climbed down and let Warring’s assistant take over the rented wagon and team. When the lad was out of earshot, he said, “Show me.”

The livery owner led him upstairs into the loft where mostly hay and other supplies were stored. Near the shuttered opening overlooking Main Street, he spotted an empty tin of beans and nudged it with his toe. Inside, a dirty spoon rattled. Shane bent

and examined the tin and raked through the scattered straw for other clues.

“Is it possible your hired boy ate his lunch up here and forgot to clean up after himself?”

“He eats his lunch on the bench out front most days. I asked to be sure, and he denies this is his.”

Shane walked the perimeter of the space, his gaze sweeping the planks. Near the ladder opening, he reached down and plucked a gold necklace from the straw. “Recognize this?”

Taking turns, they examined the locket and faded photo of a woman. “Haven’t seen her before,” Warring said. “You?”

“Nope.” Slipping it in his pocket, Shane said, “I’ll ask around. See if anyone has an idea who she might be.”

He scowled. “You think he’ll come back?”

“It’s a lot warmer in here than it is out there. If he got away with it once, he’ll try again. Unless he’s moved on.”

Their town saw a lot of travelers passing through on their way to or from North Carolina. Most were respectable folks. It was the disreputable few he had to worry about.

Shane put his boot on the ladder’s top rung. “Ben and I’ll take turns watching the place.”

“Good. I want that rascal caught.”

“Keep an eye out for anything else suspicious.”

He left the livery and headed for his office. His deputy was warming his hands at the woodstove and looked up at his entrance.

“We have a potential problem over at Warring’s.” Shane related the scant details and warned him to be on alert for unfamiliar faces.

“Will do, boss.” He gave a short nod. “You get Allison settled over at the Wattses’ place?”

“She’s Miss Ashworth to you. And I’d prefer it if you’d steer clear of her.”

Folding his arms over his chest, Ben met his gaze squarely. “Because she’s just here for Christmas? Or because you want her for yourself?”

When it became clear a couple of years back that he needed to hire help, he’d chosen Ben MacGregor because of his astute mind and discernment skills. They worked well together. Shane didn’t approve of his deputy’s flippant attitude toward women, but his personal life was none of his business.

“I don’t care what you do on your own time or who you involve, as long as you uphold the reputation of this office. But I won’t have you trifling with Allison’s emotions.”

“You didn’t answer the question.” From his stance and unyielding stare, it was obvious he wasn’t going to drop the matter.

“There’s nothing romantic between us. Never has been. She’s like a sister to me.” The words sounded false, even to his ears. “I don’t want to see her hurt.”

“I respect you, Shane. As my boss, but also as a man. I’d be an idiot to ruin our professional relationship by doing something

stupid regarding your friend.”

“I’m glad you understand.”

“I’m not finished.” He held up a hand. “Seeing as how I’m not an idiot, you can rest assured that any relationship I pursue with her will be respectable.”

Shane curled his hands into fists, the buckskin gloves molding to his knuckles. For the first time since they started working together, he was tempted to plant his fist in the other man’s face. All because of Allison.

“If you hurt her, your career in law enforcement is over.”

Ben’s eyes widened a fraction. “That’s not going to happen.”

“See that it doesn’t.”

Pivoting on his heel, Shane stormed out with no idea where he was headed.

\* \* \*

The tantalizing scents of sizzling bacon and rich-bodied coffee woke her. Snuggling deeper into the cocoon of quilts, it took several moments for Allison to remember that she was not at Ashworth House. She shot up in bed.

Pushing the tangled mass out of her eyes, she blinked at the framed needlework on the opposite wall and the mountain view through the nearest window. She inhaled again, and her stomach rumbled in anticipation. Leaping out of bed and wincing at the cold shock to her stocking feet, she hurried to the wardrobe.

Shane must’ve paid someone to cook meals for her. He’d seemed reluctant to share a meal with her yesterday. No way

would he commit to cooking for her the duration of her visit. Although a thoughtful gesture, it would've been nice if he'd alerted her to his plans.

She chose one of her favorite dresses, a soft but sturdy material of rich cream dotted with orange and green flowers and trimmed in green ribbon. The dress put her in mind of her beloved estate gardens in springtime. Once dressed, she brushed her hair until it shone and arranged it in a twist.

Descending the stairs, Allison noticed a sorrel horse hitched to the post out front. She entered the kitchen and the polite greeting died on her lips.

“What are you doing here?”

“Isn't it obvious?”

She crossed her arms, irrationally annoyed with him. “You of all people should know it's a bad idea to let yourself into someone else's house while they're sleeping.”

Shane scooped a pile of fluffy eggs onto a plate, along with biscuits and a thick, white sauce. “Most intruders don't cook you breakfast.” He held the plate out. “Have a seat. There's milk on the table. If you'd prefer coffee, the kettle's there.”

Allison accepted the plate. The food smelled amazing, especially after the modest, cold supper of cheese and bread she'd had last evening. “What is the white stuff? Are those lumps in there?”

“You've never had sausage gravy?”

“I've had brown gravy.”

“Biscuits and gravy is a common breakfast food here. Try it and see if you like it.”

She carried her plate to the dining room. He joined her in a few moments with his own breakfast and, assuming the same chair he'd occupied the day before, picked up his fork and spiked a clump of eggs.

“Shouldn't we say grace?”

He looked startled. “You're right. I forgot. Would you mind?”

Allison nodded, unsure if he was too shy to pray aloud or if his reluctance stemmed from a lack of confidence in God's love. Lord, please give me the courage to broach the subject. Give me the right words.

Catching her off guard, Shane settled his fingers over hers atop the tablecloth. Her focus shattered. The heat from his hand seeped into hers. His skin was rougher than hers, his bones denser, his hold firm and sure. Allison curved her fingers inward, capturing his, returning the pressure. His breath hitched. Her own heart tumbled in her chest. This wasn't the first time they'd held hands.

That other time he'd been guiding her through the woods to safety and, although he'd scolded her for wandering off alone the entire trek home, he'd allowed her to cling to his hand, a lifeline in a dark and stormy night.

The rare moments of physical contact stood out in her mind because Shane either hadn't liked the connection or hadn't known how to handle it. Their chief cook, a boisterous, vivacious woman

who'd been liberal with her affection, had hugged him just like she did everyone else. Instead of returning the embrace, he'd stood rock still, his arms imprisoned at his sides, looking as if he was being prodded with a hot poker. When her father had occasionally given Shane a hearty pat on the back or slung an arm about his shoulder, he'd stiffened. Allison's heart had broken each time she witnessed his reaction.

Since he refused to open up about his childhood, she was left to imagine the terrible things he must've endured.

Her prayer was brief. He tugged free of her and turned his full attention to his meal. Tension prickled between them. Allison ate without speaking, her thoughts racing. He had yet to show her where he worked and lived. Did he eat alone most of the time? The thought made her sad. And unexpectedly annoyed. If only he wasn't so stubborn, so determined to remain aloof and unaffected by the people in his life.

"How do you like the gravy?" His soft query brought her attention to his implacable blue gaze.

"It's delicious." The biscuits were large and doughy and not beneficial to her waistline. "Where did you learn to cook like this?"

"In Kansas. I didn't have a lot of extra money to spend in restaurants, and I got tired of corn mush and beans real quick. The sheriff I was working for was a widower, and he'd invite me over sometimes. I commented once how I'd wished I'd learned, and the cooking lessons commenced."

“I wish I could’ve seen that.” She smiled at the mental image of a pair of tough lawmen puttering around a kitchen.

“I’m sure you do.” One corner of his mouth tipped up. It wasn’t a full-fledged smile, but it was still able to make her spirits soar.

“You could pass on a few of those lessons, you know.”

“Sorry. I’m not much of a teacher.”

“Like you’re not much of a writer?”

Over the rim of his coffee cup, he blinked at her. When he lowered it, a wrinkle tugged his brows together and the grim set of his lips returned.

“How did you fare during the night?”

Allison allowed the change in subject. She truly didn’t want to travel down this road because, first, he likely wasn’t going to admit his reasons for disliking her, and second, she didn’t want to be the one to put that frown on his face. She wanted to make him smile and laugh. She wanted to bring him joy.

You didn’t manage that before, a voice reminded her. Nothing has changed except for the fact he’s had more practice retreating into his protective shell.

“Not terrible. There were creaks and groans that prevented me from falling asleep right away. It will take some time to get used to being alone in a big house.”

“Your brother will be here before too long.”

Allison didn’t tell him about the idea she’d been pondering for months. While George and Clarissa were happy with the current arrangement, she’d been thinking more and more about setting

up her own household, a smaller house with fewer staff in a good section of the city. Of course, that had been before she'd decided to give Trevor a fair shot at winning her heart, a decision goaded by Shane's presence and the hurtful memories he revived.

He downed the last of his coffee and stood. "Are you interested in a trip to town?"

"Certainly. What did you have in mind?"

"I was thinking I'd introduce you to the woman I told you about... Caroline Turner. The two of you can discuss holiday stuff while I see to business."

He was pawning her off on a stranger. Allison tried not to let her disappointment show. "What kind of business?"

Striding into the kitchen, he spoke over his shoulder. "Work-related."

She swallowed the last bite and, gazing longingly at the dish of remaining biscuits, turned away and joined him by the dry sink. "Do you have to resolve another argument among neighbors?"

He took her plate and submerged it in a basin of soapy water. "No. Why?"

"My world is almost completely made up of ledgers and employee disputes and company policy. It's predictable and mundane. I'd like to see what a typical day for a sheriff is like."

"My job isn't as exciting as you might imagine. Sure, there are days when I have to break up fights or investigate crimes. But there are long stretches of inactivity that anyone would consider boring."

“At least show me the jail.”

“Since the cells are unoccupied at the moment, I can do that.”

“I’d like to see your home, as well.”

“It’s nothing special.”

“Please?”

“Why is it important to you?”

“After I return to Norfolk, and George tells me what you’ve written in your latest letter, I’ll be able to picture you in your jail or your home. Much more satisfying than a blank void.”

He got a funny look on his face...like an apology. Did he regret not contacting her? Was he about to promise to change his ways after this visit? He opened his mouth, apparently searching for the right words.

“I’ll take you after lunch.”

Breaking eye contact, she headed for the exit. “I’ll gather my things.”

Maybe seeing him in his environment wasn’t the best idea. Sure, she’d be able to picture him more easily. But she’d also be able to remember being in those spaces with him. She’d wish she could return and be with him, a future that was out of the realm of possibility.

Not only would he not welcome a second visit from her, but she was determined to give a relationship with Trevor an honest try. That meant cutting all ties to her girlhood dreams.

## Chapter Five

Caroline Turner was flawless.

She lived in a flawless house and wore flawless clothes that displayed her flawless figure.

Allison sat in the Turners' sumptuous parlor, sipping golden floral tea from a china cup and listening as the young woman listed Gatlinburg's holiday-themed events. She exuded quiet elegance. Her white-gold hair was scraped into a neat bun at the base of her neck. A double string of iridescent pearls complemented her off-white bodice, as did the pearl earrings at her ears. She had large, dark blue eyes, almost navy-colored, that weren't as happy as someone with a flawless life should be. Her smile wasn't happy, either. It was one a person pinned on for guests.

"We typically have a large turnout for our annual nativity unveiling." Caroline's gaze was assessing. "The sheriff doesn't attend many of our holiday functions. I wonder if that will change this year."

"He never has been one for social functions."

"While our humble festivities can't possibly measure up to what you're accustomed to, I'm certain you'd enjoy yourself."

"Norfolk has a great many events to experience, it's true. However, I'm certain I will enjoy what Gatlinburg has to offer." Allison placed her cup and saucer on the low coffee table between them. Caroline must've seen her eyeing the tray of jumble cookies, because she picked it up and extended it her direction.

"Please, have as many as you'd like."

“I shouldn’t,” she said, even as the scents of juicy raisins and walnuts teased her nostrils. “I’ve had two already.”

Caroline offered her a sincere smile then, one that lit up her entire face and made her less perfect. “I find them hard to resist myself.” Taking one, she sunk her teeth into it and made a little sound of appreciation. “We only have them around the holidays.”

Allison returned the smile and chose a third cookie.

“I know it’s bad manners to pry, but Shane hasn’t spoken of you before. Or anyone else from his past, for that matter. May I ask how you know each other?”

Having already prepared a standard answer to this exact question, she said, “Shane’s a close friend of my family. He worked for my father.”

“I didn’t realize he’d lived in Virginia.” Brushing imaginary crumbs from her pleated skirts, she remarked, “I’d heard he moved here from Kansas and assumed that was his home state.”

“He’s always been a private person. In fact, he’d be annoyed if he knew you and I were discussing him.”

“I’m afraid he’s invited more scrutiny by keeping your existence a secret.”

“I told him as much myself,” Allison said. “He didn’t appreciate it.”

A husky laugh burst out of her. “I think I’m going to like you, Allison Ashworth. I’m going to relish watching you pull the rug from beneath the staid sheriff’s feet.”

Unsure how to respond, she was grateful when her hostess

didn't probe further. Caroline returned to the topic of Christmas, specifically their custom of assembling gift baskets for the poor. Allison was keen to assist. Charitable endeavors took up much of her free time back home, holidays or no.

A half hour past the time of Shane's specified return, the teapot was drained dry and only crumbs remained on the plate. Besides remorse, Allison felt embarrassment for monopolizing Caroline's morning. When she caught her checking the mantel clock a second time, Allison went to retrieve her gloves from the carved hall stand.

"I appreciate your hospitality, Caroline. Shane must've gotten detained."

"I've enjoyed our chat. I hope I didn't make you feel as if you overstayed your welcome." Following her to the foyer where Allison fastened on her cloak, Caroline fiddled with her pearl necklace. "I'm waiting for my father to return from a trip. Today is my birthday, and he promised to be home no later than today."

There was a hint of vulnerability in the younger woman's expression, yet another crack in her sophisticated facade.

"Happy birthday. You're fortunate to have your father with you. Mine passed away many years ago, and I still miss him terribly."

"I'm sorry for your loss." The corners of Caroline's mouth turned down. "I'm afraid my father and I don't have the best of relationships."

Allison's hand paused on the knob. "Oh?"

Pink suffused her skin. “What could I be thinking of? My manners have deserted me today. Please forgive me, Allison. You don’t want to hear about my family woes.” She waved a hand in dismissal. “Don’t feel as if you have to leave. You’re welcome to stay for lunch.”

“I appreciate the invitation, but I’d actually like to explore the town a bit. Would you mind telling Shane I’ve gone to do a little shopping?”

“Certainly.”

“I’m looking forward to seeing you again soon.”

“As am I.”

The cold enveloped her as she strolled in the direction of Main Street. Fortunately, she’d been blessed with a good sense of her surroundings. On the way, the clouds parted and a shaft of sunlight warmed her.

She wished she could speak to her brother. Tell him about the rented farmhouse, the quaint mountain town, her excitement about experiencing Christmas in a new place. Like Shane, she hoped George wasn’t long delayed. Spending time alone with the lawman was both heady and frustrating.

Help me guard my heart, Lord, she prayed.

Caring too much for Shane Timmons had always been a problem with no solution.

\* \* \*

“Where’s that pretty little filly of yours, Sheriff?”

Striding past the barber shop on his way to the mercantile,

Shane ignored the good-natured teasing. He'd brought it upon himself. If he hadn't been so flustered by the prospect of her visit, he would've seen the wisdom in letting the news travel the grapevine before her arrival. Folks wouldn't have been as shocked.

Over the years, he'd worked hard to make the Timmons name one to be respected and revered. He'd earned his current reputation as a just, honorable, hardworking man of the law, and he wasn't about to let anything tarnish it.

He'd spent too many years carrying his sloppy drunk of a mother home through the Norfolk streets, trying to ignore the vulgar taunts and insults hurled their way. In their poverty-stricken neighborhood, he'd been known as a boy no one wanted. He'd been born to poor, unwed parents. His father hadn't cared enough to stick around and his mother detested her life to the point she had to drown her sorrows in alcohol every night. His maternal grandparents had refused to acknowledge him and moved away shortly after his birth. He'd never met his father's family. Doubted they even knew of his existence.

On the boardwalk, Shane passed a pair of young men. They waited until he was several yards away before calling after him.

"Where's the paint lady? Heard she's a real looker under all that green goo."

"Hey, Sheriff, are you two courtin'?"

Not breaking his stride, he allowed their words to bounce off him. They weren't cruel like the ones he'd endured as a youth,

but they called forth excruciating memories better left in the dark shadows of his mind.

Paint lady. Allison was going to love that.

The mercantile's bell jangled as he walked in. The store was bustling with activity, as it would be until after the holiday. The scents of cinnamon, cloves and oranges permeated the air. Quinn and Nicole had complimentary cups of spiced cider available during the weeks leading up to Christmas. It helped ward off the chill, especially for those folks who traveled miles to get here.

Several people glanced his way, speculation flaring as their gazes switched from him to a point in the paper goods section. Allison's flaxen hair glistened in the natural light as she tilted her head this way and that, examining a sheaf of decorative papers. If she was aware of his scrutiny, she didn't indicate it.

His neck burning at the unwanted attention his presence was drawing, he wound his way through the crowded aisles to reach her.

"I'm sorry I ran late." He pitched his voice low. "Caroline said you might be here."

"It's all right," she said, casually holding the sheaf to her chest as she lifted her emerald gaze to his. "I figure that's standard for a sheriff."

"You're not upset?"

"No." She gave him a strange look. "I've taken advantage of the free time to do some shopping."

"What are you planning on doing with those papers?"

“You’ll see.” With a conspiratorial wink, she started for the counter.

He followed in her wake, aware that their every word and gesture was being monitored.

“You can assist me in my project if you’d like.” Her bright smile invited him to share in her enthusiasm.

“I’m not committing to anything until I know what it is you have in mind.”

They reached the long, worn-smooth counter where glass displays housed everything from razors to colored-glass bowls to jewelry. She paused before the display of cakes and pies, her eyes round. He hadn’t forgotten her penchant for sweets. The Ashworth cook had catered to Allison’s preferences, and he and George had both benefitted.

He pointed to an apple stack cake. “These are the finest desserts you’ll ever taste.”

She lifted her face to his. “Better than the Oak Street Bakery?”

“Better than that.”

A breath pulsed between her shiny lips. “And who is the illustrious baker?”

“Jessica O’Malley. Well, it’s Jessica Parker now. She’s married to a former US Marshal. She’s also Nicole Darling’s sister. You’ll meet all the O’Malleys eventually.”

“I’d like that.”

“Which one would you like to sample? My treat.”

She shook her head in regret. “Oh, no. I’ve had my quota of

sugar for the day, I'm afraid." Nodding to the window through which a vendor could be seen, she said, "But I will take some roasted chestnuts."

Shane kept his expression bland. "Whatever you'd prefer."

When she'd made her purchase, he guided her out into the now sunny day, one of those rare winter days with vivid blue skies and cheerful sun reminiscent of warmer seasons. He bought her a bag of chestnuts, but declined to get one for himself.

She sampled the first bite and hummed with delight. She offered the bag to him.

"No, thanks."

"Don't you like them?"

"I wouldn't know. Never tried one."

She stopped abruptly, forcing the man behind them to sidestep quickly in order to avoid a collision. "Then how do you know you won't like them?"

How could he explain his silly aversion to something that had taunted him during this most painful of seasons? Most days he'd had to make do with stale bread and moldy cheese or a thin broth with vegetables long past their prime. Walking past restaurants, he'd smell fresh-baked bread and grilled meat and his mouth would water. He began to dread Christmas because his lack was made even harder to bear. He'd see fathers out with their sons as they carried a fat goose home to their family. He'd see kids skipping down the street sucking on stick candy. Mothers and daughters sharing sacks of chestnuts on park benches.

He hadn't longed for the food, but for the love, acceptance and security of two devoted parents. Siblings who squabbled over toys and played kickball in the yard. A clean, warm home to live in, a soft bed to sleep in every night.

A voice inside his head tried to convince him that he was no longer that ragged, defiant boy, but the feelings of inadequacy and bitterness drowned it out.

He pointed across the street. "There's the jail. Still want to see inside?"

Slowly her puzzled gaze left his to follow the line of his finger. "Very much."

With his hand nestled against the middle of her back, he guided her across the road and into the building where he spent a large portion of his time. To her, the space probably looked stark. To their left was a woodstove. Opposite the door was his desk, a scuffed relic handed down from the sheriff before him. A detailed topography map was nailed to the wall behind his chair, and the American flag hung on the right. One barred window overlooked Main Street.

Her gloved fingers trailed the desk's edge. "So this is where you keep the peace."

"Something like that."

She wandered to the first of three cells and, passing through the open metal door, pulled it closed behind her with a clang.

"What are you doing, Allison?"

Her grin was mischievous. "Go sit in your chair."

He dropped his hands to his sides. “Why?”

“Humor me.”

The sight of Allison in one of his cells was a jarring one. Her loveliness had no place in a setting meant for thieves and carousers.

He dismissed thoughts of refusing. The quicker he obliged her, the sooner they could leave. Muttering beneath his breath, he circled the desk, slumped into his chair and crossed his arms. “Happy now?”

“Teach me how to shoot, and I will be.”

He glared at her. “Not gonna happen.”

“If I was one of your prisoners, I’d be intimidated by you.”

Her tone was serious, but her eyes twinkled with a zest for life he’d always envied. “I’ll never understand the way your mind works.”

The main door swung open, and Claude bumbled inside, his jaw lolling when he caught sight of Allison behind bars.

Shane shot to his feet. “Claude.”

“Am I interrupting something?” The banker’s incredulous, gray gaze inventoried the scene.

“Shane was indulging my sense of whimsy,” Allison announced. Releasing the bars to allow the door to swing wide, she exited the cell and strode to shake Claude’s hand. “I don’t believe we’ve officially met. I’m Allison Ashworth, an old friend of Shane’s.”

Befuddled by her charming smile, the man stood up straighter

and puffed out his chest. “Claude Jenkins. I manage the bank next door.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Jenkins.” His hand still in her grasp, she patted it and leaned forward. “You wouldn’t mind keeping this between us, would you? I’ve never been in a jail before, you see, and I wanted to gain a better understanding of Shane’s job.”

Claude nodded with enthusiasm. “Oh, I understand, Miss Ashworth. I’m aware of how sensitive to gossip our sheriff is.”

Beaming, she glanced at Shane, her expression one of satisfaction. He shook his head. The woman couldn’t do anything the usual way, could she? He hoped Trevor Langston knew what he was getting himself into.

“Is there anything pressing you need help with, Claude?” he said.

“No, nothing important enough to take you away from this delightful young lady.” Releasing her hand with obvious reluctance, the banker grasped the door handle. “Will I see you at the church’s nativity celebration on Friday evening, Miss Ashworth?”

“That’s a question better directed to Shane.”

Claude pinned him with a suddenly steely gaze. “You are planning on escorting her, I hope.”

Shane hid a grimace. He made a point of avoiding these types of events. Singing about Christ’s miraculous birth while confronted with the nativity magnified the hollowness inside

him. All those church services he'd attended with the Ashworths, the sermons about eternal destination—what would he choose, heaven or hell?—would march through his mind, making peace impossible.

“If Allison wishes to attend, I’ll make sure she’s there.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear.”

When he'd left, Allison turned to him with clasped hands. “What’s the next stop on the grand tour? Your house?”

## Chapter Six

Allison was determined not to let Shane see her nervousness. This wasn't a romantic outing. He didn't wish for her company. He'd practically been ordered to escort her.

Descending the stairs, she gave her cranberry velvet skirts a little shake to adjust the stiff crinoline beneath. The bodice was constrictive, the long sleeves snug at the wrists, but the dress was one of her favorites. Shane turned from the mantel, his luminous gaze widening as he took in her appearance.

She ran her hand along the neat French braid trailing the middle of her back. “What? Is this not appropriate? Should I change?”

“No.” Stroking his whiskered jaw, he said, “You look... Christmassy.”

“Christmassy?” Like an ornament on a tree?

“Nice.” He cleared his throat. “You look nice.”

He turned his head away, giving her a chance to admire his dark suit. The midnight black hue made him seem more

imposing than usual, but it also gave him a touch of city polish. His hair was neatly combed with a few stubborn locks falling over his forehead.

She moved closer to the fireplace, where the logs smoldered. “You don’t look like a sheriff tonight.”

His lips curved into a smile, an actual smile, and Allison felt as if the floor beneath her feet trembled. His austere features assumed a masculine beauty that had her inching forward and desperately wanting to trace his lips with her fingertips.

Thankfully, his deep voice shattered the strange compulsion. “You’re awfully preoccupied with my profession. Norfolk has an impressive police force.”

She made a dismissive gesture. “It’s not the same. I know Tennessee isn’t exactly the untamed West, but neither is it a sprawling metropolis. There are books written about men like you.”

He snorted. “My life is not a grand adventure.”

“You don’t see it that way because, in your mind, you’re simply doing your duty. To the people you help, you are that larger-than-life hero in the pages of a book.”

“I suppose we’ll have to agree to disagree.” Running a finger beneath his collar, he tilted his head to the clock. “We’d better get going if you want to get there before the candle lighting begins.”

As he locked the door and led her into the nippy winter evening, she soaked in the vast expanse of twinkling stars. Twin lanterns hooked to either side of the wagon emitted a soft glow.

“I’m sorry you were roped into taking me tonight. I know you’d rather be doing something else.”

“A few hours of Christmas carols won’t kill me,” he drawled, assisting her up.

He climbed up on his side and, instead of taking his seat, reached into the wagon bed and brought out a thick, multicolored quilt. Unfolding the bundle, he bent over her and tucked it about her legs and lap. His face was near enough for her to feel the brush of his cool, minty breath across her cheek.

“Thank you, Shane,” she whispered, touched by his thoughtfulness.

The seat bounced a little when he lowered his large frame onto it. Seated this close beside him, she was aware of their variances in size and the fact he made her feel feminine and almost delicate.

With a nod, he issued quiet instructions to the horses. The wheels rolled over the rutted track. It was impossible not to bump into him. He shrugged off her apology. Allison glanced at his implacable profile, wishing he’d wrap his arm around her to hold her steady. Then she could snuggle into his side. But that would mean prolonged personal contact, which he didn’t do. It would also indicate he felt at ease with her, that he felt affection for her, neither of which were true.

Focusing her attention on their passing surroundings—the forest on either side of the lane cloaked in mysterious shadows—she thought about her visit to his modest cabin. The one-room structure was so far removed from Ashworth House as to be

laughable. Still, he took pride in his ownership. The wooden logs and chinking were in excellent condition, the puncheon floors and window glass clean of debris. What little furniture he had was of good quality. And while the single bed shoved against the wall and adorned with naught but a plain woolen blanket was a little desolate in her estimation, his home wasn't without personality.

Stacks of law journals and various periodicals had been visible on the small table beside the russet-colored cushioned chair. On a shelf near the fireplace, he'd stored a collection of games—dominoes, tabletop ninepins, chess. Years ago, during the afternoon hours after school, he and George could often be found in the estate's library playing checkers or some other board game. If the weather was nice, they'd engage in a game of kickball or football outdoors. Shane had possessed more aggression than actual skill in those physical games. Sometimes she would hide in the rose arbor and observe them, in awe of the almost frenzied energy coming off him.

“Do you still play football?”

He glanced over at her. “Mostly on holidays or special days when folks take a break from their usual chores.”

“Who do you spend holidays with?”

“The O'Malleys.”

Her curiosity about his relationship with them grew. “You're close to them, aren't you?”

“They're the closest thing to family I've got.”

She stiffened. Her hands braced on either side of her legs,

she gripped the wood to avoid bumping into him again as the conveyance traveled around a bend and left the woods behind.

He heaved a sigh. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply that you and your family aren't important to me."

Allison was grateful for the darkness. "There's no reason to deny the truth." Could he detect the tiny wobble in her voice? "Your life is here. Has been for a long time."

"Your father changed the course of my life. Without him, I'd be in jail or worse."

"He loved you as if you were his own son."

The silent accusation hung between them. Her father had given Shane a job and welcomed him into their home, but she'd seen no sign that the friendless, adrift young man ever fully lowered his guard with any of them.

He kneaded his nape for long moments. "He was the best of men."

Emotion welled up inside. Some days the grief lay dormant, like a hibernating bear, and others it roared to life, reminding her of everything her father was missing. He would've liked to have seen how well his business was flourishing under George's leadership. He would've cherished being a grandfather.

"He would be proud of you, Shane."

The faint lamplight allowed her to see his initial surprise and disbelief. Sorrow, and something akin to regret, surged in his blue eyes.

"I'd give anything to be able to talk to him again." Where his

hands rested atop his thighs, his gloves stretched tight across his knuckles. “I don’t remember thanking him.”

Stunned by the raw admission, Allison reached over and squeezed his forearm. “My father was a wise man. He saw more than you realize.”

Shane’s gaze returned to the lane. When he didn’t acknowledge her gesture in any way, she removed her hand.

He nodded to the cluster of buildings comprising Main Street. “Almost there.”

Lamps shone in several of the windows. The white clapboard church was situated at one end of town. A golden glow lit up the night around it, allowing her a glimpse of the grand steeple soaring into the sky. Shane guided their wagon to the edge of the congested churchyard.

Their arrival didn’t go unnoticed. A cluster of young men strolling past called out as Shane was helping her to the ground.

“Hey, Sheriff. Evening, paint lady.”

Allison stumbled. Shane’s hands curved around her waist, preventing her from plowing into him. Bracing herself against his sturdy shoulders, she gaped at the retreating group.

“Did I hear that right?”

“Um, it appears you’ve earned yourself a nickname.”

She lifted her face to gaze up at him. He bit his lip to stop a smile.

“Paint lady?”

His heat radiated outward from where he still held her. It

would be so easy to slide her hands up and around his neck...

“Could be worse.”

Awareness settled across his features as his gaze roamed her face, and his fingers flexed on her waist. Yearning, intense and demanding, curled through her. Please don't let me go, she silently implored. Don't pull away.

“Here you two are. Glad to see you made it.”

Claude Jenkins's intrusion brought a grimace to Shane's face. Immediately, he put her away from him and turned to acknowledge the man and his wife. Behind the couple, a handsome man with wheat-colored hair, trim mustache and goatee and a penetrating blue gaze waited to speak to them.

Claude winked at her before leading his wife away. The stranger approached and clamped a hand on Shane's shoulder in a friendly manner, all the while studying her in the most unsettling way.

“Didn't expect to see you tonight. Is your lovely guest the reason you decided to join us ordinary revelers?”

Wearing a tolerant expression, Shane inclined his head her direction. “Josh O'Malley, meet Allison Ashworth.”

“One of the esteemed O'Malleys,” she quipped as he enveloped her hand in a firm shake. “Shane has spoken highly of your family.”

“Unfortunately, he's given us scant information about you. I'm here to rectify that.” Pulling her hand through the crook of his elbow, he winked down at her. “How about I introduce you to

the rest of the clan and then you can tell us about yourself?"

"Don't trust him, Allison," Shane drawled. "He's really after dirt that he can hold over me in the future."

Josh's burst of laughter drew curious looks from passersby. "He knows me too well."

She was enjoying this exchange too much to refuse. "I'd be happy to trade stories with you. As you might imagine, Shane hasn't been forthcoming about his life here. I'm particularly interested in his professional accomplishments."

"It's a deal." Josh's eyes gleamed.

He drew her closer to the church building. Shane trailed behind them, and she sensed the weight of his attention on her. Was he worried about what she might reveal? Or did he trust her judgment?

They paused at one of several long tables to procure mugs of fragrant apple cider. Cradling the large mug, she relished the warmth seeping through her gloves. Cognizant of the curiosity she aroused in the others, Allison wondered if it was due to her being an out-of-towner or her connection to their secretive sheriff.

Josh led her to a stand of gnarled trees that resembled pitiful broomsticks. Numerous adults chatted while kids dashed after one another, shrieking and giggling. At one edge of the gathering, a beautiful brunette waved them over, a smile stretching from ear to ear.

"Allison, allow me to introduce you to the love of my life."

Releasing Allison, Josh went and tugged the woman tight against his side. “My wife, Kate O’Malley.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Allison.” Her smile was sincere. “There are quite a lot of us.” She wiggled her fingers at the group of men and women, adolescents and young children. “It can be a bit overwhelming at first.”

“As long as you don’t expect me to remember everyone’s names.”

Laughing, the couple drew her deeper into the fray. Shane remained on the group’s edge, engaging in conversation with a striking-looking man with raven hair and an angry scar around his eye. She learned there were three brothers—Josh, Nathan and Caleb—and their cousins, five sisters who greeted her with curiosity. The most recently married, Jessica was the only one as yet without kids.

“You’re the baker, right?” Allison addressed the redhead. “Shane was bragging about your talent.”

“Folks do seem to enjoy my baking.”

Her husband, Grant Parker, brushed a lock of her deep-red hair behind her shoulder. “She’s being modest. Jessica’s desserts are highly sought after around these parts.”

“My sister Jane is just as skilled.” Jessica indicated her identical twin sister, who was standing a couple of yards away with a tall, distinguished fellow. “She’s busy with her kids and doesn’t have time to bake as much as she used to.”

Allison had met only one other set of twins before, brothers

in their midsixties who looked like mirror images of each other, much like Jessica and Jane. She tried to keep her fascination hidden.

“I confess to a weakness for sweets,” she said. “I will no doubt prove to be a loyal customer during my stay.”

The scarred man, who she’d learned was the youngest O’Malley brother, tugged a reluctant Shane to the middle of the group where she stood with Jessica and Grant.

“Interrogation time,” Caleb announced with a smirk. His brown-black eyes settled on her, and she felt sure she wouldn’t want him for an enemy. “Miss Ashworth, will you kindly tell us the nature of your relationship with Shane Timmons?”

Josh tapped her shoulder. “The truth, please, Miss Ashworth, not the pat answer Shane’s prepped you to give.”

Since Shane was standing beside her, she heard his slow exhale, sensed the flight-response of his body.

“I met Shane when I was twelve, and he was fourteen. He lived with me, my brother and father for many years.”

“This was in Virginia?” Kate said.

“Yes. Norfolk. My family has lived there for generations. My father, David Ashworth, built a successful business, which he bequeathed to my brother, George.”

“Allison works with George,” Shane inserted. “She oversees the hiring and termination process and ensures the employees have proper working conditions. In addition to all that, she’s in charge of payroll.”

“I didn’t realize my brother outlined my duties for you,” she said.

“George likes to talk business. You’re part of that world.”

“What was Shane like as an adolescent?” Caleb asked, his keen gaze studying them both. She would’ve liked to ask what he saw that was so interesting.

She gave Shane a sideways glance. “A lot like he is today, actually. Reserved. Determined to do everything on his own. Convinced his opinion is the only right one.”

“Sounds about right.” Josh snorted. “You must’ve been terrified.”

“Allison isn’t terrified of anything.” Shane’s sardonic reply evoked laughter from the group.

Her smile felt forced. He clearly didn’t know her well. He was the one who’d intimidated her from the start, the one whose good opinion she’d craved.

“My turn.” Crossing her arms, she met Caleb’s stare with her own. “I want to hear about Shane the lawman.”

Shane hung his head and groaned. “There’s really not much to tell.”

“Stop being so modest.” Josh socked his arm.

“If anyone has a right to boast, it’s him,” Jessica said with conviction.

Shane shot Allison a help me look. He despised being the center of attention. Not about to miss their recounting of his exploits, she shrugged. Displeasure twisted his mouth.

“Shane’s the type of man who’ll help anyone without thought to his own personal comfort or safety,” Josh said. “He’s got a will of iron and nerves of steel.”

Josh listed the ways Shane had impacted their lives. He’d once hunted and captured a criminal who’d taken Nathan captive. He’d rounded up a gang of outlaws whose female leader had almost killed Caleb and his wife, Rebecca. When a series of crimes had been committed at Quinn’s store and Nicole had been attacked, Shane worked with Quinn to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Grant spoke up at the end, his expression one of earnest respect. “Not so long ago, I woke up on Jessica’s property with no memory of who I was. Shane could’ve thrown me in jail that first day. Even after I discovered evidence that pointed to a sordid past, he believed in my innocence. Things could’ve gone very differently if not for him.”

The adults fell silent. Allison nudged Shane. “Sounds like the contents of an adventure book to me.”

He kicked up a shoulder. “It’s my job. I do what’s required of my position, the same as any other lawman in this nation is expected to do.”

“Handsome and humble...” Jessica huffed a dramatic sigh. “If only we could convince one of the single ladies around here that he’s worth the effort.”

Kate shot Allison a significant look. “What about you, Allison? Are you involved with anyone?”

Her cheeks blazed with heat at the implication. “Not at the

moment.”

Nathan elbowed Josh. Someone let loose a low whistle.

“Isn’t that convenient. Shane’s not courting anyone.”

“When has he ever?” Nathan’s young brother-in-law, Will, observed with a hearty laugh.

Shane threw up his hands. “That’s enough punishment for one night.”

Threading his fingers through hers, he pushed past Josh, guiding her away from their group.

“You don’t have to go,” Caleb called after them. “We’ll promise to behave.”

He lifted a hand in acknowledgment. Still, he didn’t slow his pace until they’d left his friends behind and were on the opposite side of the church near the cemetery. He dropped her hand the moment they stopped.

“It wasn’t that bad, was it?” she said softly.

“They like to harass me sometimes. You presented a perfect opportunity.”

“It’s obvious how much they care about you. You’re fortunate to have them.”

After witnessing the evidence of their regard for him, she could only be happy to know he wasn’t alone.

“I know.” His attention shifted beyond her. “Evening, Ben.”

“Howdy, boss.” The rakish deputy took hold of her hand and, clasping it between his, pressed it to his heart. “You are as radiant as the North Star, Miss Ashworth. You put every other woman

here to shame.”

Allison didn't dare risk a glance at Shane. “You are quite inventive with your compliments, Mr. MacGregor.”

“What can I say?” His grin widened. “You inspire me.”

“You can release her hand now,” Shane muttered.

Ben reluctantly did so. “Boss, I know how you feel about these types of shindigs. I don't mind keeping Miss Ashworth company if you'd like to skip out.”

Dejection weighed heavily on her shoulders. Lowering her gaze to the grass beneath her feet, she waited for Shane to agree.

“That's mighty thoughtful of you, but Allie came with me, and I'll see to it that she gets home safe and sound.”

She whipped her head up. In the semidarkness, his profile was impossible to read. He'd called her Allie just once, the day he left Virginia. On the verge of boarding the train, he'd taken her hand and told her to take care of herself.

Ben accepted his refusal with aplomb. “Understood.” His green gaze slid to her. “I'll see you around, Miss Ashworth.”

He sauntered off in the direction of the snack tables.

Shane scrubbed at the day's growth of beard shadowing his jaw. “I didn't think to ask your opinion. If you'd rather pass the time with him, I'll understand.”

“I came here to visit you, Shane.”

He stared at her for long moments. Holding out his bent arm, he said, “The reverend's getting in position, which means the program is about to start. Let's go and find us a spot.”

About that time, the jangle of cowbells got everyone's attention. The reverend, a silver-haired man clad in a penguin's colors, went to stand near the church steps and waited until the crowd gathered around.

"Friends and neighbors, another year is drawing to a close," he said. "In this last month of 1886, let us reflect on God's blessings and His greatest gift to mankind, His Son, Jesus Christ." He gestured to the grouping of statues covered with burlap. "This year, I'm pleased to inform you that we have a new nativity. My thanks goes to Josh O'Malley, who carved each piece with his own two hands."

The people clapped as the reverend removed the burlap from each statue. Allison was amazed by the craftsmanship and detail of Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus and the animals.

"It's wonderful," she whispered. "I've never seen the like."

His face devoid of emotion, he nodded and sipped his cider. "Josh is a skilled carpenter. You'll have to visit his furniture store sometime."

"I'd like that."

Candles were handed out to the adults. When they were lit, the reverend's wife led the gathering in the singing of several carols. The flickering lights created a pretty glow in the darkness, and the sound of male and female voices blending together and singing about their Savior sent chills cascading over her skin. This was a humble church in a tiny mountain town, yet she'd never experienced the same awed emotion.

Beside her, Shane was peculiarly silent. His candle aloft, he stared into the distance, his focus far from here. Was he remembering some terrible moment from his past? Another sad, disappointing Christmas?

She touched his sleeve. "I'm ready to leave if you are."

He angled his head toward her, and it took a second for his gaze to clear. "Are you sure?"

Of course she wanted to stay, but she refused to be selfish when he was unhappy.

"I'm cold. I'd like to go back to the house and relax before a comforting fire."

Taking her candle, he extinguished them both and, discarding them in a bin, led her past awaiting horses and wagons to where his was parked. As before, he cocooned her in the quilt, his movements efficient and impersonal but wreaking the same effect as the first time. She was so busy seeing to her niece's and nephews' needs that she'd forgotten what it felt like to experience a moment of cossetting herself.

"You were uncomfortable back there," she ventured. "You don't like when I question you about your past, but you didn't say I couldn't ask about your faith. Has your viewpoint altered since you left Virginia?"

He was quiet a long time. "I want to believe that the God who created all this beauty could love someone with a soul as tarnished as mine. I want to, but..."

"It's hard for you to trust." Anxious to say the right thing,

she said, “No one deserves Christ’s love. Or His forgiveness. But because of His compassion and mercy, He extends it to us. It’s a free gift. We can’t earn it.”

“I’ve heard these same words many times.” The defeat in his voice disappointed her.

Why can’t you accept them as truth? “I’ve never stopped praying for you, Shane.”

His gaze swerved to her face, his shock evident. “I don’t know what to say except thank you. That you would take the time to pray for me...” He removed his hat and thrust a hand through the blond-brown strands.

“I won’t stop.” Her own voice grew thick. “You can count on that.”

Nodding, he didn’t utter another word. At the house, he set the brake and, after helping her down, started to climb the steps.

“You’re coming inside?” she blurted. “I can stoke the fireplaces without your help.”

He paused with one boot braced against the bottom step. It was impossible to make out his features in the porch shadows. “I thought I’d see to the task. Unless you don’t want me to.”

“That depends on your reasons,” she said evenly. “If you’re coming in because of some perceived duty, then the answer is no. I don’t need to be watched after. If you’re coming in because you’d like to share a cup of coffee and my company, then the answer is yes.”

His long-suffering sigh originated deep in his chest, and the

tenuous bond born from her confession evaporated.

“I guess I have my answer.” She ascended the steps. “Good night, Sheriff.”

## Chapter Seven

“Allison.”

Still reeling from her revelation that he featured regularly in her prayers, Shane trailed after her. He had to tread carefully because, to him, this entire visit was a necessary but not exactly welcome intrusion into his life. He hadn't invited her here. He definitely hadn't anticipated having to keep up his guard every hour of the day.

“Wait a minute.” He touched her shoulder, and she whirled on him.

“I have to be honest, Shane. I hate that you see me as a burdensome child. Every time you sigh and huff and roll your eyes, I'm tempted to throttle you.”

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