NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SUSAN MALLERY

A Fool's Gold Christmas



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«HarperCollins»

Mallery S.

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A classic heartwarming tale for the holidays from New York Times bestselling author Susan MalleryThe cheer in Fool's Gold, California, is bringing out the humbug in dancer Evie Stryker. An injury has forced her to return home to her estranged family. So she won't add to the awkward scenario by falling for the charms of her brother's best friend, no matter how tempting he is. When she's recruited to stage the winter festival, she vows to do as promised, then move on, anywhere but here.Jaded lawyer Dante Jefferson is getting used to the town he now calls home, but the pounding of little dancers' feet above his office is more than he can take. When he confronts their gorgeous teacher, he's unprepared for their searing attraction. Evie is his best friend's sister—off-limits unless he's willing to risk his heart. Dante has always believed that love is dangerous, but that was before he had to reckon with the magic of a certain small town, where miracles do seem to happen….

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Praise for New York Times bestselling author

SUSAN MALLERY

"This sweet Christmas treat is a pleasant introduction to Mallery's popular series."

—Publishers Weekly on A Fool's Gold Christmas

"Mallery does her usual excellent job of giving readers a funny, warm-hearted story that is edged with cutting emotion!"

—RT Book Reviews on All Summer Long

"The wildly popular and prolific Mallery can always be counted on to tell an engaging story of modern romance."

—Booklist on Summer Nights

"Mallery infuses her story with eccentricity, gentle humor, and smalltown shenanigans, and readers...will enjoy the connection between Heidi and Rafe."

—Publishers Weekly on Summer Days

"Romance novels don't get much better than Mallery's expert blend of emotional nuance, humor and superb storytelling."

—Booklist

"Susan Mallery is one of my favorites."

—#1 New York Times bestselling author Debbie Macomber

A Fool's Gold Christmas

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Dear Reader,

'Tis the season in Fool's Gold, a time of sparkly lights, warm holiday greetings and, of course, romance. Although reading may seem like a solitary activity, we romance readers are as much a community as the small town of Fool's Gold. Our first reaction when reading a great love story is to tell a friend about it. We want to share that happy feeling.

I've been blessed with the most enthusiastic readers a writer could ever hope for. Last year, I invited my fans to try out for the Fool's Gold Varsity Cheerleading Squad, to earn prizes simply for telling people about Fool's Gold and the books they love. The women selected for the team took my breath away. They drove to their local bookstores with Fool's Gold car magnets, wearing Fool's Gold T-shirts, hats and pins, and handed out bookmarks, placed the books in readers' hands and said, "You will love this!" Yes, they won lots of prizes along the way—including the dedication in this book—but I could never thank them enough for their generosity.

This book is for those of you who love romance, love to read and then tell your friends about the latest, greatest book you just finished. It is also for my wonderful cheerleaders.

If being a Fool's Gold Varsity Cheerleader sounds like fun to you, be sure to join the Members Only area at www.susanmallery.com so I can email you the next time we hold cheerleader tryouts.

In the meantime, from my heart to yours, Merry Christmas! May all your dreams come true.

Susan

To the 2011 Head Cheerleader, Char, who has such an amazing heart that she wanted to share this dedication with the entire Fool's Gold Varsity Cheerleading squad in the spirit of Christmas. This one is for you.

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ONE

THE SOUND OF eight tiny reindeer had nothing on a half-dozen eight-year-olds clog dancing, Dante Jefferson thought as he held the phone more closely to his ear.

"You'll have to repeat that," he yelled in to the receiver. "I'm having trouble hearing you."

The steady thudding above his head paused briefly, then started up again.

"What's going on there?" Franklin asked, his voice barely audible over the banging that nearly kept time with the damned piano music. "Construction?"

"I wish," Dante muttered. "Look, I'll call you back in a couple of hours." The stupid dance class would be over by then. At least he hoped so.

"Sure. I'll be here." Franklin hung up.

Dante glanced at the bottom right of his computer screen. The ever-present clock told him it was seven-fifteen. In the evening. Which meant it was eleven-fifteen in the morning in Shanghai. He'd stayed late specifically to speak to Franklin about an international business deal that had developed a few glitches. The clog dancers had made the conversation impossible.

He saved the spreadsheet and went to work on his email. He and his business partner had plenty of other projects that needed his attention.

Just before eight, he heard the clog dancers going down the stairs. They laughed and shrieked, obviously not worn out by an hour of misstepping practice. He, on the other hand, had a pounding pain right behind his eyes and the thought that he would cheerfully strangle Rafe first thing in the morning. His business partner had been the one to rent the temporary space. Either Rafe hadn't noticed or didn't care about the dance school parked directly above. The offices were in an older part of Fool's Gold and had been built long before the invention of soundproofing. Rafe didn't seem to mind the noise that started promptly at three every single afternoon and went well into the evening. Dante, on the other hand, was ready to beg the nearest judge for an injunction.

Now he got out of his chair and headed for the stairs. He made his way to the studio. He and whoever was in charge were going to have to come to terms. He had to spend the next couple of weeks working out the problems of the Shanghai deal. Which meant needing access to his computer, contracts and blueprints. Some of which he couldn't take home. He needed to able to use his phone, in his office, while speaking in a normal voice.

He paused outside the door that led to the studio. It was as old-fashioned as the rest of the building, with frosted glass and the name of the business—Dominique's School of Dance—painted in fancy gold script. He pushed open the door and entered.

The reception area was utilitarian at best. There was a low desk, a computer that had been old a decade ago, backless benches by the wall and several coatracks. He could see through into the studio itself—a square room with mirrors, a barre that was attached to the wall and, of course, hardwood floors. There wasn't a piano, and he realized the endless, repetitive song that had driven him insane had come from a compact stereo.

He rubbed his temples and wished the pounding would stop, then walked purposefully into the studio. He was a coldhearted bastard lawyer, or so he'd been told endlessly by those he bested. He planned to reduce the dance instructor to a blob of fear, get her to agree to lay off with the dancing and then go back to his phone call. All in the next ten minutes.

"We have to talk," he announced as he came to a halt in the center of the room.

He realized there were mirrors on three walls, so he was seeing himself from unfamiliar angles. His shirt was wrinkled, his hair mussed, and he looked tired, he thought briefly, before turning his attention to—

Dante swore under his breath as he took in the tall, slender woman dressed in nothing more than a black leotard and tights. Despite the fact that she was covered from collarbone to toes, the clinging outfit left nothing to the imagination. He almost felt as if he'd walked in on a woman undressing. A sexy woman with big green eyes and honey-blond hair. A woman who was completely untouchable, for a host of reasons.

He ground his teeth together. Why hadn't Rafe mentioned that his sister was now working here? But even if his business partner didn't kill him for looking, Dante had a firm list of rules that were never broken. Not getting emotionally involved was number one. Anyone who taught little kids to dance had to be softhearted. Nothing got him running faster than a hint of emotion.

"What are you doing here?" Evangeline Stryker asked.

Yes, he thought as he stared at her. Rafe's baby sister. She was responsible for the nightmare that was his life. She and those unbelievably loud mini-dancers she taught. So much for reducing the dance instructor to anything.

"Dante?"

"Sorry," he said, doing his best to keep his voice from growling. "I didn't know you worked here."

Evie gave him a wide-eyed stare, then a strange half laugh. "Right. I work here. I teach dance. Lucky me."

Dante knew Evie had broken her leg a few months ago, but he didn't remember hearing anything about a head injury. "Are you all right?"

"No," she snapped and put her hands on her hips. "Do I look all right?"

He took a step back, not wanting to get in the middle of whatever she had going on. "I came upstairs because I can't work like this anymore. The pounding, the same piece of music playing over and over again. I have to talk to Shanghai tonight, and instead of peace and quiet, there were clog dancers. You've got to make it stop."

He held out both hands, palms up, speaking in what he knew to be his most reasonable tone.

"Make it stop? Make it stop?" Her voice rose with each word. "Are you kidding?"

* * *

EVIE KNEW SHE sounded shrill. She was sure she was wide-eyed, flushed and more than a little scary, but right now she didn't care. She was in full panic mode and now Dante was stuck listening to her rant.

"You want to talk to me about your troubles?" she continued. "Fine. Here are mine. In approximately six weeks it's Christmas Eve. That night, the town of Fool's Gold expects yet another chance to see their annual favorite—The Dance of the Winter King. You've never heard of it, you say? I know. Me, either. But it's a huge deal here. Huge!"

She paused for breath, wondering if it was possible for her head to actually explode. She could feel a sort of panicked pressure building. It was as if she was in a nightmare where she was going to be naked in front of a room full of strangers. Not that being naked in front of a room full of people she knew was any better.

"I won't go into the details about the storyline," she continued, her chest getting tighter and tighter. "Let's just say it's a lot of students dancing. Oh, and the dances they're doing this year are different than the ones they did last year because, hey, they move up. Which wouldn't be a problem because there's always Miss Monica, who's been teaching here for the last five-hundred-and-fifty years."

She was getting shrill again, she realized, and consciously lowered her voice. "The only problem is Miss Monica has run off with her gentleman friend. The woman has to be pushing seventy, so I should probably be impressed or at least respectful that she has a love life, except she took off with no warning. She left me a note."

Evie pointed to the piece of paper still taped to the mirror.

"She's gone," she repeated. "Left town. Flying out of the country first thing in the morning. Which leaves me with close to sixty girls to teach dances I don't know for a production I've never heard of, let alone seen. There's no choreography to speak of, I'm not sure of the music and I heard the sets are old and need to be completely refurbished. In the next six weeks."

She paused for air. "It's up to me. Do you want to know how long I've been teaching dance? Two months. That's right. This is my first ever, on the planet, teaching job. I have sixty girls depending on me to make their dreams come true. Their dreams of being beautiful and graceful, because you know what? For some of them, this is all they have."

She knew she was skating uncomfortably close to talking about herself. About how, when she'd been younger, dance had been all she'd had. She might not have any teaching experience, but she knew what it was like to want to be special and, by God, she was going to make that happen for her students.

She stalked toward him and jabbed her finger into his chest. More specifically, she felt the cool silk of his fancy tie. It probably cost more than she spent on groceries in a month. She didn't know very much about Dante Jefferson beyond the fact that he was her brother's business partner

and therefore disgustingly rich. Okay—he was reasonably good-looking, but that didn't help her right now, so she wasn't going to care.

"If you for one second think I'm going to stop having practice here," she told him, "you can forget it. I have a serious crisis. If you want to have a conversation with Shanghai, you can do it somewhere else. I'm hanging on by a thread and when it snaps, we're all going down."

Dante stared at her for a long moment, then nodded. "Fair enough."

With that, he turned and walked out of the studio.

She glared at his retreating back. Sure. He got to leave and go back to his fancy life. Not her. She had to figure out what to do next. While running in circles and screaming might feel good in the moment, it wasn't going to get the job done. Nor was railing at the unfairness, kicking something or eating chocolate. She might have failed in other areas of her life, but she wasn't going to fail her students.

"You have to rally," she told herself. "You're tough. You can do it."

And she would, she thought as she sank onto the floor and rested her head on her knees. She would figure out The Dance of the Winter King and teach her students and let them have one magical night.

First thing in the morning. But now, she was going to take a few minutes and feel massively sorry for herself. It was a small thing to ask, and she'd earned it.

* * *

THE NEXT MORNING, Evie started her day with a heart full of determination. She had survived worse than this before and probably would have to again. Mounting a production she'd never seen with no help might seem daunting, but so what? Her pep talk lasted through her first cup of coffee, then faded completely, leaving the sense of panic to return and knot her stomach. Obviously the first step was to stop trying to do this all alone. She needed help. The question was, where to get it.

She was new in town, which meant no support network. Well, that wasn't totally true. Her brothers had taken a surprising interest in her lately. Rafe had even prepaid for her townhouse, against her wishes. But they would be useless in this situation, her mother wasn't an option and going up to strangers to ask them what they knew about The Dance of the Winter King seemed questionable at best. Which left the women in her brothers' lives.

She had one sister-in-law and two sisters-in-law to-be. Of the three of them, Charlie seemed the easiest to approach. She was blunt but kindhearted. So after a quick routine of stretching to overcome the stiffness of her still-healing leg, Evie got dressed and started out for the center of town.

Fool's Gold was a small town nestled in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada—on the California side. The residential areas boasted tidy lawns and well-kept houses while the downtown held nearly a half-dozen traffic lights, making it practically metropolitan. There were plenty of pumpkins by front doors and paper turkeys in windows. Orange, red and yellow leaves flew across the sidewalk. It had yet to snow at this elevation, but the temperatures were close to freezing at night, and the ski resorts higher up the mountain had opened the previous weekend.

The whole place was one happy small town postcard, Evie thought, shoving her hands into her coat pockets and longing to be somewhere else. Los Angeles would be nice. Warm and, hey, big enough that nobody knew her name—which was how she preferred things. She just wanted to live her life without getting involved with other people. Was that too much to ask?

A stupid question, she reminded herself. She was here now, and responsible for a holiday tradition. She would get it right because she knew what it was like to be disappointed, and there was no way she was doing that to her students.

She rounded a corner and walked up to the fire station in the center of town. The building was older, mostly brick, with giant garage doors that would open if there was an emergency.

Charlie was a firefighter. From what Evie had been able to piece together, Charlie drove one of the big trucks. She was competent, sarcastic and just a little intimidating. She was also a bit of a

misfit, which made Evie more comfortable around her. In addition, Clay, Evie's youngest brother, was crazy about her. Over-the-moon, can't-stop-looking-at-her in love.

Clay had been married before, and Evie had adored his late wife. Now that she thought about it, Clay kind of had extraordinary taste when it came to women. After years of mourning his first wife, he'd stumbled into a relationship with Charlie, only to find himself giving his heart and everything else he had. It was kind of nice to see someone as perfect as Clay brought to his knees by an emotion.

Evie hesitated by the entrance leading into the fire station. She told herself to just open the door and walk in. Which she would. In a second. It was just...asking for help was not her favorite thing. She could easily list ninety-seven ways she would rather spend her time. Maybe more.

The door swung open unexpectedly, and Charlie Dixon stepped out. "Evie? Are you okay?"

Charlie was a little taller than Evie, and much bigger. The other woman was all broad shoulders and muscle. The latter no doubt necessary because of her job. Evie had spent her life in search of the perfect combination of being strong enough to dance and thin enough to look good in whatever costume her job required. Which meant being hungry every day of her life since her fourteenth birthday.

"Hey, Charlie," Evie said and forced a smile. "Do you have a second?"

"Sure. Come on in."

The fire station was warm and brightly lit. The big trucks gleamed, and holiday music played over a hidden sound system. Charlie led the way to a massive kitchen with seating for maybe fifteen or twenty, long counters and a six-burner, restaurant-style stove. A big pot of coffee sat by the window, and there was an open box of donuts on the table.

Charlie poured them each a mug of coffee and handed her one, then settled right next to the box of donuts and grabbed a maple bar. As Evie watched, she took a bite and chewed.

Just like that, Evie thought, both impressed and horrified. Depending on the size of the donut, the maple bar would be anywhere from two hundred and fifty calories to over five hundred. Evie had learned shortly after puberty, she was destined to be pear-shaped, with every extra ounce going to her hips, thighs and butt. While the medical community might want her to believe that pear-shaped was perfectly healthy, more than one costume director had pointed out no one wanted to watch a ballerina with a big ass and jiggly thighs.

Evie gripped her coffee mug with both hands, averted her gaze from the box of donuts, whose contents had started to quietly call her name, and stared at Charlie.

"I wondered if I could talk to you about The Dance of the Winter King. Do you know about the production?"

"Sure," Charlie said, dropping half the donut onto a napkin and reaching for her coffee. "It happens every year on Christmas Eve. It's kind of a big deal." She smiled, her blue eyes bright with humor. "That's right. You're working for Miss Monica now. Nervous about the big show?"

"You have no idea." Evie knew the situation was complicated even more by the fact that, while Miss Monica was in charge of the studio, the business had recently been purchased by Charlie's mother. Evie had left the new owner a message the previous night, bringing her up-to-date, but had yet to hear from her.

"Miss Monica ran off yesterday." Evie quickly explained about the older woman's flight with her gentleman friend. "I've never seen the dance, and there aren't very many notes on the production. Miss Monica mentioned many of the sets need to be refurbished, and I don't even know where they're kept. I have sixty students who expect to dance in front of their families in six weeks and no idea what I'm doing. Worse, there aren't any videos of the production in the studio. If Miss Monica had any, they're in her house, and she's on her way to Italy."

She stopped and forced herself to inhale. The panic had returned and with it the need for sugar. She started to reach for a small, plain cake donut, then gave in to the inevitable and picked up a chocolate glazed. As her teeth sank into the sweet, light center, the world slowly righted itself.

Charlie ran her hands through her short hair and groaned. “I’m trying desperately not to imagine Miss Monica and her gentleman friend.”

Evie chewed and swallowed. “I know exactly what you mean. The terror helps me overcome that image.”

“I’ll bet.” Charlie reached for her coffee. “Okay, let me think. I’ve seen the dance every year I’ve been in town, but I can’t remember the details. So, start with your students. Their parents will have the production on video, right? You can watch them and figure out what’s going on.”

Evie sagged back in the chair and nodded. “You’re right. They’ll all have it filmed. That’s perfect. Thanks.”

Charlie stood and moved back toward the kitchen. She pulled open a drawer. When she returned to the table, she had a pad of paper and a pen.

“The sets are going to be in one of the warehouses on the edge of town. There should be a receipt for the monthly rent in the studio’s records. This is the guy who manages the warehouses.” She wrote down a name. “Tell him who you are, and he’ll let you in, even without a key. Then you can evaluate the sets. Let me know how much work there is and we’ll organize a work party.”

Evie blinked at her. “A what?”

“A work party. People come and help repair the sets. You’ll have to provide the materials, but they’ll give you all the labor you need.”

“I don’t understand. You mean there’s a group I can hire to fix the sets?” She wasn’t sure what the budget would be. Maybe her new boss would want to cancel the production completely.

Charlie sighed and patted her hand. “Not hire. People will help you with the sets for free. Because they want to.”

“Why?”

“Because this is Fool’s Gold and that’s what we do. Just pick a day and I’ll get the word out. Trust me, it will be fine.”

“Sure,” Evie murmured, even though she didn’t believe it for a second. Why would people she didn’t know show up to work on sets for her production? For free? “I don’t suppose these miracle workers can also alter costumes and do hair for the show?”

“Probably not, but there are a couple of salons in town.” Charlie wrote on the paper again. “Someone’s been taking care of all that every year. Start here. Ask them who normally handles the hair and makeup for the show. I suspect it’s either Bella or Julia. Maybe both.” She picked up the second half of her maple bar. “They’re feuding sisters who own competing salons. It makes for some pretty fun entertainment.”

Evie’s recently injured leg began to ache. “Let me see if I have this straight. I’m going to talk to parents of my students to get videos of a production I’ve never seen so I can teach it to their daughters. In the meantime, a man who doesn’t know me from a rock is going to let me into a warehouse so I can evaluate the sets. You’re going to arrange a work party of perfect strangers to repair those sets —all of which will happen for free. Then feuding sister stylists may or may not know who does the hair and makeup for my sixty dancers.”

Charlie grinned. “That about sums it up. Now tell me the truth. Do you feel better or worse than you did before you got here?”

Evie shook her head. “Honestly? I haven’t a clue.”

TWO

EVIE WALKED HOME after her last class that evening. The night was cool and clear and smelled like fall. All leaves and earth and woodsmoke. She might be more a big-city girl, but there were things she liked about Fool’s Gold. Not having to drive her car everywhere was nice, as was being able to see stars in the sky. Now if only she could find a good Chinese place that delivered.

She turned onto her street, aware that most of the townhouses had Thanksgiving decorations in the windows and on the porches. She’d only been in her place a few weeks—it was a rental and

had come furnished. She wasn't interested in putting down roots, and buying furniture wasn't in her budget. But maybe she should stick a flameless candle in the window or something.

Somewhere a door slammed shut. She heard laughter and a dog barking. Homey sounds. For a second she allowed herself to admit she was, well, lonely. Except for her family, she barely knew anyone in town. The most contact she'd had with her neighbors had been to wave to the young couple who lived across the street. She'd never even seen the people next door.

She couldn't shake the feeling of being out of place. The sensation wasn't new. In Los Angeles, she'd had plenty of friends but no real direction for her life. She'd been waiting for something. A sign. She'd been going through the motions of living without a sense of belonging. She'd always figured "one day" she would have the answer. Now she was starting to think there wasn't going to be one day. There was now, and it was up to her to figure out what she wanted.

One of those would be a start, she thought with a quiet laugh as a fancy black sedan pulled into the driveway next to hers. Actually she would settle for having over a hundred dollars in her checking account at any given time.

Evie watched the driver's door open and prepared to at least pretend to be friendly. But her halfhearted wave had barely begun when she recognized Dante Jefferson.

"What are you doing here?" she asked. Was he checking on her? Typical. Her brothers couldn't even get the address right. Dante was in the wrong driveway.

"I live here."

"Where?"

He pointed to the townhouse next to hers.

She dropped her arm to her side. "Seriously? For how long?"

"I moved in the weekend after you."

"You knew you were moving in next to me?" she asked.

He shrugged. "There weren't a lot of choices. I don't know if I want to buy or not, so I took a short-term lease. Hungry?"

"What?" She was still dealing with the fact that her brother's business partner was her neighbor.

Dante pulled a large white bag out of the car. "I got Italian. There's plenty. Come on." He started toward his front door before she could decide if she was going to say yes or not.

He was her brother's business partner. That alone was reason enough to say no. He was connected with her family, and she wanted to avoid her family. Mostly because every time she was around them, she got hurt. It was a rule she'd learned early—people who were supposed to love you usually didn't. Staying far, far away meant keeping herself safe.

"And wine," he called over his shoulder.

She could have ignored the bag of food and the offer of wine except for two things. Her stomach growled, reminding her she was starving. And a very delicious smell drifted to her.

"Garlic bread?" she asked, inhaling the fragrance of garlic as visions of cheesy goodness made her mouth water.

Dante paused at the front door and laughed. "Sure. Thanks for making it clear your willingness to have dinner with me is about the menu and not my sparkling personality."

"I really shouldn't," she began, even as she took a step toward him.

He smiled and shook the bag again. "Come on. Just this once. You can do it."

Just this once, she agreed silently. That would be safe.

She walked up and joined him on the porch. He handed her the bag containing dinner, then opened the front door and flipped on the light.

His place was the mirror image of hers, with a living-dining area, a small gas fireplace and the kitchen beyond. She knew there was a half-bath tucked under the stairs. The second floor had a master and a second bedroom with an attached full bath.

Dante's furnishings were all black leather and glass. From his place in San Francisco, she would guess, setting the food on the table and shrugging out of her coat. Her brother had mentioned Dante had moved from the coastal city just a few months ago.

Dante dropped his suit jacket and tie onto the sofa. He rolled up his sleeves to his elbows as he walked into the kitchen. He was tall, she thought, taking in the short blond hair and killer blue eyes. The man was easy on the eyes. Her gaze dropped as he moved to the cupboards. Nice butt. He moved well. Athletic. He'd been a jock once and kept in shape.

"I'm going to use the guest bath," she said, motioning to the short hallway on the right.

"Help yourself."

She ducked inside and quickly washed her hands. Her face was pale, her eyes too large. She looked tired. No doubt because she was still healing.

By the time she returned to the dining area, Dante had opened the wine and poured. There were plates and paper napkins. Several containers of food were open on the bar area.

"Help yourself," he told her.

"A take-out buffet. Very nice." She took lasagna and a bit of salad, along with two slices of garlic bread. Her brain quickly added up the calories, but she dismissed the number. Staying at her dancing weight wasn't an issue anymore. Besides, she was tired of being hungry.

They sat across from each other. She leaned back in her chair, picked up her glass of wine and smiled. "How are things in Shanghai?"

"Better. We're building a high-rise and the permits have come through." He paused. "I'm going to guess you don't want the actual details."

"You can tell me if it's important."

"You'll pretend interest?"

She laughed. "Yes. Even wide-eyed amazement if it's called for."

"I'll take a rain check." He studied her. "How about your crisis? Getting any better? You aren't as..." He hesitated.

"Shrill?" she asked.

"I would have picked a different word."

"A smart man who understands women." She picked up her fork. "I'm still dealing with everything that's happening, but I'll get through it."

"How's the leg?"

Evie winced. Not something she wanted to talk about.

For two years she'd been a cheerleader for the Los Angeles Stallions football team. Earlier this season, she'd been plowed down by one of the players. She'd fractured a bone, torn a few tendons and generally ended any chance she'd had at ever dancing again professionally.

In a belated attempt to take care of her, her family had converged on the hospital. When she'd been released, they'd taken advantage of her still-drugged state and brought her to Fool's Gold. When she'd finally surfaced, she'd discovered her belongings moved, her physical therapy set up and her brothers and mother hovering. She'd gotten a job at the dance studio and moved out as soon as she was able. But in a town this small, it was impossible to escape them completely.

The bright spot in her recent, uncomfortable past was she'd discovered she loved teaching dance. She'd always been the one to help classmates conquer difficult steps and passages. She might not have the necessary brilliance to be a star, but she understood how to break down a dance and teach it to others. Funny how she'd never thought to turn that into a career. But working with her students had her thinking she might finally have found the direction she'd been looking for.

"I'm healing," she said. "There are a few lingering aches and pains, but nothing I can't handle."

He took a bite of lasagna, swallowed and chewed. "Did the manager of the studio really take off and leave you with the Christmas program?"

"The Dance of the Winter King, open to all faiths," she corrected and nodded. "She sure did. You'd think life in a place like this would be easy, but it's not. There are expectations and complicated relationships."

"Like?"

She drew in a breath. "Okay, Miss Monica ran the studio and she's the one who hired me. But the owner is Dominique Guérin." She paused.

Dante waited expectantly.

"You've never heard of her?" she asked.

"No. Should I have?"

"She's a famous ballerina. Or she was. You're not into dance or the dance world, are you?"

"Do I look like I'm into dance?"

"Fair enough." Although he had nice bone structure, she thought. "Then let's try this another way. Dominique is Charlie's mother."

Dante stared at her. "Clay's Charlie?"

"Uh-huh."

"But Charlie's..." He took a big bite of lasagna and mumbled something unintelligible.

She grinned. "What was that?" she asked sweetly.

He motioned to his still-full mouth, as if indicating there was no way he could possibly speak.

"I understand the point you're avoiding," she said. "Charlie doesn't look like a dancer. From what I understand, she takes after her father. Anyway, I've left a message for Dominique to tell her what's going on with the dance studio, but I haven't heard back. In the meantime, I have to assume we're still planning on the Christmas Eve performance, which means getting organized in ways I'm not sure I can even comprehend. I've never been in charge like this before."

Her appetite faded, and she pushed away her plate. "Charlie suggested I ask some of the parents for copies of any recordings they have. So I'll be able to see those. Then there are costumes and steps and music." She stopped. "We should change the subject or I'll get shrill again. Neither of us wants that."

He swallowed. "It's a lot."

She poked at her salad. "Like I said, we can talk about something else." She looked at him. "So, how did you meet my brother?"

"Rafe?"

"He's the one you do business with. I'm assuming you met Shane and Clay through him."

Dante leaned back in his chair. "You don't know?"

"We're not that close." She'd left for Juilliard when she was seventeen and hadn't had a whole lot of contact with her family ever since. She'd seen them more since her football accident than she had in the past eight years.

"Even to your mom?" he asked.

She sighed. "Let me guess. You and your mom are close and you call at least twice a week. For what it's worth, I really admire that." From an emotional distance, she thought. No way she could relate to it.

Dante picked up his wine. "My mother died a long time ago."

"Oh." Evie felt herself flush. "I'm sorry."

"Like I said, it was a long time ago." He leaned toward her. "Rafe and I met while we were both in college. We were working construction."

She remembered that her brother had taken summer jobs to supplement his scholarships. After finding out about Dante's mother, she wasn't going to do any more assuming.

"You went into the family business?" she asked.

He chuckled. "No, I was paying the bills. I found out I was a lot more popular with girls in college when I could afford to take them on dates. I was a scholarship student, too."

"Intelligent and good-looking," she teased. "So why are you still single?"

"I like the chase, but I'm not so big on the catch."

"A man who avoids commitments." She knew the type. With those broad shoulders and blue eyes, he would have no trouble getting a woman to notice him. The money and success wouldn't hurt, either. "Do they line up at a set time, or is it more like concert lotteries? You pass out numbers and then call them randomly?"

"Impressive," he told her. "Mocking me and my dates at the same time."

"I was gently teasing. There's a difference."

"You're right." He studied her over his wineglass. "What about you? No fancy Mr. King of the Dance coming to rescue you from the backwater that is Fool's Gold?"

"I'm between kings right now. And, at the risk of sounding like Jane Austen, content to be so. Miss Monica is welcome to her gentleman friend. I'm more focused on the upcoming performance." Not to mention avoiding her family as much as possible.

"Did you see all the Thanksgiving decorations around town?" he asked.

"The turkey population is well represented."

"Christmas is going to be worse," he grumbled.

"Candy canes on every mailbox."

"Wreaths on every door." He looked at her. "It's going to be like living in a snow globe."

"Tell me about it." She sipped her wine. "Do you know this town doesn't have a grocery store that stays open twenty-four hours a day? What's up with that? What if someone needs something at two in the morning?"

"Like aspirin after listening to clog dancers for an hour?"

"You'll adore them when you see them perform."

"Maybe." He frowned. "Hey, why aren't you a big fan of Christmas? With your family, I would think loving the season would be a given. I'll bet your mom made Christmas special for you."

Evie put down her wine and pressed a hand to her stomach. Sudden churning made her uncomfortable.

No doubt Dante saw May as a warm, caring parent. The kind of woman who would bake cookies and sew Christmas stockings. Maybe she had once—Evie's brothers each had a carefully embroidered stocking. But Evie's was store-bought and not personalized. There hadn't been many traditions for her. She'd always found Christmas kind of lonely and wasn't looking forward to an entire town showing her all the ways she didn't fit in.

"I suppose I've gotten out of the habit of the holidays," she said, hedging. She barely knew Dante. There was no reason to go into the gory details of her past with the man.

"Then we'll have to stay strong together," he told her. "There's only the two of us against all of them."

She laughed. "Grinches together?"

"Absolutely." He pointed at her nearly untouched plate. "Okay, you're either going to have to eat more or explain to the chef why you didn't like his very excellent lasagna."

"I wouldn't want that."

An hour later, they'd finished most of the wine. Dante had explained more about the Shanghai project and she'd told funny stories about her days touring with a third-rate ballet company. He insisted on packing up the leftovers for her to take home and then escorted her across their shared driveway and to her front door. Once there, he waited until she'd put her key in the lock and pushed open the door.

"If you need anything, pound on the wall," he told her. "Ah, the one between us. If you pound on the other one, you'll confuse the neighbors and get a bad reputation in the development."

"I wouldn't want that." She held up the bag of food. "Thanks for this."

"You're skinny. Eat more." With that, he bent down and lightly kissed her cheek. "'Night, Evie."

"'Night."

She watched him walk back to his place and step inside. Then she stepped into her house and shut the door. She stood in the dark for a second, the feel of his kiss lingering on her cheek.

She'd had fun tonight. Talking, sharing a meal with a friend. Dante was easy to talk to. Charming. He was the kind of man who made a woman think about more than kissing. Even someone who knew how dangerous that could be.

"My brother's business partner and a player," she said as she turned on the light in the entryway. There were a thousand reasons not to play the what-if game with Dante Jefferson. She was smart enough to remember every one of them.

* * *

"YOU KNOW THIS isn't normal, right," Dante said as he stood on the porch of the house and stared out at the elephant. "Ranches are supposed to have things like horses and goats. What were you thinking?"

Rafe shook his head. "It wasn't me."

Dante continued to study the elephant. "What is she wearing?"

"A blanket. It gets cold here. She goes into a heated barn at night, but she likes to be out during the day. Mom had the blanket made for her."

Dante thought longingly of his life back in San Francisco. Season tickets to the Giants and the 49ers. Poker nights with his buddies. Dinners with beautiful women. Okay, sure, he'd had a beautiful woman at his place last night, but that was different. She was his partner's sister. The price of getting lucky could be the loss of a very treasured body part. Although he would have to admit watching Evie move was almost worth it. He supposed it was years of dance training, but she made even the act of picking up a fork look graceful.

"I know what you're thinking," Rafe said.

Dante doubted that.

"I changed my life for Heidi," Rafe continued. "It's worth it. And I want to be here on the ranch. I like Fool's Gold."

"I figured as much when you moved the business here."

"Come on." Rafe turned toward the house. "Let's go inside. We'll have brownies while you tell me about what's going on in Shanghai."

They settled at the kitchen table. The company's rented office space didn't have any private offices, which meant any sensitive business had to be discussed elsewhere.

Over the next couple of hours, they reviewed several ongoing projects, and Dante brought Rafe up-to-date on a few legal matters. When they were finished, Rafe poured them each more coffee.

"You staying in Fool's Gold for Thanksgiving?" he asked.

Dante shrugged. "Probably."

"Come to dinner, then. I wasn't going to get between you and your latest conquest, but if you're flying solo, we'd love to have you."

"Thanks. I'll bring wine."

"Not a salad or dessert?" Rafe joked.

"Maybe next year." He collected the folders he'd brought. "Evie's pretty panicked about the Christmas Eve dance show."

Rafe frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"The show. The Dance of the Winter King. The manager of the dance studio took off and left everything to her."

"I didn't know that."

The statement confirmed what Evie had hinted at the previous night. That she and her family didn't have much to do with each other.

"You and your brothers have always been close," Dante said. "But you barely mention Evie. We'd been in business about three years before I even knew you had a sister. What's up with that?"

Rafe shrugged. "After my dad died, things were tough. My mom was devastated, money was tight. I tried to handle the family, but I was a kid."

Eight or nine, Dante thought, remembering what his friend had told him over the years. He knew what it was like to look out for a parent. He'd done the same with his mom. It had always been the two of them against the world. Until Dante had joined a gang. His actions had broken her heart and ultimately cost her everything.

What he would give to go back and change that, he thought grimly. To have his family back. But he'd learned about the perils of close ties.

"Mom was crying all the time," Rafe continued. "We knew she was sad. Shane met this cowboy in town for one of the festivals and brought him home for dinner. Nine months later, Evie showed up."

"You're kidding."

"No. She's technically our half sister. The four of us were a unit and Evie never seemed to find her place. I should have tried harder with her. I'm trying now. I don't know that it's enough." He stared at Dante. "You live close to her, don't you?"

"Next door." Dante braced himself for the next line. Where Rafe said to stay away from his sister.

"So do me a favor. Look out for her. Make sure she's okay."

That was it? No dire warning? Rafe knew Dante's reputation with women. It's not that Dante was a bad guy—he simply didn't believe in long-term commitments. Four months was a personal best in his world.

"Sure thing," he said easily. "I'm happy to help."

"Good. She'd tell me that it's too little, too late, but as far as I'm concerned, having Evie in town is a second chance for all of us."

THREE

EVIE STARED AT the battered ledger that served as a scheduling calendar. While Miss Monica had been a pleasant enough person and a good teacher, she hadn't believed in any invention that surfaced after 1960. The Smithsonian had been calling to ask if their old computer could be put on display in the history of technology section and the answering machine had to be from the 1980s. The worn tape had contained a single message that morning. Dominique Guérin, the new owner, had returned Evie's call. Her response to Evie's slightly panicked info dump about the loss of the head instructor and the upcoming ballet, about which Evie knew nothing, had been a cheerful "I have every confidence in you, my dear. I can't wait to see the production on Christmas Eve."

"Great," Evie said, clutching her mug of tea in her hands and willing her heart to stop beating at hummingbird speed. She felt as if she were trapped in some old black-and-white movie. "Come on, boys and girls. Let's put on a show!"

Only there was no production staff waiting in the shadows to work the cinematic magic. There was her, a battered ledger and sheer force of will. Oh, and sixty students she wasn't willing to disappoint.

She picked up her purse and crossed to the small mirror on the wall. After brushing her hair, she separated it into two sections and braided each one. She expertly wrapped the braids around her head and pinned them in place, then returned her purse to the desk drawer. Now she was ready to dance.

She heard footsteps on the stairs leading up to the studio. A few seconds later, a smiling woman with brown hair hurried into the reception area. Evie recognized her as one of the mothers but had no idea of her name.

"I'm running late," she proclaimed, handing Evie three CDs in cases. "Here's what you need. I hope. I mean I know it's what you wanted, I just hope they help."

The woman was in her late twenties, pretty, wearing a long-sleeved T-shirt with a large embroidered cartoon turkey on the front.

The woman laughed. “You look blank. I’m Patience McGraw. Lillie’s mother.”

“Oh. Lillie. Sure.” Sweet girl with absolutely no talent, Evie thought. But she loved dancing and worked hard. Sometimes that was more important than ability.

“Charlie called me,” Patience continued. “OMG, to quote my daughter. Miss Monica ran off with a man? I haven’t been on a date in maybe three years, but my daughter’s seventy-year-old dance teacher gets lucky? I can’t decide if I should be depressed or inspired.”

“I’m both,” Evie admitted. “Slightly more depressed, though.”

“Tell me about it.” Patience gave a rueful laugh. “Anyway, Charlie explained that you’re feeling completely abandoned and pressured. I can’t help with the dance stuff. Lillie inherited her lack of coordination from me, I’m afraid. But I’m good at getting things done. So those are recordings of previous years’ shows. One is mine. The other two come from other mothers. They’re also for different years. I thought that might help.”

Evie tightened her hold on the CDs. Right now, these were her best shot at figuring out what the program was supposed to look like.

“Thank you. You’ve saved me.”

Patience laughed. “I’m barely getting started.” She pulled a piece of paper out of her jeans’s front pocket. “My phone number. I’ll help get the work party together for the sets. Charlie mentioned those, too. So, a Saturday would work best. I suggest the first Saturday in December. All that’s going on in town is the tree lighting and that’s not until dusk. We’d have all day to spruce and paint and do whatever needs doing.”

Evie took the paper with her free hand. In addition to Patience’s phone number was a man’s name.

“This guy is your contact at the hardware store in town. Tell him who you are and what you need the supplies for. He’ll give you a great discount. Once you get that coordinated, get back to me and I’ll spread the word about the work party. Oh, we’ll also need to coordinate for the costumes.”

Evie felt as if she were being pushed by an out-of-control tide. “You sew?”

“Enough to repair a costume. But I have the names of the talented ladies who do the real work. Plus, we need to schedule the fittings and then the run-through for hair and makeup.” She drew in a breath and planted her hands on her hips. “Drat. There’s one more thing that I can’t... Brunch!” She grinned. “Thanksgiving morning we all meet at Jo’s Bar. We have yummy brunch food, enough champagne so that we don’t care about the turkey we’re cooking and we watch the parade on TV. Girls only. You have to come. It’s really fun. After we’re stuffed and drunk, we head outside to watch the Fool’s Gold parade through town.”

“Okay,” Evie said slowly, still overwhelmed by names, promises and information.

“Be there at nine.” Patience pulled her phone out of her pocket and glanced at the screen. “I’m running late. Nothing new, right? I have to get back to work. Call me with any questions.” She started for the door. “And pick a date for the work party. We need to claim our labor.”

Evie stood in the center of her studio. She was holding three CD cases and a small piece of paper, but she would swear she’d been buried under a giant mound of boxes or something. She tucked the CD cases into her purse. Tonight she would watch the recordings and start to make notes. As for the rest of it, she would have to sort through all she’d learned and make up some kind of schedule. She still wasn’t convinced about the work party, but maybe a few parents would be willing to help.

She walked into the main studio and settled in front of the barre. A half hour or so of practice would settle her mind for the lessons to come. Slowly, carefully, conscious of her still-healing leg, she began to warm up. Two minutes later, her cell phone rang.

She straightened, slid her right foot back to the floor and walked over to where the phone sat on the reception desk.

The calling number was unfamiliar.

"Hello?"

"Evie? Hi, it's Heidi."

Heidi was Rafe's new wife. She lived on the ranch and raised goats. A pretty blonde who had welcomed Evie with genuine warmth.

"Hi," Evie said, more cautious than excited about contact with her family.

"I wanted to make sure you knew we were having dinner at four on Thanksgiving. Rafe couldn't remember if you'd been told." Heidi sighed. "Men. Because social details aren't that interesting to them, right?"

Thanksgiving dinner? Evie held in a groan. She wasn't up to dinner with her relatives.

"Oh, and that morning we watch the parade at Jo's Bar. You know about that, right? It's a huge crowd. Girls only brunch. You'll love it. It's a great chance to meet everyone. Just be careful. The champagne goes down way too easy. Last year I had to call my grandfather to drive me home. I vowed I wasn't touching the stuff this year and I'm holding myself to that. Oh, it's on a local channel that starts the replay at nine our time. Just so you don't freak out and think you have to get up too early."

Evie heard a crash in the background.

Heidi gasped. "I think that was my new batch of cheese. I gotta run. Save the date."

The phone went silent.

Evie slowly pushed the end button, then replaced the phone in her bag and set the bag in the bottom drawer. As far as Heidi was concerned, Evie had just accepted both invitations. Calling back to say no would mean answering questions and coming up with a reason why she wasn't joining the only people she knew in a town she'd just moved to. Talk about awkward.

In truth, she didn't mind spending time with her brothers. With new wives and fiancées hanging around, Evie should find it easy enough to avoid her mother.

She glanced at the clock on the wall, then walked to the stairs. Once she was on the main floor, she stepped into her brother's offices and moved toward Dante's desk. He was staring at his computer screen but glanced up as she approached.

"Hey," she said. "I wanted to warn you that tonight there's more clog dancing. No tap classes until tomorrow. Ballet the rest of the time. Ballet is quieter. Except for the music. But you seem to have this thing against the clog girls, so I'm letting you know in advance."

Dante sat at his desk, his blue eyes fixed on her, the oddest expression on his face.

"What?" she demanded, raising her hands to her head to make sure her braids were tightly in place.

He swore under his breath. "Is it legal?"

"Clog dancing? The last time I checked."

He opened his mouth, then closed it. "What you're wearing."

She glanced down at herself. She had on black tights and a leotard. It was exactly what she wore nearly every day of her life. Scuffed ballet shoes covered her feet. Later, she would put on toe shoes to demonstrate some steps, but she wasn't going to walk around in them. She found that awkward and, okay, a little pretentious.

She pulled at the stretchy material. "It's worn, I'll admit, but I'm dressed."

Dante glanced around, as if checking to see who was watching them. As far as Evie could tell, everyone else was busy with work.

"You're practically naked."

She laughed. "I'm fully covered."

"Technically. But..." He waved his hand up and down in front of her body. "Shouldn't you put on a coat?"

She didn't understand. "Because why?"

"You're distracting."

"Really?"

"Look around. Do you see anyone else wearing an outfit like that?"

"It's not office wear."

He seemed a little glazed and frantic. For a second she allowed herself to believe he found her sexy. Wouldn't that be nice?

"You're killing me," he muttered.

She smiled. "That's so lovely. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Oh, the guy at the hardware store called me about the set."

"What? Why would he call you?"

"Because Charlie told him to. She has this idea that you don't know squat about construction."

"I don't, but it's my responsibility anyway." She was going to make sure her students weren't disappointed.

"Yeah, well, now I'm going to help, too. I thought we could go look at the sets together, and I'll put together a list of what needs doing."

She took a step back. "No, thanks. I appreciate the offer, but no."

"Why not?"

"Because, um, you're busy." Lame, but it was better than the truth. She wasn't willing to risk getting sucked in. Dante was pretty tempting. Handsome, funny, interesting. Sexy. Hard to resist.

"Why not?" he repeated.

She sighed. "You're my brother's business partner. I'm not looking to get more involved with my family. We have a long, complicated history. I won't bore you with it, but believe me when I say, stay far, far away."

He studied her. "Interesting. A mystery. I love a good mystery."

"Don't be intrigued. I'm a seriously boring person. You're sweet to offer, but no. I'll do it myself."

His phone rang. He swore quietly. "I have to take this call, but our conversation isn't over."

He couldn't be more wrong, she thought, giving a cheerful wave and hurrying away. Dante was a complication she didn't need and couldn't afford. Him being nice would make staying away more difficult, but even more necessary.

* * *

THE OFFICE CLEARED OUT a little after five. Dante kept working. Right on time, the thudding of clog-clad feet pounded above his head. He turned off his computer and ducked out while he could. But an hour later he returned and made his way upstairs. Evie was turning out the lights in the studio, obviously done for the night.

She turned and looked at him, her expression slightly guarded. He took in her bulky sweatshirt and fitted jeans, and raised his eyebrows.

"You changed."

She pointed at him. "You did, too."

"I don't think my suit would get the same reaction as your work clothes."

"I don't know," she told him. "I do love a man in a tie."

"Now you're just messing with me."

"You make it easy."

Her eyes were big and green, with dark lashes. He would guess she wasn't wearing much in the way of makeup, which was fine by him. He liked women in all shapes and sizes. From high-maintenance divas to the most casual of tree-huggers.

"I'm going to help you with the sets," he said. "You can accept gracefully or you can fight me, but in the end, I'll win. I always win."

"Doing your civic duty?"

"Helping out a friend."

He liked her. She was Rafe's sister. As for the way she looked in dance clothes, that was his problem alone. He knew better than to go down dangerous paths.

He thought briefly of his mother, how she would have liked Evie and adored the little girls who danced. His mother had wanted so much more than the hardscrabble life she'd been forced to deal with. She'd wanted him to be a success. She would be happy about that, too.

Knowing her, she would accept the price she'd had to pay to get him on the right road. Something he could never accept or forgive in himself. He supposed that made her the better person. Hardly a surprise.

"It's Christmas," he said. "Think of this as me getting in the spirit."

"You don't like Christmas spirit."

"Maybe helping you will change my mind." He shrugged. "You know you can't do it alone. Accept the inevitable and say thank you."

She drew in a breath. "I know I can't do it alone, and for what it's worth, I trust you."

"I think there's a compliment buried in there."

"There is. Thank you."

He smiled. "Was that so hard?"

"You have no idea."

"Then while you're still wrestling with your personal growth, let me add, your brother invited me to Thanksgiving dinner." He braced himself for her rant.

"Good. I was hoping for a big crowd."

Unexpected, he thought. "Should I ask why?"

"No. You should assume I'm just one of those friendly types who loves humanity."

"Your recent resistance to me helping aside." He leaned against her desk.

"Yes."

"And your feelings on humanity?"

"Okay in small groups." She held up a piece of paper. "I was visited earlier by one of the moms. Patience. She swears there really can be a work party to restore my sets."

"Good. We'll make the list of what needs fixing and get it organized."

He studied her. From what he could tell, she wore her hair up for her lessons—two braids wrapped around her head. But now, with her work done for the day, she'd left it loose. Wavy strands of honey-blond hair fell past her shoulders and halfway down her back.

He would bet she had soft hair, he thought, imagining her bending over him. He could practically feel the cool silk in his fingers. She would be all muscle, he thought absently. Long legs. Incredibly flexible.

"Dante?"

He blinked himself back into the room. "Sorry."

She tilted her head, her mouth curving into a smile. "Want to tell me where you went?"

"Nope."

"Are you going to help me?" She paused. "Go with me to look at the sets?"

Was that what they'd been talking about? "Sure. When do you want to do that?"

"You weren't listening at all, were you?"

"Not even a little."

"At least you're honest about it." She folded her arms across her chest. "Now. I suggested we go now."

"Works for me." He studied her, wondering how much trouble he would get in for kissing her, and knowing it would be worth it. "Here's the thing."

She raised her eyebrows. "You're putting conditions on helping me? You're the one who insisted."

"No. I'm telling you that when I said I was a player, I wasn't kidding. I never get serious. I don't do relationships and I'm not the guy you take home to meet the parents."

"You're already having dinner with my mother on Thanksgiving."

"That's different. It's not a date."

She tilted her head. "You're warning me off."

"Yes."

"I haven't expressed any interest in you. Is this your ego talking? Are you assuming that a woman can't be in the same room with you without begging for your attention?"

"I wish, but, no."

Her gaze was steady. "You're going to make a move."

"Most likely."

One corner of her mouth turned up. "Announcing it up front isn't exactly smooth."

"You're difficult to resist."

She laughed. "Oh, please. I'm very resistible. Trust me."

He moved a little closer. He liked the sound of her laughter and how she wasn't aware of her appeal.

She put her hand on his chest. "Let me see if I have this straight. You're warning me that you're not someone I want to be involved with, and at the same time, you're convinced you have enough going for you that I'll give in anyway."

"Absolutely."

He put his hand on hers, liking the feel of her fingers against his chest. Skin on skin would be better, but a man had to take what he could get.

She pulled free and dropped her arm to her side, then shook her head. "You're a weird guy, you know that?"

"I've been called worse."

"I'm sure you have. Let me get my coat, and while we head to the warehouse, you can share all the details. Knowing the depth of your awfulness will help me resist you."

"Now you're mocking me."

"Hey, you think you can seduce me against my will. I think a little mocking is called for."

FOUR

EVIE WASN'T SURE about brunch at a bar, but she showed up right on time anyway. She was a little bleary-eyed from spending every free moment over the past few days watching the videos of The Dance of the Winter King. She'd broken down the choreography of over half of the production. With luck, by the end of the holiday weekend, she would have the whole dance down on paper and then be able to put it all together for the girls.

While each age group had already learned the basic steps they would need for their section of the production, there were no transitions, no flow and the order of the dances had yet to be determined. Traditionally, the younger, less experienced students would go first, but Evie was playing with the idea of having the older soloists do short routines in between each group. Although, with time ticking, that might not be a smart move.

She walked into Jo's Bar to find the main room already filled with a couple of dozen women. Unlike regular bars she'd been to, this one had flattering lighting, the TVs already tuned to the parade and the smell of cinnamon and vanilla filling the air.

The bar itself was being used as a buffet. Large chafing dishes sat in a row, with a stack of plates at one end. Big trays of cut up fresh fruit offered healthy choices next to a display of pastries that made Evie's mouth water. Even the voice in her head—the one that warned about potential butt and thigh growth—was silent with carb anticipation.

A tall no-nonsense thirtysomething woman walked over carrying a tray of glasses of champagne. She stopped in front of Evie.

"I don't know you," she said, a friendly smile buffering her blunt statement. "Visiting relatives?"

"Evie Stryker."

The woman's eyes widened. "The mysterious dancing sister of the cowboy brothers. Everyone wants to meet you."

"I can't decide if that's a compliment or if it makes me sound like the villain in a horror movie."

The woman laughed. "Dancer killer. I like it. I'm Jo, by the way. This is my bar." She nodded toward a guy opening bottles of champagne behind the bar. "I promised everyone this would be girls only, but he's married to me, so technically he doesn't count. Besides, he's a good guy, so that's something. Your group is over at that table. Enjoy."

Evie walked in the direction Jo had indicated, not sure what she would find. Heidi, Annabelle and Charlie were already there, which allowed her to relax.

Annabelle, Shane's pregnant fiancée, jumped to her feet when she spotted Evie. "Thank goodness. Charlie is not willing to drink for two, which is very selfish of her, and Heidi's resisting drinking at all."

"I have to handle dinner later," Heidi protested. "I'm responsible for the turkey. Do you really want me wielding a sharp knife after a couple of glasses of champagne? I don't think so. If I hurt myself, one of you will have to milk the goats."

Annabelle sighed. "Fine. Be reasonable." She drew Evie to the table. "I'm dying for champagne. Can you drink a glass now so I can watch you and experience it vicariously? Please?"

"Ah, sure," Evie said, not clear on what Annabelle wanted. She didn't think watching someone else drink would be very satisfying, but she was willing to go along with it.

She sipped from the glass Annabelle handed her. "Delicious."

Annabelle sighed. "I knew it. I miss champagne."

"I'd miss coffee more," Charlie muttered. "The whole pregnancy thing is a giant pain in the ass, if you ask me."

"It's not really your ass that hurts," Annabelle said in a mock whisper.

Charlie rolled her eyes. "Thanks for the update."

"I thought you were hearing the pitter-patter of little feet," Heidi said.

Charlie ran her hands through her cropped hair. "We're still negotiating." The strong, competent firefighter flushed. "Clay is worried that once I'm pregnant we're going to have to, um, spend less time...you know. He wants a few more months of us alone."

Evie stared at her, not sure what she was talking about. Wouldn't they still be alone during the pregnancy?

Annabelle leaned toward her. "Sex. She's talking about sex. Clay's worried that Charlie might have morning sickness or something and he won't be getting as much. They need the bloom to wear off the rose, so to speak."

Evie covered her ears. "Okay, I'm not having that conversation. Clay's my brother and that's just disgusting."

The other three laughed.

Conversation shifted to the plans for the day—what was happening when. The four of them walked over to get started on the buffet.

"Oh, Dante said he'd drive you, if you want," Heidi told Evie. "He said to knock on his door when you were ready."

"Thanks."

She hadn't seen Dante since their trip to the warehouse a couple of days before. Despite the flirtatious teasing at the dance studio, once they'd arrived to view the sets, he'd been all business. His claims to have worked in construction had turned out to be true. He'd studied the sets, had taken notes on what needed to be fixed and started a preliminary supply list.

All things that would help, Evie told herself. She had a big job ahead of her, and she didn't have the time to complicate her life with a guy. Still, there was something about Dante....

Something best left unexplored, she cautioned herself. A philosophy he obviously embraced. For all his flirty ways, after the set viewing, he'd simply dropped her off at her place with a quick goodbye and left. Apparently the only thing he'd exaggerated had been his attraction to her.

Evie collected a small piece of stuffed French toast and some bacon. Heidi chose a lot of protein, while Charlie filled her plate with food for twenty. Annabelle kept touching her stomach, as if trying to figure out what she and the baby were in the mood for.

Five women walked in together, and most of those already in the bar called out greetings. Heidi moved close to Evie.

"The Hendrix family women," she murmured. "Denise is the mother. The three who look exactly alike are triplets. Dakota, Montana and Nevada. Nevada's the one who's pregnant. The one who doesn't look like the others is Liz Sutton, the writer. She's married to Denise's oldest son."

The women looked happy to be together, Evie thought, watching them. The sisters and sister-in-law seemed especially close and kept near their mom.

She knew her brothers had grown up tight and, even when Rafe was at his most imperious, had kept in touch with the other brothers. She'd always been the odd one out. Never fitting in. As a kid, she'd felt as if everyone was mad at her all the time, but she never knew why.

She started back to the table, only to come to a stop in front of her mother.

"Hello, Evie," May said with a tentative smile.

"Um, hi. I didn't know you were going to be here."

"I drove in after Heidi. I wanted to get a few things started for dinner tonight."

Evie nodded, wondering if her sister-in-law had known May was coming to the brunch all along, but had failed to mention it. Had Heidi made that clear, Evie would have found a reason not to attend.

Evie started to step around her. May put her hand on her arm.

"Wait," her mother said. "Evie, we should talk." May glanced around at the crowded bar. "Maybe not here. But soon."

Evie looked for a place to set down her plate. She'd suddenly lost her appetite. "There's not very much for us to talk about."

"Of course there is. It's been so long. I want..." May drew in a breath. "I'd like us to stop being angry with each other."

To anyone else, that was probably a very reasonable statement. Evie fought against the sudden rush of tears in her eyes. "Sure. But first answer me a question. What do you have to be mad about? Me being born? Because that's not anything I could control."

May stiffened. "That came out wrong. I'm sorry."

Evie shook her head. "I don't think it came out wrong at all. I think you've been angry with me for a long time. As for talking, as far as I'm concerned, until you can tell me what it is you think I did, we have nothing to say to each other."

With that she walked back to the table. She set down her plate, picked up her champagne glass and drained it. Then she went in search of a refill.

* * *

"ARE YOU DRUNK?" Dante asked.

Evie leaned back into the soft leather of his very expensive, very German car. She'd been driving the same dented, slightly rusty old Chevy for nearly five years. The seats were more spring than foam, the windows didn't close right and the mechanic actually sighed every time she took her car in for service.

"This is nice," she said, stroking the side of the heated seat. "I'll try not to throw up."

"Gee, thanks," Dante said, turning his attention back to the road. "You are drunk."

"I'm buzzed. There's a difference."

"It's one in the afternoon."

"I was at a brunch and there was champagne. Plus I had a fight with my mom and that took away my appetite." She frowned, or at least tried to. She couldn't exactly feel her forehead. "We didn't fight. Not really. She said we should stop being mad at each other. I'm the kid. What did I ever do? That's what I asked. Is she pissed I was born? But she didn't have an answer. There's never a good reason, you know?"

She turned to Dante and blinked. "What were we talking about?"

"You need to eat something."

"Turkey. I'll eat turkey."

"That'll help." He glanced at her. "She said she was angry?"

Evie tried to remember May's exact words. "She said she would like us to stop being angry at each other. Being annoyed at me is kind of implied."

"Poor kid." Dante briefly put his hand on top of hers.

For a second Evie enjoyed the warmth of the contact, then the meaning of his words sank into her slightly soggy brain. Poor kid? Poor kid? Is that how he saw her? As a child? What happened to her being a sexy vixen? Not that he'd ever used that phrase, but still. He'd implied she was. Or at least her dancer work clothes. She didn't want to be a kid. She wanted to be vixeny. Vixenish. Whatever.

She leaned her head back against the seat and sighed. Life was far from fair.

Two hours later she'd munched her way through a fair amount of the veggie platter Heidi had put out and finished off about a half gallon of water. The buzz was long gone, as was the faint headache that had followed. Through careful maneuvering, she'd managed to avoid spending any time alone with her mother. Oddly enough, Dante had helped more than a little. He'd stuck beside her from the second they walked in the door.

Painfully aware that his concern was more fraternal than she would like, she told herself not to read anything into his actions. Dante was practically family. There was no way to avoid him while she was in Fool's Gold, and as her plans had her staying well into the new year, logic needed to win over longing. Well, not longing. Acknowledging that Dante was smart and sexy was simply stating the obvious. It wasn't as if she had a thing for him or wanted anything other than casual friendship.

"Halftime," Heidi said, walking into the living room. "It's time, people."

"Time for what?" Dante asked.

"I have no idea," Evie admitted, but stood along with everyone else.

Shane sighed. "It's Thanksgiving."

Evie pointed to the kitchen. "You know, the big turkey in the oven was our first clue."

"Funny. It's Thanksgiving, and if we get a big feast, so do the animals," Shane said.

Dante groaned. "Including the elephant?"

"Especially the elephant. My racehorses have a very controlled diet, but everybody else gets a treat. Do you know what a watermelon costs this time of year?"

They all followed Shane and Heidi outside where a truck waited. The back of the pickup was filled with all kinds of holiday goodies. There was the massive watermelon for Priscilla, the elephant, carrots and apples for the goats, Reno, the pony, Wilbur, the pig, and the riding horses. Something from the local butcher for the feral cat who had taken up residence with Priscilla and Reno.

Evie and Dante were assigned the riding horses.

"You know what you're doing?" Shane asked.

Evie sniffed. "Yes. We'll be fine."

They walked toward the corral. Six horses trotted over to greet them. Dante hesitated.

"They have really big teeth," he said. "You're okay with that?"

She smiled. "Keep your fingers away from their teeth and you'll be fine."

She took the knife Heidi had provided and sliced the apple in quarters, then put a piece on her hand, straightened her fingers so her palm was flat and offered it to the first horse. He took it gently, his lips barely brushing her skin.

"Impressive," Dante said and did the same with another quarter of apple.

"Look out!" she yelled, just as the horse reached for him.

He jumped back, dropping the apple piece. "What?"

She grinned. "Nothing. Just messing with you."

"Charming." He took another piece of apple and held it out to the horse. "Sorry about that," he said. "You know women."

"Um, you're talking to a girl horse."

"She understands just fine."

They finished giving the horses their holiday treats, then headed back to the house. When they stepped onto the porch, Dante paused. "Did you grow up here?"

Evie looked out at the rolling hills of the ranch. The air was cool, but the sky blue. To the east, snow-capped mountains rose toward the sun.

"Technically I was born in Fool's Gold," she admitted. "But I don't remember much about it. We moved when I was pretty young."

Her earliest memories were of the tiny apartment they'd had in Los Angeles. The three boys had been crammed into the larger of the two bedrooms. May had taken the smaller bedroom for herself and Evie had slept on the sofa.

"Are you happy to be back?"

"I like teaching dance," she said, willing to admit that much of the truth. "I wasn't sure I would, but it's gratifying. The girls are enthusiastic and excited to learn." A few were talented, but she'd discovered she was less interested in skill than attitude when it came to her students.

"Let me guess," he said, glancing at her. "The clog dancing is your favorite."

She laughed. "It's a very important art form."

"It's loud and on top of my head."

For a second she allowed herself to get lost in his dark blue eyes. Then common sense took over, and she gave him her best sympathetic smile. "It's for the children, Dante. Not everything is about you."

"It should be," he grumbled. "Come on. The second half is starting."

"You know, I was run over by a football player only a few months ago. Does it occur to you that watching the game could be traumatic?"

"Is it?"

"No. I'm just saying it could be."

He wrapped his arm around her and drew her inside. "Stay close. I'll protect you."

For a second she allowed herself to believe he wasn't just being funny. That he was someone she could depend on. She knew better, of course. Her family had taught her that the people who were supposed to love you back usually didn't and that it was far safer to simply be alone. She was done with love.

* * *

DINNER WAS MORE ENJOYABLE than Evie had allowed herself to hope was possible. With ten people sitting around a large table, it was easy to avoid awkward silences and difficult questions. Even more fortunate, May had sat at the opposite end, on the same side, so Evie didn't have to try to avoid her at all.

Once everyone had eaten their fill of turkey, dressing, mashed potatoes, sweet potato casserole, vegetables, olives, rolls and a very confusing Jell-O mold, conversation turned to the holiday season in Fool's Gold.

"You pretty much need a schedule of events on the refrigerator," Charlie was saying. "The town starts decorating this weekend. Next Saturday night is the tree lighting."

Heidi leaned against Rafe. "We're doing hayrides."

Dante turned to her. "What?"

Shane groaned. "Hayrides. Horses pulling sleighs." He glanced out at the rapidly darkening night. "Or wagons if we don't get snow."

Evie knew he sounded exasperated but guessed it was all an act. Shane liked everything about the ranch, including the close proximity to town. More important to him was how Annabelle enjoyed the holidays.

She glanced around the table, startled to realize all her relatives were paired up. A year ago everyone had been single. Since the last holiday season, Rafe and May had both married and Shane and Clay had gotten engaged. Annabelle was pregnant. This time next year Shane and Annabelle would have their baby. Heidi and Charlie would probably be pregnant, and she would be gone.

"I ate too much," Glen, May's husband, said as he pushed back from the table. "Wonderful dinner. Thank you."

May smiled at him. "It wasn't just me. Everyone helped."

"Not me," Evie said, suddenly wanting a few minutes away from her family. "So I insist on cleaning up. Everyone carry your plates into the kitchen, then leave me to it."

"You can't do all the dishes yourself," Heidi said.

"There's a brand-new dishwasher that says otherwise," Evie told her.

"I'll help," Dante said. "I'm good at taking orders."

"We all know that's not true," Rafe said. "But, hey, if he wants to wash, I say let him."

It only took a few minutes to clear the table. Heidi took charge of the leftovers and put them neatly away in the refrigerator, then Evie shooed her out so she could start rinsing the dishes. As promised, Dante stayed behind and began stacking serving pieces.

May walked in. "I want to help."

Evie forced a smile. "You made most of the dinner. I can handle this."

Her mother stared at her. "You really hate me, don't you?"

Evie felt her shoulders slump. "Mom, it's Thanksgiving. Why do you have to make me helping with cleanup more than it is?"

"Because you've been avoiding me." She pressed her lips together. "I know you had a difficult childhood and it's my fault. It's just that you..." Tears filled her eyes, and she looked away.

Evie told herself to be sympathetic. That nothing would be gained by snapping or complaining. There was no new material here. Just the same half-truths and partial explanations.

May sniffed. "Can't you forgive me?"

Evie folded her arms across her chest in what she knew was a protective and not very subtle gesture. "Sure. You're forgiven."

"You're still angry." May drew in a breath. "I know I wasn't there for you, when you were little. There were so many responsibilities."

"I'm sure it was difficult to raise four children on your own," Evie told her. "But we both know that's not the problem. The problem is you had a one-night stand a few months after your husband died, and I'm the result. The problem is, every time you look at me, you're reminded of your moment of weakness. You never wanted me, and, growing up, you made sure I knew it. It's not enough that I don't even know who my father is. I ended up with a mother who didn't give a damn."

May clutched at her throat. "That's not true."

"Isn't it? You blamed me for being born. That's my big crime. When I was little, you wanted nothing to do with me. You were never there for me. You weren't overtly mean, but you also weren't interested. You and my brothers had special things you did together. Rituals and celebrations. Things

I wasn't a part of. It was the four of you as a family and then me on the outside looking in. My brothers did their best with me, but it wasn't their job to raise me. It was yours and you didn't bother."

Evie felt herself starting to shake. She tried to hold it all together but knew she was seconds from a complete meltdown.

"I left home as soon as I could because there was no reason to stay. I never wanted to come back and wouldn't be here now if you and my brothers hadn't literally brought me here while I was unconscious after the accident." She almost blurted out that she wasn't planning on staying, either, but May didn't deserve to know her plans. She wouldn't be a part of her future.

"I was seventeen when I took off, and it was over a year until I heard from you. You never checked on me or wondered where I was or what I was doing."

"You were at Juilliard," May whispered.

"Right. For the first six months. Then I left. Did you ever wonder how a seventeen-year-old girl makes it on her own in the world? Did you bother to ask?"

The room blurred, and it took her a minute to realize she was crying.

"So, sure, Mom," she said, her voice thickening. "I forgive you. You were everything I ever wanted in a parent."

Then she was running. She went out through the back porch and down the stairs. Somewhere along the path to the goat barn, she stumbled and nearly fell. The only thing that kept her from going down was a pair of strong arms.

Dante pulled her against him and held her tight. He didn't say anything. He just hung on and let her sob until she had nothing left.

FIVE

DANTE WAS SURPRISED to find Rafe in the office Friday morning. "Why aren't you home with Heidi?" he asked.

Rafe looked up from his computer. "She's making cheese and let me know I was getting in her way. Figured I'd get some work done. What about you?"

"Heidi pretty much only has eyes for you."

Rafe chuckled. "I'm lucky that way."

Dante walked to his desk and turned on his computer, then poured himself a cup of coffee. They were the only two working that morning. The staff had been given the long weekend off.

"How's your mom?" Dante asked.

"Fine. Why?"

Dante had wondered if May had told anyone what had happened. He'd let Evie cry herself out, then had driven her home. This morning he'd wanted to go check on her, but there'd been no sign she was awake when he'd left.

He'd been forced to walk away, still feeling protective but with nothing to do.

"She and Evie got into it last night," Dante said and recapped the conversation.

Rafe shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "I wish they wouldn't talk about the past. There's nothing that can be done to fix it."

"Was Evie telling the truth?" Dante asked. "Was she that isolated as a kid?"

"It was complicated," Rafe admitted. "She was a lot younger, and I think she was a reminder of that one night for my mom. The four of us were used to being together, then Evie came along...." His voice trailed off.

Dante had lost his mother when he'd been fifteen. While he hadn't been the one to pull the trigger, a case could be made that he was responsible. They'd always been there for each other, and to this day, he would give anything to have her back. He couldn't comprehend what it would be like to have family and not be close to them.

"She's your sister," he began.

"I know." He sighed. "I was too busy being the man of the family. I figured the rest of them would worry about Evie. But that never happened. She was always an afterthought." He shook his head. "There's no excuse."

Dante had known Rafe a lot of years and trusted him completely. From what he'd seen, May was a sweet, loving person. So how had everyone managed to ignore what was going on with Evie?

"She's here now," Rafe continued. "We want to make things up to her."

"Good luck with that."

"You think she'll resist?"

"If you were her, how forgiving would you be?"

Rafe sighed. "Yeah, I see your point. I appreciate you looking out for her." He stared at Dante. "That's all it is, right? You're not getting involved?"

Dante knew exactly what his friend was asking. Telling Rafe he thought Evie was sexy as hell, from the way she walked to her hard-won smile, wasn't a smart move. Instead he settled on the truth.

"You know how I feel about relationships." In his world, love had deadly consequences. He'd learned the lesson early and had never let it go.

* * *

THE FRIDAY AFTER Thanksgiving wasn't a school day, so Evie had scheduled her dance classes early. She was done by three and showered, dressed and settled in front of her television by four. She pushed the play button on her remote, cuing up the DVD of the performance, then settled back on her sofa to watch it for the fortieth time.

The story was simple. The Winter King had dozens of daughters. The girls wanted to go free in the world, but he loved them too much to let them go. So his daughters danced to convince him they were ready to leave. At the end, the girls were revealed as beautiful snowflakes and he released them into the world as Christmas snow.

The girls danced in groups. They were mostly divided by age, with the younger performers having more simple choreography. Every student had a few seconds of a solo with the more advanced students having longer in the spotlight. Several styles of dance were represented. Modern, tap, clog and, of course, ballet.

The sets were simple, the lighting basic. The music was a collection of classic holiday songs, leaning heavily on Tchaikovsky. What would the world have done without his beautiful Nutcracker? The biggest problem in her mind was the transitions. They were awkward in some places, nonexistent in others. Sometimes the girls simply walked off the stage, and the next group walked on. Every time she watched that part of the performance, she winced.

Evie made a few notes, then rewound to the clog dancers who opened the show. Some of their steps were similar to tap, she thought. The sounds could echo each other. Slower, then faster. She stood and moved along with the girls on the recording. But as they turned to leave, she kept dancing, going a little more quickly, finding the rhythm of the tap dancers as they moved onto the stage.

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