



CARTER BRAVO'S CHRISTMAS BRIDE

Christine Rimmer

 *Cherish*™

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Carter Bravo's Christmas Bride

«HarperCollins»

Rimmer C.

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Compatible? Check. Chemistry? Check. Love? Check...mate! When Carter Bravo decides it's time to settle down this Christmas, the once-burned, no-strings-attached hunk chooses the one woman who isn't looking to be swept off her feet. Not only does his business partner and best buddy, Paige Kettleman, say yes—the chemistry sizzling between them is further proof that she's his ideal mate. Carter's no-nonsense proposition isn't exactly the romantic proposal Paige dreamed about under the mistletoe. After five years of building a business and sharing confidences, her dearest friend still has no idea how she really feels about him. If he did, he'd go running for the Colorado hills. Unless Paige can show Carter how to turn a test-run engagement into the real thing: a holiday wedding with all the trimmings—including love!

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“No way.”

“Carter. Come on, think about it. Really think about it. What if it doesn’t work out? What if ... one of us falls in love and the other doesn’t?” *What if one of us is already in love?* “What if it ends up destroying our friendship, our partnership, everything? Then what?”

He just wouldn’t listen. “That’s not going to happen.”

“You can’t be sure of that.”

“Yes, I can. Nobody’s falling in love. That’s the beauty of it. We know who we are with each other. We’re going to have a great life together, Paige, a *happy* life. That falling-in-love crap isn’t going to happen to us.”

But it’s already happened to me.

* * *

The Bravos of Justice Creek: Where bold hearts collide under Western skies

Carter Bravo’s

Christmas Bride

Christine Rimmer



www.millsandboon.co.uk

CHRISTINE RIMMER came to her profession the long way around. She tried everything from acting to teaching to telephone sales. Now she’s finally found work that suits her perfectly. She insists she never had a problem keeping a job—she was merely gaining “life experience” for her future as a novelist. Christine lives with her family in Oregon. Visit her at www.christinerimmer.com.

For my dear friend Carol Sue Ell,
who loves books as much as I do
and is always ready with a kind word.
Thanks for the smiles, Carol Sue,
and for making every day just a little bit brighter.

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[Chapter One](#)

It all started three days before Thanksgiving with a silly magazine quiz.

Paige Kettleman and her best friend and business partner, Carter Bravo, sat in the plush Denver offices of Leery International Drilling. They were waiting to meet with president and CEO Deacon Leery, who had already commissioned five big-ticket custom-redesigned cars from their company, Bravo Custom Cars.

Carter was getting fidgety. He spent most of his working life in old jeans and T-shirts, with his head stuck under the hood of one of his soon-to-be beautiful custom creations. He'd never enjoyed taking meetings.

But Deacon was a major customer. And Deacon liked Carter to come to his gorgeous office and listen to him ramble on about classic cars for a while before getting around to the dream ride he wanted Carter to build for him next. As far as Deacon was concerned, Paige didn't really even need to be there. But she ran the business end of Bravo Custom Cars. She always went along to visit Deacon for that special moment when they started talking money.

Carter had already taken off his sport coat and tossed it across the back of his chair. Now he sat forward, elbows on his spread knees. He braced his square jaw on his big fist and tapped his booted foot impatiently.

Paige watched him and tried not to grin.

He sent her a quick, challenging glance. "So what? I hate sitting around. That's a crime?"

She stifled a chuckle. "Who said a word about crimes?"

He grunted. "Smug. You know you are. Sitting there all cool and calm in your preppy little suit, tap-tap-tapping on your tablet."

She gave him a bland smile. "I'm sure it won't be long now."

He grumbled something. She wisely did not ask him what. And then he grabbed one of the glossy magazines from the low table in front of them. Hitching one boot across the other knee, he slumped back in his chair and began thumbing through it.

She returned her attention to her tablet and her email correspondence with Kelly Cobb, the Realtor they'd hired a few weeks before. Bravo Custom Cars was looking to expand. Electric cars were the future, and Carter wanted to start building custom electric cars along with the gas hogs most of his clients favored.

Carter and Paige had their eye on a new location. They'd made one offer and been turned down. The owner had rocks in his head. Nobody else in town wanted that property. The building and large fenced concrete yard had been sitting on an ugly stretch of Arrowhead Drive on the outskirts of their hometown for over a year with a big For Sale sign on the gate. Paige and Carter were waiting for the seller to get real and lower his asking price a little before they tried again.

Carter nudged her with his elbow. "You got a pen?" She took one from her black leather tote and handed it over. "Thanks. You listening?"

"Um."

"Good. Because you'll love this. 'Is he really your best friend or are you secretly in love with him?' It's a quiz and you need to take it."

She zipped off the email to the Realtor. "No, I don't."

"Yeah, you do. It's all about us."

Paige reached over and snagged the corner of the magazine so she could get a look at the front of it. “*Girl Code*? You’re reading *Girl Code*?”

“I’m broadening my horizons, trying to understand women better. Everyone says I need to.”

She stifled a snort and pointed at the other magazines on the low table. “There’s a *Car and Driver* right there.”

His broad shoulders lifted in a dismissive shrug. “I’ve read that one. First question. ‘Do you compare all your dates to him?’ You know you do. So that’s a yes.” He scratched at the page with the pen she’d foolishly given him.

“It’s obvious you don’t even need me here,” she wryly observed.

He actually had the nerve to smirk. “You’re right, I don’t. I know all the answers. Because, face it, I know you better than *you* know you—which proves I know a thing or two about women, after all.”

“So then shut up,” she muttered out of the corner of her mouth. “Take the damn thing silently if you just *have* to go there.” A text popped up from Mona, who ran their front office. Mona was closing up for the night. Paige sighed and replied Still @ Leery’s. C U 2morrow.

And Carter went right on to the next question. “Can you tell him anything without feeling at all uncomfortable?” Oh, hell to the yes.” He scratched on the page again.

“That’s not fair. You have no idea the things I *don’t* tell you.” There weren’t a lot of them, to be strictly honest. But he didn’t need to know that right now.

“Oh, come on. You tell me *everything*, Paige. That’s how you are with me. Constant oversharing. A thought pops in your head and I’m the only one there? Comes right out your mouth.” She elbowed him. Hard. He snickered, leaned away from her so she couldn’t do it again and asked, “Do you care about his happiness more than you do the happiness of your other friends?” Another snicker as he checked the answer. “Do you think about drunk-texting him every other weekend?” I’m going with yes for that, too, because if you were drunk, you *know* it would be me you drunk-texted.”

Best to just ignore him, she decided. So she did—or at least she pretended to.

And he kept right on, asking the questions and answering them for her. There were twenty in all.

When he finally answered the last one, he announced, “You scored twenty out of twenty. Hate to break it to you, Paige. But you’re desperately in love with me.”

She considered taking off one of her high-heeled shoes and bopping him on the head with it. But if she hit him once, she would only want to hit him again.

He tossed the magazine back on the table. “I gotta ask.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Why does every woman I meet just *have* to fall in love with me?” he went on as though she hadn’t spoken. “I don’t get it.”

She scoffed, “You’re not the only one.”

“Wait a minute, hold on. We both know *you* get it. We just found out you’re hopelessly in love with me like all the rest of them, remember? So, what is it that you adore about me?”

“Not a thing.”

“I think we need to make a list.”

“Carter, stop.”

He was wearing that smile now. The one that drove all the women right out of their panties—except for her. As his best friend, Paige reminded herself, she was totally immune to that smile. And he was still talking. “Yes. Definitely. Let’s make a list.”

“Let’s not and say we did.”

He started ticking off his supposed lady-killing qualities. “Okay, I’ll admit it. I’m better looking than most. And I have a great personality. I’m a god in bed—not that you would know that. And I’m well off, but come on. Half the time, I’m covered in axle grease.” He gave her one of those looks, serious and teasing, both at the same time. “Paige.”

“What?”

“We both know I’m not really all that.”

“You think I’m going to argue with you and tell you you’re wonderful and not to run yourself down? Ha. Think again.”

He spread his arms wide and she had to jerk back in her chair to keep from getting smacked in the chest with a rock-hard forearm. “Why can’t someone explain it to me? What is this thing I have?”

Before Paige could manufacture a suitably quelling reply, the receptionist said pleasantly, “Mr. Leery will see you now.”

So they got up and entered the inner sanctum where another plum project was waiting for them.

An hour later, they shook hands with Deacon Leery and wished him a happy Thanksgiving. It had gone well. Carter was excited about acquiring and redesigning his next four-wheeled masterpiece. Paige felt pleased with the deal she’d struck. A satisfying transaction in every way.

Except for that damn quiz. For some reason, she couldn’t stop thinking about it.

Ridiculous. Why even worry about it? It was nothing but fluff. Silly, meaningless fluff.

“You’re quiet,” Carter said about midway through the hour-and-a-half drive back to their hometown of Justice Creek.

She made a sleepy noise, closed her eyes and leaned against the passenger-side window, hoping he’d assume she must be napping and leave her alone.

It worked. But Paige was not napping. Far from it. Her brain was packed to bursting with that absurd *Girl Code* quiz.

Let it go, she told herself. It’s no big deal. Forget about it.

But she couldn’t forget. It was stuck in her mind and it wouldn’t go away. It was like the avalanche that killed her parents, a snowball rolling downhill, quickly gaining speed and mass until it buried everyone and everything in its path.

They weren’t even her answers, she reminded herself. They were Carter’s.

But unfortunately, his answers were the ones that she would have given. And for a silly, meaningless magazine quiz, well, they were kind of good questions, she had to admit.

They were *telling* questions.

And that was why she couldn’t put it out of her mind. Carter *had* answered the questions just as she would have. And that meant she couldn’t stop thinking that it might actually be true, that she’d gone and fallen secretly in love with her best friend.

And now just look at her, with that totally unacceptable secret loose and wreaking havoc in her mind and heart.

The only good news?

Nobody else knew. Not even Carter. He had no clue. She was dead certain of that. Thank God. He’d only been messing with her, taking that ridiculous quiz for her. He had no idea what he’d done.

The next morning, when he stopped by the house to walk the dogs and then fix breakfast for her and him and her younger sister, Dawn, he seemed totally oblivious. And then at work that day, he mostly stayed in the shop and she managed to stick to the office, so he had no chance to notice if she acted strange and preoccupied.

Mona, who worked side by side with her, caught on, though. “You okay, Paige? You seem kind of far away.”

“Christmas on my mind, I guess,” Paige outright lied. “And you know, it’s kind of quiet today. We should get out the decorations, get them up. You think?”

Mona loved Christmas. She zipped right out to the shed by the back gate and hauled the boxes of decorations up front to the office. They spent a couple of hours setting up the fake tree and tacking sparkly garland on every available surface. Mona already had her old iPod loaded up with Christmas favorites. She stuck it in the dock at the end of the service counter. Holiday tunes filled the air. Mona hummed along under her breath, thrilled to have the office full of Christmas and no longer worrying about what might be bugging Paige.

Wednesday morning when Paige followed the tempting smells of frying bacon and perfectly brewed coffee downstairs, she found the dogs—her beagle, Biscuit, and Carter’s hound, Sally—sprawled contentedly on the kitchen floor after their morning walk.

Carter stood at the stove. He had his back to her. She hesitated in the doorway in her flannel pj’s and plaid robe and watched him cooking up the bacon nice and slow.

He liked to come over before she and Dawn got up, especially lately, since he’d broken up with his last girlfriend, Sherry Leland. Lately, Carter ended up at Paige and Dawn’s a lot of the time. He would take Biscuit out with Sally, then let himself back in and start breakfast.

And even when he had a girlfriend, Carter still found time to walk Paige’s dog and brew her morning coffee two or three days a week. Most Sunday nights, he came over for dinner and stayed on to play video games or stream a movie.

That he spent so much time at the Kettleman’s always bugged his girlfriends eventually. They didn’t really like that his best friend was a woman and his business partner. They also didn’t like that his best friend’s teenage sister was kind of a cross between a daughter and a little sister to him. Paige got why it bugged them. She wouldn’t like it, either, if her special guy spent most of his working life and half his free time with another woman. Paige used to suggest to him that maybe he should focus more on the girlfriend of the hour and not so much on hanging with her and Dawn.

He wouldn’t listen. He said he liked being with her and Dawn, and if his girlfriend was jealous, she needed to get over that.

Paige always felt kind of sorry for Carter’s girlfriends. Somehow they all fell so hard for him. And the deeper they fell, the more he pulled away from them. And the more he pulled away, the more upset they got. There would be scenes. Carter hated scenes, mostly because his childhood had been one long, dramatic scene.

His mother, Willow Mooney, had loved his father, Franklin Bravo, to distraction. Franklin was already married when he met Willow. But Frank Bravo didn’t let a little thing like a wife get in his way. He set Willow up in a house on the south side of town. Willow kicked Frank out of that house on a regular basis. But she always took him back, remaining his mistress for over two decades, giving Frank five children while he was still married to his first wife, Sondra, who gave him four.

Yeah. Falling for Carter? Not a wise move.

This can’t really be happening, Paige thought for about the fiftieth time since Monday and that awful, terrible, silly, pointless quiz. *This can’t be happening to me.*

But if it wasn’t, then why was she lurking in the doorway to the kitchen, staring longingly at Carter’s broad, thick shoulders and fine, tight butt?

It just made her feel sad. Beyond sad. Carter’s shoulders and butt had never mattered in the least to her before Monday. Why should they mean so much now?

He sent her a quick smile over one of those far-too-fine shoulders of his. “Coffee’s ready.”

As if she didn’t know. Carter was a great cook. And he had a way with coffee. She would know a Carter-brewed cup of coffee blindfolded. All it took was one sniff. Heaven in a cup.

“Thanks.” She shuffled over and filled a mug with the hot, wonderful brew. And then she stood there, leaning against the counter, sipping it slowly, her heart breaking at the hopeless absurdity of it all as Carter cracked eggs into her mother’s favorite cast-iron pan.

* * *

Carter woke on Thanksgiving morning to the sound of his cell ringing. He stuck out a hand, snared the damn thing off the nightstand and squinted at the display. It was 5:49 and his mother was calling.

When had Willow Mooney Bravo ever climbed out of bed before six in the morning? Never, that he could remember. Even when he and his brothers and sisters were small they knew not to bother Ma too early in the morning. She tended to throw things if you messed with her beauty sleep.

His sweet redbone coonhound, Sally, lifted her floppy-eared head from the foot of the bed and blinked at him questioningly.

“Hell if I know,” he said to the dog, and put the phone to his ear. “Ma? What’s going on? Did somebody die?”

“Happy Thanksgiving, darling. Everything is fine and no one has died. But I know you’re an early riser and I wanted to catch you before you left the house. I want a private word with you—today, I hope. I’m leaving for Palm Springs tomorrow and I’m not sure when I’ll be back.” Since his father had died four years ago, you could hardly catch his mother at home. She traveled the world, flitting from one luxury destination to the next. “I wonder if you could drop by for a drink before you join the rest of the family at Clara’s.”

His half sister Clara Bravo Ames had invited the whole family to her house that afternoon for a big Thanksgiving dinner. Paige and Dawn were coming, too. “Won’t you be at Clara’s?”

“It was sweet of Clara to include me, but no. Big family gatherings exhaust me and I have an early flight tomorrow morning—and besides, I want to speak with you alone.”

He didn’t really like the sound of that. “About what?”

“Darling. Honestly. Don’t be so suspicious. I’ll explain everything when we talk.”

“We’re talking now.” At the foot of the bed, Sally picked up the tension in his voice and whined. He snapped his fingers and she slinked up the bed, slithered in a circle and settled beside him where he could throw an arm around her and scratch her silky red head.

His mother went on, sounding way too casual for his peace of mind. “How about this? I know you’re expected at Clara’s at three. So let’s say two o’clock at my house, just you and me.” Her house was the Bravo Mansion, which his father had built for his first wife, Sondra. The mansion was full of beautiful things that used to be Sondra’s. When Sondra died, Frank married Willow and installed her at the mansion. By then, Carter had been twenty-three and on his own. He’d never had to live in the house he still considered Sondra’s, and he was damn glad he hadn’t. He didn’t want to go there today, either. “Carter. Are you still there?”

He patted Sally’s smooth flank. “Yeah.”

“Two o’clock, then?”

He reminded himself that she was his mother and he really didn’t see her all that often these days. “Yeah, Ma. See you then.” Disconnecting the call, he tossed the phone on the nightstand. Then he turned to Sally. “Walk?”

Sally let out a happy whine of agreement and lifted off her haunches enough to give a wag of her red tail.

“Let’s go pick up Biscuit and get after it, then.”

* * *

Ten minutes later, he stood on Paige’s front porch and stuck his key in the lock. Biscuit was waiting on the other side. He grabbed the beagle’s leash from the hook by the door and clipped it to Biscuit’s collar. Then he clicked his tongue and Biscuit trotted out the door to wiggle over and butt against Sally, who waited patiently for Carter to lock up again so they could get going.

Half an hour later, he was back in the kitchen at Paige’s, getting the coffee going, trying to decide between French toast and oatmeal. He settled on the oatmeal because of the huge dinner ahead of them at Clara’s. Paige and Dawn came down together as he was turning off the fire under the oats.

Through breakfast, Dawn chattered away as usual about the afternoon dinner at Clara’s, about how she and her best friend, Molly D’Abalo, were going to the movies with friends in the evening.

Dawn was a great kid. Not an ounce of bitterness in her, though she’d lost her mom and dad suddenly when she was only ten. Erica and Jerry Kettleman had been buried in an avalanche while off on a twenty-fifth anniversary skiing trip. Paige had come home from college to take care of her little sister. Together, they’d made it work. And now, at eighteen, Dawn had boundless enthusiasm and a smile for everyone. She was an A student and first chair clarinet with her high school band.

Babbling away happily between bites, Dawn inhaled her oatmeal. Once her bowl was empty, she jumped up, carried it to the sink, ran water in it and rushed off upstairs to get dressed.

Carter turned to Paige, who wore her heavy plaid robe, with her brown hair loose and uncombed on her shoulders. Her eyes looked kind of puffy. She'd hardly said a word since she came downstairs. "You okay?"

She blinked and seemed to shake herself. "Uh. Fine."

"Sure?"

"Positive."

He couldn't really get a read on her, couldn't decide whether he ought to keep pushing her to tell him what was going on with her or let it go. It was odd. As a rule, he never had to push her to tell him if she had a problem. She always came right out with it and asked his advice.

Okay, so maybe this time she needed a little encouragement. He was just about to try that when she jumped up. "Thanks for the breakfast, Carter. You're the best."

"Gotta keep my girls fed." He watched her bustle to the sink, rinse out her bowl and bend to stick it in the dishwasher.

"Well." She shut the dishwasher door and straightened. "Better get after it. The day's not getting any younger. Leave everything. I mean it. I'll clean up."

"Will do."

"Quarter of three?"

"I'll be here."

And then she darted to the door and took off down the hall.

He didn't get it. They always spent a few minutes together in the morning after Dawn went back upstairs. But today—and for the past couple of days, now that he thought about it—Paige couldn't get away fast enough.

Her rush to leave the kitchen right after breakfast hadn't bothered him much yesterday or the day before. Today, though, he'd really wanted to tell her about the weird call from his mother. He wanted to get her take on Willow suddenly asking him to come to the Bravo Mansion and have a drink with her, alone.

But so much for wanting Paige's input.

"So, okay, then," he said to the dogs, because there was no one else there to hear him. He rose. "Come on, Sally. Time to go."

* * *

Built less than forty years ago on top of a hill at the west end of Grandview Drive, the Bravo Mansion seemed a product of a much earlier age. Georgian in style, with big white columns flanking the front door, the mansion bore a striking resemblance to the White House. Let it never be said that Frank Bravo didn't dream big.

The housekeeper, Estrella Watson, must have been told to watch for him. Before he was halfway up the front steps, she pulled the wreath-hung door open and gave him a big smile of greeting. "Happy Thanksgiving, Carter." She reached for a hug.

He wrapped his arms around her. "Good to see you." He'd always liked Estrella. She'd been the mansion's housekeeper for years, from before Sondra died and Carter's mother moved in. Well into her fifties now, Estrella kept the house and grounds in great shape, hiring and supervising maids, gardeners and repairmen. She lived in, cooking for Willow whenever his mother was at home. She seemed to enjoy her job and treated everyone kindly.

A jumble of boxes filled the front hall, most of them opened, bright decorations and shiny ornaments spilling out. "It's a weeklong job, getting the house ready for the holidays," Estrella explained. "And I'm not preparing Thanksgiving dinner this year, so I thought I might as well get a head start."

What for? he couldn't help wondering. Only she and his mother lived there, and his mother was leaving for California. But Willow liked the mansion just so, whether she stuck around to enjoy it or not. And Estrella had a gleam in her eye, as though nothing pleased her more than decking the halls of the big, empty house.

She took his coat. "Your mother's in the library."

He thanked her and went on through the formal living room to the large book-lined room behind it, where a fire crackled in the ornate fireplace and the mantel was already done up in swags of green garland studded with shiny ornaments and twinkling lights.

"Carter." His mother rose from a silk-covered chair. She looked beautiful as always, in snug black slacks and a fitted green cashmere sweater, her chin-length blond hair combed back from the classic oval of her face.

He kissed the smooth, pale cheek she offered. "Ma. How are you?"

She fiddled with the diamond stud in her left ear. "Perfect. Thank you. How about a martini?"

He looked at her patiently. "Got a beer?"

She sighed. "Of course." She had a longneck waiting in an ice bucket on the fancy mirrored drink cart, right next to the Bombay Sapphire and the Vya vermouth. She also had a chilled glass for him.

"Just give me the bottle."

Another sigh. His mother had been born with nothing. Her own mother ran off when she was three weeks old and Willow grew up in a double-wide, just her and her father. Gene Mooney, deceased before Carter was born, had had trouble holding a job and drank too much. It probably wasn't all that surprising that, over the years, Willow had developed a passion for elegance and gracious living. The way Willow saw it, if a man insisted on drinking beer, he should at least use a glass.

Too bad. Carter took the beer, sat in the chair across from hers and watched as she skillfully whipped up her martini—stirred, not shaken.

Willow took her seat again and raised her glass. "To happiness."

Happiness? His mother had never struck him as a person who put a lot of store in happiness. She'd wanted Frank Bravo and the good life he provided for her. And she'd fought tooth and nail to get both.

But hey. She was getting older. Maybe she missed the happiness that had never seemed all that important to her while Carter was growing up.

"Happiness it is." He lifted his bottle in answer to her toast and resisted the urge to come right out and ask her why she'd summoned him here. It wouldn't kill him to try a little friendly conversation. "So, what's happening in Palm Springs?"

"The usual. Shopping. Spa time. And the weather is lovely there now."

"Well. Have a great time."

"I will, darling."

Ho-kay. So much for cordial conversation. He took one more stab at it. "We'll miss you at Clara's."

She smiled her cool smile. "Somehow I doubt that."

Annoyance gnawed at him. His half siblings had made it more than clear that they wanted to forgive and forget. Her decades-long love triangle was seriously old news. "You're wrong. We *will* miss you." He took care to say it gently. "And I think you know that."

She sipped her drink. "I didn't ask you here to talk about dinner at Clara's."

"Well, all right. What's going on?"

Willow lounged back in the chair and crossed her legs. "Notice I made a toast to happiness?"

"Yeah, Ma. I heard you."

“That’s because lately I’ve been thinking a lot about happiness, about what makes a man—or anyone, really—truly happy.” She paused. Just to be nice, Carter made an encouraging sound low in his throat. She said, “Take your brother.”

“Which one?” He had two full brothers, both younger than he was—Garrett, thirty-three, and Quinn, thirty-one. And then there were also Sondra’s sons, Darius and James.

“I’m talking about Quinn,” his mother said. A former martial arts star, Quinn had retired from fighting last year and brought his little daughter, Annabelle, home to Justice Creek. Now he owned a gym and fitness center on Marmot Drive. Just recently, he’d gotten together with gorgeous Chloe Winchester, who’d also grown up in town. “Now that Quinn’s married Chloe, he’s a truly happy man.”

Carter wasn’t sure he liked where this was going. “Can’t argue with that,” he answered cautiously.

“I want that for you, too, darling. I want you to find happiness.”

Okay, now. He *definitely* didn’t like where this was going. “What are you up to, Ma? Just spit it the hell out.”

“Love, darling. I want you to take a chance on love.”

He really wished he hadn’t asked. “Oh, well, sure. I’ll get right on that.”

“Don’t give me sarcasm. You’re thirty-four years old. When a man reaches your age and he’s never been married, the likelihood that he’ll find someone to be happy with is...” Another sigh. God. He hated her damn sighs. “It’s not looking good for you. You have to know that.”

Carter sat very still in the silk wing chair and reminded himself not to say anything he would later regret. But she pissed him the hell off. She acted as if he didn’t want to get married. He *did*. Very much.

But somehow the whole romance thing never worked out for him. And it wasn’t as if he hadn’t tried. He had. Repeatedly.

There was just something about him, something *wrong* with him. Because he always attracted the drama queens.

Things would begin well. Lots of fireworks in bed, yes, but otherwise the woman would seem like a reasonable person, someone he could talk to, someone easygoing and fun. Early on, his girlfriends reassured him that they wanted what he wanted, a solid partnership and a balanced life. He always explained up front that he expected an exclusive relationship and he planned someday to get married, but if they were after passionate declarations of undying love, they should find a different guy. The woman would say that was no problem; she completely understood.

But every woman he’d ever dated had eventually told him she loved him. He never said it back. And his silence on the subject never worked for them. The downward spiral would start. There would be heated accusations, generally irrational behavior and a messy breakup at the end. He hated all that.

Truthfully, deep down?

Carter thought the whole love thing was pretty damn stupid. The way he saw it, falling in love was a good way to lose your mind.

His mother said, “I know, darling. I understand. I wasn’t a good mother.”

“Did I say that? I never said that.”

“You don’t have to say it. It’s simply the truth. There were way too many big dramatic scenes. I loved your father to distraction and I wanted him to leave Sondra. Every time I kicked him out, I swore I would never take him back.”

“But you always did.”

“I loved him.” She said it softly, gently. As though it explained everything.

Carter kept his mouth shut. It was stupid to argue about it. To some people, love excused the worst behaviors. All you had to do was call it love and you could get away with anything—steal someone else’s husband, make your children’s lives an endless series of shouting matches and emotional upheavals.

His mother set her empty martini glass on the small inlaid table by her chair. “I want you to take a chance on love. I may be a bad mother, but I do love you. And a mother knows her children. At heart, you’re like Quinn. A family man. I won’t have you ending up alone because of my mistakes.”

She wouldn’t *have* it? You’d think he was ten, the way she was talking. “Ma, you really need to dial this back. It’s not all about you. I’m a grown man and have been for quite a while now. It’s on me if I can’t make things work with a woman.”

“Not entirely. I know very well that my actions when you were growing up have made you afraid of strong emotions.”

He looked at her sideways. “Have you gone into therapy or something?”

“No. I’ve only been thinking—as I’ve already told you. These days, I have plenty of time for thinking.”

“Well, think about something other than me and my supposed need for true love and a wife, why don’t you?”

She didn’t answer, only sat there in her chair, watching him for about fifteen seconds that only seemed like an hour and a half. He was just about to jump up, wish her a safe trip to California and get out of there when she said, “I asked you here to offer a little something in the way of motivation, a little something in the interest of helping you get past your fears.”

He stood and set his empty beer bottle on the drink cart. “You never suffered from a lack of nerve, Ma. I gotta give you that. Look, this...whatever it is you think you’re pulling here is more than I’m up for, you know? You really need to mind your own damn business.”

His mother didn’t seem a bit bothered by his harsh words. She gave a shrug. “I can that see you’re ready to go.”

“More than ready.”

“Just listen to my offer before you leave. Please.”

“Offer? You’re kidding me. There’s an offer?”

She draped an arm over the chair arm and crossed her legs the other way. “Yes, there is. I know that you and Paige have been eyeing a certain property on Arrowhead Drive, with a large cinder-block industrial building on it.”

“What the...? How do you know that?”

She waved a hand. “It was all really quite innocent.”

“Innocent,” he repeated. Not a word he would think of in connection with Willow. “Right.”

She fiddled with her earring again. “I drove by there a few weeks ago and saw the two of you standing outside the gate. And then I recalled how, several months ago, you said something about wanting to expand Bravo Custom Cars. I added two and two. Voilà. Four. Tuesday, I paid a visit to the owner. He had a price. And I have paid it.”

“You’re not serious.”

“Oh, but I am. I’ve bought that property.”

“What for? What possible use can you have for a fifteen-thousand-square-foot cinder-block building and a concrete yard rimmed in chain-link fence?”

“None, of course.”

He wanted to pick up his empty beer bottle and hurl it at the garland-bedecked fireplace. “I’m going to leave now, Ma. Happy Thanksgiving and have a nice trip to Palm Springs.” He turned to go back through the formal living room and out the way he’d come in.

And she said, “The property is yours, free and clear. But only as a wedding present.”

Keep going, he thought. *Don’t give her the satisfaction of taking her seriously*. But then he just couldn’t let it go at that. He halted and turned back to her. “Reassure me, Ma. Tell me you *didn’t* just say that if I get married, you’ll give me the property.”

“But that is exactly what I said.”

Unbelievable. “What if you’ve got this all wrong? What if Paige and I have zero interest in that property?”

“Ah, but I’m not wrong, am I?”

He could strangle her. He’d probably get the death penalty and go to hell for murdering his own mother. But right at that moment, murder seemed like a great idea. “Just curious. Did you have any particular bride in mind for me?”

“Of course not. It has to be someone you choose for yourself.”

He made a low, scoffing sound in his throat. “Wow. I get to choose the woman myself.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“I gotta say it, Ma.”

“Go ahead. Whatever you need to tell me, I’m here and I’m listening.”

“The way your mind works?”

“Yes?”

“It’s always scared the hell out of me.”

“Don’t be cruel. Can’t you see that I’m doing this for you? It’s a nudge, plain and simple, an opportunity for you to start thinking about giving love and happiness a chance. I just want you to entertain the idea of making a good life with the right woman. The property is an incentive, that’s all.”

He laughed. Because it was funny, right? And then he said, “You have a great holiday, Ma.”

She granted him her coolest smile. “Thank you, darling. I will.”

He turned on his heel then. This time, he didn’t pause or turn back. He strode fast through the front room and into the giant foyer, where he collected his coat from Estrella and got the hell out of there.

Chapter Two

Not only was Carter’s mother a manipulative nutcase; his best friend had checked out on him.

Carter sat between Paige and Dawn at the long, white-clothed table in his half sister Clara’s formal dining room and wondered what was the matter with Paige. She’d hardly said two words to him all afternoon. At some point between the time she’d left the breakfast table that morning and two forty-five in the afternoon, when he picked her and Dawn up to bring them to Clara’s, Paige had gotten dressed, combed her hair and put on makeup. But her eyes still had that strange vacant look.

If someone spoke to her directly, she would lurch to life and pretend to be interested. But as soon as the focus moved elsewhere, she’d settle back into the weird funk she’d been in for days now.

Twice, he leaned close and asked her if she was okay. Both times, she lied. “Fine,” she said the first time. “Great,” she answered later.

He left her alone after that. They could talk about it when they got back to her place.

For now, he enjoyed his family. The food was always good at Clara’s house. Plus, Clara was a truly sweet woman and happily married to a banker from Denver named Dalton Ames. They had a six-month-old daughter, Kiera.

Carter liked hanging around Dalton and Clara. Just seeing them together made him smile. They’d had some difficulties when they first started out, but they’d worked through them and come out strong on the other side.

Same thing with his brother Quinn and Chloe Winchester, who was now Chloe Bravo. Truthfully, Willow might be full of crap about a lot of stuff, but she was right about Quinn and Chloe. Quinn and Chloe had that thing—whatever it was. They shared that special connection, same as Dalton and Clara.

And then there was his cousin Rory and her fiancé, Walker McKellan. Rory Bravo-Calabretti was an honest-to-God princess from the tiny Mediterranean principality of Montedoro. She’d moved to Justice Creek last winter. She and Walker, who owned a guest ranch not far from town, were getting married on Christmas Eve.

And yeah, Rory and Walker had it, too. Same as Clara and Dalton. Same as Quinn and Chloe.

Hanging around at Clara's house on Thanksgiving, watching those three couples interact with each other, Carter could almost start to think that love and forever were actually possible.

At least for other people.

Once the meal was through, they all helped to clear the table. Then a little later, Dalton turned the game on in the great room. Some of them—Carter included—gathered around the big screen mounted over the mantel.

Most of the women headed for the kitchen area, which shared the high-ceilinged great room space. Carter could hear them back there, bustling around, laughing and talking over each other, having a fine time. He heard Paige's distinctive husky laugh. Apparently, whatever was bothering her didn't stop her from having fun with his sisters.

Dawn came and sat on the sofa arm next to him. He glanced up at her and she sent him a quick smile. Then Quinn's daughter, Annabelle, who'd recently turned five, wandered over. She was the cutest kid, with a plump little pixie face. Chloe must have done her hair. It was curled and held back with big sparkly barrettes. She wore one of those puffy, lacy dresses that little girls liked to wear, complete with white tights and shiny black Mary Janes. She whispered something to Dawn.

Dawn said, "Absolutely," and swung the little girl up on her knee.

Annabelle leaned back in Dawn's arms as if she belonged there. She caught Carter watching her and said, "I *like* Dawn, Uncle Carter. She's very pretty."

"Yes, she is," he agreed.

Dawn, who'd always been good with kids, cuddled Annabelle closer.

Carter felt a little better about everything, with the two happy girls sitting next to him. He liked his family—his mother excluded, at least at the moment. He liked that Dawn felt comfortable here at Clara's with his siblings and half siblings.

Now, if only he could get Paige to get real about whatever was bugging her. Once they had that out of the way, he could tell her all about the stunt Willow had just pulled and break the bad news that they needed to find another property for the expansion.

After the pie and coffee, Carter drove Paige and Dawn home in the '61 Lincoln he'd taken out of the shop for the day. He was looking forward to being alone with Paige so they could talk.

"Gotta hurry." Dawn was out of the car the second he pulled up to the curb in front of their house. "I'm meeting Molly at the Gold Rush in twenty minutes." The Gold Rush was the movie theater on Golden Drive. She leaned in the rear door she'd just jumped out of. "Thanks, Carter. It was fun."

Paige said, "Home by—"

"Midnight, promise," Dawn finished for her and pushed the door shut.

Carter started to turn off the engine, but Paige said, "I'm really tired. And me and my Visa card have a shopping date tomorrow." Bravo Custom Cars would be closed. It was a BCC tradition to give everyone both Thanksgiving and Black Friday off. Paige went on. "Nell and Chloe and Jody are picking me up at three a.m." Nell and Jody were his sisters. "We're driving into Denver to check out the deals. I need sleep to get ready for a day of serious shopping, so I think I'll draw a hot bath and call it an early night."

He turned off the engine and shifted in the seat to face her. "You mean you don't want me to come in."

She cleared her throat. "Well, as I said. I'm tired and it's going to be a long—"

"Stop it. Tell me what is going on."

"What are you talking about? There's nothing—"

"Paige, you've been dragging around like the world's coming to an end for two or three days now, all the time constantly telling me there's nothing wrong. What's up?"

"Nothing. Really."

"Come on. It's something."

"Nope. Uh-uh. Nothing. Like I said, I'm just really tired."

He gave in. “Fine. Great. Later, then.” It was only a ploy. He honestly expected her to hesitate, to say she was sorry for brushing him off, to ask him not to be annoyed with her—something. Anything.

But she only chirped out a quick “Night, then. And thanks. I had a great time,” and leaped out of the car.

He watched her run up the front walk and disappear into the house. He just didn’t get it. Paige told him everything. In detail. Way too much detail, as a rule.

What could be bothering her that she couldn’t talk about it with him?

* * *

The next morning, Carter decided he would walk Sally alone. He was kind of pissed at Paige for shutting him out. Why in hell would he want to walk her damn dog for her?

And she was in Denver anyway, right? She wouldn’t be there to eat any breakfast he cooked for her.

But then what about Dawn? Paige hadn’t mentioned whether Dawn was going, too. What if Dawn was home alone? She’d need breakfast.

And what about poor Biscuit? Biscuit liked his morning walk with Sally.

So Carter and Sally went over to the Kettlemans’, after all. He got Biscuit and walked the two dogs. On the way back, he called Dawn on her cell.

She answered with a big yawn. “Yeah, what?”

“You still in bed?”

“How’d you guess?”

He grunted. “Just checking to see if maybe you went to Denver with Paige.”

“Uh-uh. Too early for me. You coming to make breakfast?”

“I’m on my way.”

He made French toast and tried to be subtle when he asked Dawn if she’d noticed anything different about Paige in the last few days.

Dawn groaned. “Oh, yeah. Something’s on her mind. But every time I ask, she tells me there’s nothing.”

He felt instantly vindicated. And then he frowned. “So...you don’t know what it is, either, huh?”

“I’m clueless. Seriously. But how awful can it be, really? I mean, she got up at two-thirty in the morning to spend the day shopping. I don’t think it’s an incurable disease or anything.”

“A disease?” That kind of freaked him out. “It didn’t even occur to me she might have a disease...”

“Carter. Pull yourself together.”

“Well, I’m worried about her, okay?”

“She’s just feeling down about something.”

“It’s not like her,” he grumbled.

“Everybody feels low now and then. Eventually, she’ll tell you. She always does.”

“Yeah,” he said, feeling marginally better. “Of course she will. She always does.” He knew everything about Paige, all the little things—that she thought she looked bad in purple and she liked ’70s rock.

He knew that she’d been in love with a loser named Jim Kellogg when she was in college. She and Jim had been talking marriage, but he dumped her when her parents died. He said he didn’t want to follow her to some Podunk small town and help her raise her sister. Since then, she’d only dated casually.

He asked Dawn, “What time did she say she’d be back from Denver?”

“Five or six—and, Carter?”

“Yeah?”

“Let it go. She’ll tell you when she’s ready to tell you.”

“You’re right. I will...”

After breakfast, he took Sally home and then headed for Bravo Custom Cars, thinking about Paige the whole way. About him and Paige, about how they'd hit it off from the start.

He'd met her at Romano's Restaurant, where she'd started working after her parents died. He'd liked her right off and he used to eat there at least a couple of times a week, partly because Romano's had the best Italian food around. But mostly because he loved to sit in Paige's section and give her a hard time. He'd asked her out more than once. She'd turned him down over and over, but he kept trying.

Finally, she'd told him gently and regretfully that she was never going out with him.

She hadn't told him why she wouldn't date him. Not then. The truth had come out later, as their friendship grew. About how she was happier on her own, that her heart had been stomped on but good by that Kellogg creep when she was already in bad shape from losing her parents.

But that was later.

He could still remember her way back at the beginning of their friendship, still see her so clearly, standing by his favorite booth at Romano's, her hands in the pockets of her waitress apron. "I don't need a date, Carter. But I could sure use a friend."

"Then you got one," he'd said.

The overhead fluorescents had brought out red lights in her dark brown hair, and her soft mouth kicked up at the corners. "Does my friend need another beer?"

When he opened BCC, she'd answered his ad for an office manager. He hired her on the spot and she got right after it, moving the furniture around in the office for better "work flow," as she called it, setting up the front counter and the customer waiting area so she could see everything from her desk. He knew cars. Paige knew a whole lot about systems and how to set up the front of the shop. Not only did she seem to have a knack for running the place; she'd been a semester away from getting a BA in business when her parents died and she quit to come home.

The woman knew her way around a spreadsheet. He'd figured out within the first few weeks that he needed to keep her around. So every year at Christmas, he gave her a percentage of the company as her Christmas bonus. Five years after they opened BCC, they were best friends and she owned 25 percent of the business.

They had a good thing going. And somehow, now that she'd cut herself off from him, suddenly everything in his life seemed all wrong. Best friends were supposed to communicate. Paige knew that. Or at least, she always lectured him about communication whenever he got feeling down and wouldn't say what was bugging him.

He unlocked the gate at BCC and sailed onto the lot. Stopping the Lincoln in front of one of the bay doors, he climbed out and went around to the shop's side door, where he turned off the alarm and let himself in. A button by the bay sent the accordion door rumbling up. He pulled the Lincoln into the open bay, got out again and shut the bay door. It was sunny out, but only in the midthirties, so he turned on the heat.

The Lincoln, which he'd customized in a number of pretty cool ways, needed a little fine-tuning. *He* needed to let all this worrying about Paige go. She would talk when she was ready to talk. And when she did, he'd be there to listen.

In the meantime, BCC was closed for Black Friday and he had the whole place to himself. He could get the Lincoln purring like a kitten and ready for the day trader from Boulder who'd commissioned it from him. And then he might even get started on the already cherry '68 Shelby Cobra GT-500 Fastback that Deacon wanted pimped out with a whole new sound system and all the modern conveniences, including GPS. Deacon also wanted a rear spoiler, a modified grille and monster wheels with some really garish rims. It kind of seemed a shame to do that to a work of art like the Cobra. But Deacon didn't pay him the big bucks to suddenly get squeamish over messing with the classics.

Carter had a killer sound system in his shop. He turned on the radio to a hard rock station. As ZZ Top roared out, he zipped up his overalls and got down to it.

He didn't notice he had company until about an hour later, when he rolled out from under the Lincoln and headed for the inner door to the office and the little table in front of the window, where Paige kept one of those K-Cup machines. He had a nice hot mug of coconut mocha on his mind and had all but forgotten that he'd failed to relock the side door to the shop when he came in.

Whipping a rag from his rear pocket, he wiped the worst of the grease from hands and switched off the radio. He loved vintage Bruce as much as the next man, but sometimes a little silence was good for the soul.

As he turned for the front-office door, he registered movement out of the corner of his eye.

And then he saw her: Sherry Leland, his ex-girlfriend.

Sherry had taken the cover off the metal-flake candy-apple-red '67 Firebird just back from the painter's on Wednesday, and draped that killer body of hers across the hood.

"Hello, Carter." She gave him one of her come-and-get-me smiles. The smile matched her outfit: a red thong, a Santa hat and sky-high stilettos.

It was a testament to how over Sherry he really was that his first thought had very little to do with her being nearly naked. His first thought concerned how those pointy heels of hers had to be screwing up the Firebird's high-dollar paint job.

"Sherry," he said and tried not to sigh.

"I thought you'd never come out from under that car." She stuck out her plump lower lip in a sexy pout and tossed her long blond hair. "I'm starting to get kind of chilly." She fluttered her eyelashes and glanced down at her bare breasts. Yep. She was chilly, all right. "Come on over here, baby," she cooed. "Come here and warm me up."

"Sherry, I..." He really wanted to ask her to please get off the hood and be careful while she was doing it. But showing concern for the paint job right at that moment would only send her through the roof.

Her pout started to get kind of pinched looking. "What is the matter with you? *I missed you*. I'm here in this smelly garage of yours practically naked and it's all for you." The big blue eyes suddenly brimmed with fat tears. "I'm here to get past this little problem we've been having. I'm here to prove to you how much I want to work things out."

There was nothing to work out. They were done and she knew it, *had* been done for months now.

He spotted her black trench coat. She'd tossed it on top of the cover she'd whipped off the Firebird. So he stuck his rag back in his pocket, crossed to the coat, grabbed it and held it up for her. "Sherry, come on."

She sniffled. "How can you be so cold? You're breaking my heart. How can you do this to me?"

"Put your coat on," he coaxed.

"Fine. Sure." Sharp heels digging in, she scrambled off the hood. He tried really hard not to wince at the sight. She tossed her hair some more. And then she came at him, hands raised in frustration. "I hate you, Carter Bravo!"

"Sherry, there's no point in—"

"Hate you!" And she hauled back and bitch-slapped him right across the face. That shocked him. She'd never physically attacked him before.

Then all the fight went out of her. She crumpled, burying her head in her hands. The sobs started.

He gently wrapped the coat around her. "It's over," he said quietly. "You know it is."

She sobbed harder. "But I *love* you..."

He took her to the counter at the window between the shop and the office and whipped a few tissues from the box there. "Come on, now. Blow your nose."

She snatched the tissues and swiped at her cheeks.

He said sincerely, "I'm sorry, Sherry. For everything. Let me drive you home."

"Forget it." With a furious sniff, she shoved her arms in the trench he'd draped on her shoulders and tied the belt, hard. Then she raked her acres of hair off her face and aimed her chin high. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

He had no idea what to say next, so he said nothing. She wheeled on one of those pointy heels and stalked toward the side door, flinging it wide when she got there. That door was made of steel. It banged good and loud against the wall. "That does it, Carter. I am through. Finished. I hope I never see your face again."

He kept his mouth shut. He had a feeling that even the sound of his voice right then could have her storming at him all over again. Uh-uh. Better to keep quiet and stand still.

At his extended silence, she fisted both hands at her sides, threw her head back and let out a yowl of frustration. A second later, she disappeared from sight.

Carter stayed right where he was, hardly daring to breathe, until he heard the Camaro he'd rebuilt for her start up. She gunned it and then roared from the lot. He gritted his teeth, hoping against hope that she wouldn't run into anything, wouldn't hurt herself or anyone else.

As the sound of the engine faded into the distance, he let himself breathe again. And then, reluctantly, he took a good look at the Firebird.

Yep. Dents and gouges all over that hood. Resigned, he whipped the cover back in place. Monday, he'd get it back to the paint booth and tell the customer he'd need a few more days before the car would be ready.

It would be okay. Sherry would get over him and eventually move on.

He just wished he knew what was wrong with him. He just wished he could someday find a sane woman to get involved with. His mother had it right about one thing. He'd always known that someday he wanted a family.

Well, the years were going by. And someday was starting to look a whole lot like never. But what the hell was a guy supposed to do? He'd tried over and over and it always ended up the way it had with Sherry. This time, he had zero desire to find someone else and try again.

Chapter Three

Paige had a great day shopping in Denver with Carter's sisters and sister-in-law. She found a bunch of fabulous deals, giving her a serious head start on her Christmas list. The stores were all decked out for the holidays, and Christmas music filled the air, so the day really kind of put her in the holiday spirit. It was good to get out of town and it helped her achieve a little much-needed perspective.

She realized she needed to stop avoiding Carter. It wasn't his fault if she'd suddenly started thinking she might be in love with him—*might* being the operative word.

It was a magazine quiz, for God's sake. What fool took a magazine quiz seriously?

The next morning, there he was as usual when she came downstairs. Her heart leaped at the sight of his handsome face and sexy smile. She thought of how good he was to her and her sister, showing up to walk the dog and fix the breakfast even when she'd been avoiding him for days. That made her misty-eyed.

But Paige didn't let a leaping heart or misty eyes keep her from trying harder that morning. She made an effort to join the conversation, remembering to thank him, to praise his cooking and his coffee. More than once, she caught him glancing her way, questions in his eyes.

She waited until Dawn went back upstairs to call Molly and make plans for their Saturday, before she said, "I'm sorry I've been moody the last few days. Hormones. They drive me crazy sometimes." Yeah, it was a stretch. But not a total lie. She *had* been on her period.

"But you're okay now?" He looked so hopeful.

She promised him that she was. He poured himself more coffee, sat down beside her—and his cell rang. It was Mona, already at the shop, with some unexpected issue that needed his okay.

He said he'd be right over and hung up. "Gotta go. You coming in today?"

"I wasn't planning to." Paige had Saturdays off. Mona took Mondays and they were closed Sundays.

He was already reaching for his jacket. "Talk later? We've got lots to catch up on."

Paige answered him vaguely, "Yeah. Later. Sounds good." Did that mean he'd be over that evening? Was she ready for that? And speaking of talking, she needed to talk to someone about all this, get her head on straight when it came to Carter—and keep it that way.

He clicked his tongue for Sally. "Come on, girl. Time to go." Leveling those clear green eyes on her, he said softly, "Glad you're okay."

"Thanks." She gave him her brightest smile.

Sally at his heels, he left through the back door. Biscuit watched them go from his favorite throw rug at the end of the snack bar, dropping his head to his paws when they were out of sight.

With a grim little sigh, Paige got up and started clearing the table. She was busy wiping counters when Dawn reappeared, fully dressed this time in jeans and a thick blue sweater patterned with a band of snowflakes across the front.

"Molly's coming over in half an hour. We're going to practice together for the Christmas concert." They were both in the school band and in the orchestra, Paige on B-flat clarinet, Molly on flute.

Paige tossed the sponge in the sink—and made a decision. Dawn might be only eighteen, but she had a level head on her shoulders. Paige trusted her absolutely. Who better to confide in than her own sister?

Half an hour should be plenty of time.

Dawn was frowning. "You okay?"

Paige went ahead and answered honestly, "No, not really."

Dawn leaned her head against the doorframe. "You've been acting strangely for days now."

Paige marched to the table and pulled out a chair. "Got a few minutes?"

Dawn joined her, taking the chair next to hers. "Want me to call Molly, tell her to come later?"

"Nah. Half an hour should do it..." Where to even begin?

Dawn braced her chin on her hand. "I'm here. I'm listening."

Paige waded in. "So, last Monday Carter and I went to Denver to meet with one of our biggest customers. We had to wait awhile to see him and Carter decided I needed to take this stupid quiz..."

Dawn made a sound in her throat, a little grunt of encouragement.

It was all Paige needed. She let the story pour out, about the silly quiz and how Carter answered all the questions for her and then announced that the quiz proved she was hopelessly in love with him. "I know it's ridiculous. He was just giving me a hard time the way he loves to do. But all his answers? They were the answers *I* would have given. And since then, I can't stop thinking about it. Can't stop thinking that the stupid quiz was right, that I'm actually in love with him, with Carter of all people. It's driving me crazy, Dawn."

Dawn reached over and gently squeezed her arm. "I can see that."

"So I want you to tell me the truth now. I want you to tell me that of course I'm not in love with Carter, that I've just gotten hung up on some meaningless magazine quiz and I need to let it go and move on."

Dawn made a pained sound and looked away.

Hesitantly, Paige reached out and ran her hand down Dawn's straight golden-brown hair. It was the same color and texture as their mother's hair had been. Dawn also had their mother's warm hazel eyes. "Dawn?"

Dawn looked at her then—and winced. "Really? I mean, seriously?"

Paige tried a laugh. It came out more like a sob. "Ridiculous, right?"

Dawn clapped both hands to her head, as though she was worried her brains might escape. “Ugh.” And then she dropped her hands to the table, slapping her palms flat. “Dude.” She rubbed the tender skin beneath her eyes. “I’m just not gonna lie to you. I think you need to get real, you know? I think it’s better if the two of you just face the truth.”

Paige’s stomach lurched and sweat bloomed on her upper lip. “Um, what truth?”

“You’ve always been in love with him.”

Paige gasped. “What the...? No. Uh-uh. Just no.”

“Oh, come on, Paige. He practically lives here. You work together and you’re best friends and he’d rather be with you than any of those smokin’-hot girlfriends he’s had. Paige, come on. Everybody knows—everybody but you and Carter.”

Paige slumped in her chair. “I don’t believe it. You think I’m in love with him.”

“I don’t just *think* it, I know it. And he’s in love with you.”

That had Paige scoffing. “Oh, please. Carter doesn’t do love.”

“Carter doesn’t *admit* love. It’s two different things.”

Paige let her head drop back and groaned at the ceiling, because honestly, how could this be happening to her?

“You actually wanted me to lie about it straight out.” Dawn sounded hurt.

Paige sucked in a fortifying breath and faced her sister. “I’m sorry. Come here.” She reached for Dawn, who resisted at first, but then swayed in her chair and finally let herself lean on Paige. Paige stroked her hair. “You’re incredible.”

“Yeah, right.”

Tenderly, Paige admitted, “Okay, I confess. Sometimes it’s a little scary to have such a brilliant and perceptive baby sister.”

“I wouldn’t have said anything,” Dawn muttered. “I never have. But you asked me straight out.”

Paige rocked Dawn a little, the way she used to do so often during that first terrible year after they lost Mom and Dad. “Please don’t be insulted, but I need to ask you not to tell him.”

“Of course I won’t tell him,” Dawn grumbled. “Have I said a word up till now?”

“No, you haven’t. You’re an angel.”

“Hardly.” She pushed free of Paige’s embrace and said, “*You* need to tell him.”

Paige only blew out a hard breath and slowly shook her head.

* * *

At 2:10 that afternoon, Carter was in his office off the shop studying engine schematics for Deacon’s Cobra.

Someone tapped on the door.

“It’s open.” Carter glanced up from his laptop as the door swung wide.

Murray Preble, one of Carter’s top auto parts vendors, stuck his head in. “Got a minute?”

“Sit.” Carter gestured at the empty chair across the desk. Murray closed the door before folding his long, thin frame into the offered seat. Carter frowned. Murray never shut the door when he stopped in to say hi. “Is this a secret meeting, Murray?”

Murray, who was usually a pretty cheerful guy, didn’t even crack a smile. “I guess you could say that. I need this to be just between you and me.”

Carter shut his laptop. “Is there a problem?”

Murray scraped his hand down his narrow face and smoothed his thick black hair off his forehead. “Well, Carter, it’s about Sherry.”

Sherry? Murray wanted to talk about Sherry—with the door closed? Cautiously, he asked, “What about her?”

Murray shifted in the chair. And then he straightened up and put it right out there. “I’m in love with her.”

This was news. And maybe good news. If Murray and Sherry got together, she would leave Carter alone. “Well, great. I hope you’ll be very happy.”

“See, that’s just it.” Murray hitched an ankle across the other knee and wrapped his long fingers around his shinbone. “I’ve been patient, I really have. But she just won’t believe that you’re never coming back to her.” Murray’s brow crumpled with his frown. “You’re not, are you?”

“Hell, no. It’s over with Sherry and me.”

Murray didn’t look encouraged. “She won’t give me a chance.”

“Murray. What do you want me to say? It’s over. I’ve told her several times. I don’t know what more to do.”

“She spent last night cryin’ on my shoulder over you.” Murray glowered at him. “I waited long enough, you know? Months. It’s time I got my chance with her. She’s...”

“What?”

“I’m telling you straight, Carter. Telling you more than you got any right to know. She’s a passionate person, as hotheaded as she is beautiful. I love that about her. I want all that fire directed at me.”

Carter put up both hands. “More power to you, buddy. I’m not standing in your way.”

“Yeah. Yeah, you are.”

“Oh, come on.”

“Carter. You are. You’re standing between me and my future happiness.”

“I don’t know what to say to you. Sherry and I broke up a long time ago. It’s as over as it gets. I don’t see how I can make it any more clear to her.”

“Move on, Carter.”

“I *have* moved on.”

“Choose someone new. As long as you stay unattached, Sherry can tell herself that you’re coming back to her and I don’t have a prayer of showing her that I’m the man she needs.”

Carter shook his head. “I’m sorry, Murray. I can’t help you with this. I hope you get through to her. But there’s no way I’m up for trying again with someone new anytime soon. As long as we’re putting it right out there, Murray, the truth is, I always make a mess of it with women somehow. I’m losing heart, you know? I’m about done.”

Murray jumped up. He turned to the side wall and stared at the Prime Sports and Fitness calendar hanging there. November had an image of a gorgeous woman’s back and shapely arms as she executed a lat pull on a Universal machine. “Well, how about Paige?” Murray asked without taking his eyes off the calendar.

It took Carter a moment to make sense of Murray’s question—and even then, he didn’t really understand it. “What do you mean, how about Paige?”

Murray faced him then. “I mean, why the hell don’t you just settle down with Paige? Everyone in town can see that you two are meant for each other. And come on, you practically live together already. You sure you’re not *already* with Paige and just keeping it a secret for some reason known only to the two of you?”

“Already with Paige? Have you lost your mind, Murray?”

“No, I have not. What I’ve lost is my heart. To Sherry. I want her to get over you and love me back.”

“And I sympathize with that. I would *love* for her to forget about me and be all about you. I’ve told her it’s over more times than I can count. I don’t take her calls or answer her texts or her emails. If she drops in on me, I send her away. I’ve done everything I can to—”

“No. No, you haven’t, Carter. You haven’t shown it’s over by moving on. And if you think about it a little, you’ll see I’m right. You and Paige are a great match. And frankly, if you choose Paige, Sherry will definitely wake up and smell the coffee. She’s always gone on about Paige, always believed that you’re secretly in love with Paige.”

Carter made a strangled sound. “Are you crazy? Of course I’m not secretly in love with Paige.”

Murray grunted. “Sherry would never admit it, but we both know she sees Paige as the rival she couldn’t beat.”

“Uh, we do?”

A firm nod from Murray. “You bet we do. So if you and Paige finally get together, finally couple up and admit what’s really going on between you, Sherry will have to accept that she’s never getting you back.”

Carter cleared his throat. “Murray.”

“What?”

“I’m sorry, Murray, but no. Just...no.”

Murray glared at him. “I’m only asking you to think about it.”

“There’s nothing to think about.”

“What is the matter with you?” Murray practically shouted. “Why can’t you see?”

“Murray, whoa. Chill.”

But Murray did not chill. “Open your mind, Carter!” He turned and flung the door open. “Open your mind and see the light.” Murray left, slamming the door good and hard behind him.

Carter stared at that door for several very long seconds. And then he shrugged and opened his laptop again and put Murray Preble out of his mind.

Or tried to.

Unfortunately, Murray’s weird visit stuck with him, made the Cobra engine schematics blur in front of him, made it so all he could think about was Paige.

“Open your mind!” Murray had yelled at him just before he slammed the office door.

Carter kept thinking about that. About his mind opening.

Opening like a door, a door that hadn’t really been there before. He looked through that new open door and saw everything he wanted: marriage and a family.

To a sane and even-tempered woman.

A woman like Paige.

Because Murray was right. Paige was perfect for Carter.

No. Of course, he wasn’t in love with Paige. He wasn’t in love with anybody. Carter had no intention of going to the stupid place, thank you very much. But now that he’d opened that door, he could clearly see that Paige was just about as good as it got for a man like him.

How come he’d never realized it before?

Paige was smart and fun, and he loved being with her. She was completely reasonable, no drama, not ever. He worked with her and he hung with her and her little sister was family to him. Even their dogs were best friends.

He couldn’t imagine his life without Paige. And to marry her and have kids with her...

Hot damn. That could work out. That could be good.

Carter got up from his desk and stared at the fine back and arms of Miss Superfit November as he worked out the kinks in the plan he was formulating.

Kinks like the fact that to have kids together, he and Paige would have to have sex with each other.

That could be weird. He’d never considered sex and Paige in the same sentence before—or wait. Scratch that. He *had* been attracted to Paige way back at the beginning. But then they’d decided to be friends without benefits and he’d accepted that.

So the idea of having sex with her didn’t gross him out or leave him cold. It had just always seemed like a bad idea to go there, to take the chance of messing up a great friendship—not to mention a successful business partnership.

However, now that he’d let himself consider the concept of Paige as a bed partner, well, it didn’t strike him as awful. He could get into it. He was sure that he could. And sex didn’t necessarily have

to screw up what they had. If they got married, that would only make their friendship and business partnership stronger.

Oh, yeah. The door was open, all right, open wide and showing him everything. It all fell into place.

He didn't have to be alone. He could get married and have a family, after all.

A family with his best friend.

A family with Paige...

Talk about huge.

Carter left BCC at a quarter after five that night. He'd planned to go home and shower, then take Sally and head over to Paige's.

But after opening that door in his mind and seeing a family with Paige on the other side, well, he wasn't quite ready to spend the evening with her. It was all too new and also a little bit scary.

He had to find just the right way to bring it up to her.

And he needed to find out for sure if they had the necessary physical chemistry together.

And hey. What if she just said no?

Uh-uh. He wasn't ready to see Paige. He could blow this whole thing before it even got started if he didn't handle it right.

So that night he stayed home.

* * *

Paige spent the day on household stuff. She bought groceries and baked a casserole, vacuumed and dusted the downstairs.

And the whole day she kind of dreaded the evening, when Carter would show up and she'd have to deal with him while knowing that her sister—and apparently most of the people they knew—believed that Paige was in love with him.

And that he was in love with her.

Awkward. Embarrassing. Too strange for words.

She hardly knew what to say to him—to Carter, of all people.

But then, as it turned out, he didn't show up.

And that just made her sad. So she put on some old yoga pants and a baggy sweatshirt, streamed a tearjerker on Netflix and ate a quart of Ben & Jerry's Chunky Monkey.

* * *

The next morning, Sunday, Carter considered chickening out again and not showing up at Paige's to walk Biscuit with Sally, not being there to get the coffee going.

But if he bailed on their usual routine again, he'd have to admit to himself that opening the door in his mind had freaked him out just a little—hell. Who was he kidding?

Opening that door freaked him out a *lot*.

But freaking out was no excuse to turn wimp and bail on his girls.

So he walked Biscuit with Sally as usual and then let himself back into Paige's quiet house and made the coffee.

He was standing at the fridge, staring inside, trying to decide what to make for breakfast as his brain kept insisting on circling back to the mind-altering concept of Paige and him and a houseful of baby Bravos, when he heard a soft sigh behind him.

A hot bolt of lightning seemed to surge across his shoulder blades and the hair on the back of his neck stood to attention. Bizarre.

He shut the door and turned around.

And there she was: Paige, leaning in the doorway, wearing that old plaid robe, flannel pajamas and silly fuzzy slippers he'd seen a hundred times. She'd tried to comb her hair, but she must have slept on it hard, because it still stuck up on the left side.

“Hey,” she said. The single huskily spoken word seemed to hit him in the chest and then curl around him like a hug.

“Mornin’.” Damn, she was cute. With those big brown eyes and that soft, pretty mouth. Not aggressively sexy, not showy like most of the women he’d dated. But hot in her own down-to-earth, *real* sort of way. The more he looked at her, the more he thought he could definitely tap that.

And wouldn’t it be great to live here with her in the house she grew up in, to stop going back and forth between their houses? Her house was homier than his, a perfect place to raise their family.

If she would have him.

She was so smart. And she could be intimidating with that steady, unruffled way she had of looking at a guy. Since that bastard in college broke her heart, she didn’t give her trust easily—not to men, anyway.

But he had a head start on that, being her best friend and all.

“What?” She straightened in the doorway.

“Nothing.” It came out nice and calm, giving zero hint of the nervous energy churning inside him. “I was thinking eggs Benedict. I didn’t make muffins, but I see you have some store-bought.”

“Sounds wonderful.” She went to the coffeepot and filled a mug, turning back around the way she did almost every morning, leaning on the counter for her first sip. A pleased sound escaped her.

Would she make sounds like that in bed?

He realized he really wanted to find out.

The big brown eyes were soft and shadowed. He couldn’t really read them. She said, “You’re good to us, Carter. Thank you.”

“I never did anything I didn’t want to do.” It came out gruff, low. It wasn’t what he’d meant to say and he wondered where the hell it came from.

But those soft lips turned up in the beginning of a smile. “I know that.”

“I like it here, with you. With Dawn.”

“I’m glad.”

He was maybe three steps away from her. It would have been so easy, to close the distance, take the mug, set it on the counter. Draw her into his arms...

“Carter, hey!” Dawn chirped from the doorway, shattering the moment. She joined him at the fridge, pulling the door open again and taking out a carton of orange juice. “What’s for breakfast?”

“Eggs Benedict,” said Paige.

“Yum. Just what I was I hoping for.” Dawn edged around Carter, set the pitcher on the counter and opened the cupboard to get down the juice glasses.

Paige and Dawn got the table ready and he cooked the food. They sat down to eat. Things started getting really strange about then. He kept having the feeling that something was going on at that table between the sisters, as if they knew something he didn’t and both of them were on edge about it.

They told him repeatedly, way more times than necessary, how much they loved his eggs Benedict. Then they started in on Christmas stuff—on how they were looking forward to Rocky Mountain Christmas, Justice Creek’s big holiday shopping event next Saturday.

Next Saturday was also the date of the Holiday Ball at Justice Creek’s world-famous Haltersham Hotel. It was a charity event to support the local children’s shelter. Carter had bought a bunch of tickets at a chamber of commerce auction months ago and passed them out at the shop. He’d given some to Dawn and Paige, as well. At the time, he’d planned to take Sherry. When they broke up, he’d gotten Paige to agree to go with him.

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