



THE MAVERICK'S CHRISTMAS BABY

VICTORIA PADE



Cherish[™]

Victoria Pade

The Maverick's Christmas Baby

«HarperCollins»

Pade V.

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Rejoice, ye merry Mavericks! As Christmas approaches, we here at The Rust Creek Falls Rambler thought we'd reward our devoted followers with a blind item guaranteed to put a little extra jingle in your stockings. Which rugged Rust Creek Traub has been spotted canoodling with a very pregnant lady of the Crawford kind? Astute readers will guess we're talking about divorced rancher Dallas Traub, who rescued expectant shopkeeper Nina Crawford from a snowy car wreck a few weeks back. Can these holiday honeys survive feuding families, three boisterous boys, and a little bundle of joy intent on an early arrival? Only Santa knows for sure... and he might just be bringing the gift of love down the chimney this year!

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**Noelle was small, but pink and perfect, with
just a smattering of hair the color of Nina's.
And gazing down at her made him smile.**

“You’re a beauty like your mama,” he told her in that same almost inaudible whisper. “But you must be tired, too, so why don’t you go back to sleep for a little while?”

As if obeying, the newborn balled up her fists under her chin, closed her eyes and did just that. Making Dallas smile all over again.

You’re not mine ...

You’re neither one mine ... he reminded himself.

But somehow it felt as if they were. Or at least as if they should be. And the thought of walking away from either of them was something he just couldn’t find it in himself to do.

MONTANA MAVERICKS: RUST CREEK COWBOYS Better saddle up. It’s going to be a bumpy ride!

The Maverick’s
Christmas Baby
Victoria Pade



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For information about her latest and upcoming releases, and to find recipes for some of the decadent desserts her characters enjoy, log on to www.vikkipade.com.

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Chapter One

“Oh, this is not good...” Nina Crawford said to herself as she cautiously pulled her SUV to a stop at the sign on the isolated country road outside her hometown.

Mother Nature had not been kind to Rust Creek Falls this year. First a summer flood had devastated the small Montana town, and now—still in the midst of trying to recover from that—it was being hit by a December blizzard.

The weather report had predicted only a moderate storm that would arrive later tonight. Nina ran her family's general store in town and, trusting that weather report, when an elderly, arthritic customer on an outlying farm had called in and asked that a heating pad be delivered to her, Nina hadn't hesitated to leave the store in the hands of her staff and grant that request. And even when that lonely elderly woman had offered Christmas cookies and chamomile tea, Nina still hadn't had any worries about spending an hour visiting.

But the sky had grown increasingly ominous and dark with storm clouds, and when the first few flakes began to fall much earlier than they were supposed to, Nina had left.

Only to find herself miles from home when the howling winds had whipped that snow into a blinding frenzy.

Temperatures had plummeted rapidly, and already the snow was freezing to the windows of Nina's SUV, adding to the limitations of her vision. She rolled down her window, hoping to be able to better see if another vehicle was coming from her left.

It didn't help much. Visibility was low. Very, very low.

She studied the crossroads, searching for anything that might give her an indication that another car was coming. But she didn't see any approaching headlights in the whiteout conditions, and all she could hear was the screaming wind. So, hoping the coast was clear, she rolled up her window and ventured into her right turn.

But the moment she got out onto the road she did see headlights. Coming straight for her.

Trying to avoid a collision she swerved sharply, and so did the other vehicle.

The next thing Nina knew her SUV was nose-down in a ditch and she'd fallen pregnant-belly-first into the steering wheel.

Which was when she felt the first pain.

“No, no, no, no...”

Fighting the rise of panic, she did what she could to push herself back from the steering wheel—which at that angle was no easy task.

Her due date was January 13. It was currently two weeks before Christmas. If her baby was born now it would be a month early.

She couldn't deliver a month early.

She couldn't....

A pounding on her side window startled her and the fright didn't help matters.

“Are you all right?” a man's voice shouted in to her.

Her SUV hadn't hit anything so her airbag hadn't activated and the engine was still running. But dazed and scared, she didn't know if she was all right. She just couldn't think straight.

Then the door was opened from the outside. And standing there was Dallas Traub!

It wasn't exactly encouraging to see a member of the family that had been at odds with her own for generations.

“Are you all right?” he repeated.

“I don't know. I may be going into labor. I think I need help....”

“Okay, stay calm. My truck is stuck, too, on the other side of the road. But at least it isn't nearly up on end the way you are. If we can get you out of here you can lie down in my backseat.”

Fear and the dull ache in her abdomen robbed Nina of the ability to argue. Traub or not, he was all there was and she was going to have to accept his aid.

“Can you turn off the engine?” he asked.

That made sense but it hadn't occurred to Nina. And, yes, she could do that, so she did, leaving the keys in the ignition.

"I'm glad to see that you can move your arms. Do you have feeling everywhere—arms, legs, hands, feet?"

"Yes."

"Did you hit your head? Do you have any neck pain?"

"No, I didn't hit my head and I don't have any neck pain. I just hit the steering wheel."

"Are you bleeding from anywhere? Did your water break?"

As odd as it seemed, not even a question that personal sounded out of place at that point.

"I don't think I'm bleeding, no. And I'm perfectly dry...."

"Good. All good," he judged. "Would it be okay if I lifted you out of there?"

"I think so...."

"Let me do all the work," he advised. Sliding one arm under her legs, the other behind her back, he gently but forcefully pulled her toward him until she found herself extracted from behind the wheel and cradled against his big, masculine chest.

"Maybe I can walk...." Nina said.

"We're not going to take any chances," he responded, wasting no time heading across the road.

The man was dressed in a heavy fleece-lined suede jacket, but Nina had to assume that he was all muscle underneath it because he carried her as if she weighed nothing. And when he reached the white truck that was nearly invisible in the snow blowing all around it, he even managed to open the rear door on the double cab.

Another cramp struck Nina as he eased her onto the backseat and her panic must have been obvious to him because he said, "It's okay. Just breathe through it. It'll pass and we'll get someone out here before you know it."

"And if my baby doesn't wait for that?" Nina nearly shouted over the wind.

"I've been in a delivery room for three of my own kids and birthed more animals than I can count—if it comes to that, I can take care of it. We'll be fine."

It crossed her mind to call him a liar because nothing about this was at all fine. But there was actually something soothing in his composure, in his take-charge attitude, and Traub or not, Nina had to hope that he really could get her through this if need be.

Just please don't let there be the need....

"We should conserve fuel, so I'll turn on the engine long enough to get it warm in here, then we'll turn it off again," he explained, closing the rear door and getting into the front of the cab from the passenger seat to slide across and turn the key in the ignition. "But I'm going to leave my hazards flashing, to make sure anyone approaching can see us in the snow."

Warm air instantly drifted back to Nina but she was feeling more uncomfortable lying down, and she pushed herself to sit up to see if that helped.

It actually did and she explained that. "Just see if you can get someone out here to us," she instructed.

That was when he tried his cell phone and found that he had no reception.

"Try mine," Nina said, taking it out of the pocket of her wool winter coat to hand to him, fighting renewed panic.

But her phone was as useless as his was.

"Oh, God..." Nina lamented as every muscle in her body tensed.

"Another contraction?" he asked.

"No, I don't think so," she answered, so scared she wasn't sure what she was feeling beyond that.

He angled sideways in the front seat. "We're gonna be fine. I promise," he said in a way that made her believe it and relax a little again.

Until he said, “There are pockets out here where you can get cell reception if you just hit one. I’ll walk out a ways and see if maybe—”

“No! You can’t leave!” Nina said in full-out panic once again. “You know the stories about farmers getting lost in storms like this just trying to find their way between their house and barn. You can’t go!”

“I do know the stories,” he said.

Then he slid to the passenger side again and got out of the truck.

A moment later he climbed into the backseat with her, carrying a thick coil of rope she’d heard him drag out of the truck bed. He rolled down the rear passenger window, held one end of the rope and tossed the rest of the coil through the window. Then he rolled the window up again, catching the rope in a small gap at the top of it.

“Okay...” he said then, handing her the end of the rope that he’d retained. “Hang on to this, I’ll hang on to the other end and I won’t go any farther than the length of it. If you need me, just yank and I’ll come right back. Otherwise, I’ll use it to make sure I can get back.”

“You’ll be careful?”

“I will be. And I’ll leave the engine running to keep you warm in the meantime. All right?”

“I suppose,” Nina agreed reluctantly, holding on to that rope with a tight fist.

Dallas Traub wrapped his hand around hers and squeezed. “Everything is going to be okay,” he said confidently.

Her own hand wasn’t cold, and yet his around it felt even warmer. It was also slightly rough and callused, and the size and strength of it along with those signs of hard ranch work all infused her with more of a sense of calm and a renewed belief that he could and would take care of her. Traub or not. Regardless of what happened.

Nina even managed to smile weakly. “Be careful,” she said, thinking of his safety, too.

“I will.”

He let go of her hand and Nina was surprised to find herself sorry to lose his touch. Which was what she was thinking when he opened the door, ducked under the rope and got out, leaving her alone. And sorry to lose his company, too. His comforting presence.

The touch, the company, the presence of a Traub.

She closed her eyes and breathed deeply again, willing herself to settle down for the sake of her baby, willing her baby to rest, to stay put, not to be born today....

Then another cramp struck.

“Please, no, not yet,” she begged her unborn child and the fates, as if that could stop things if she really was going into labor.

How long had Dallas Traub been gone? It seemed like forever and Nina looked across the front seat through the windshield, hoping to spot him. But all she could see was snow.

She caught sight of herself in the rearview mirror then and realized that the stocking cap she had on was askew. For some odd reason she regretted that Dallas had seen her looking so disheveled, so she straightened the cap. She also gave in to the urge to fluff her hair a bit where the long brown locks cascaded from beneath the cap past her shoulders.

Her ordinarily pink cheeks were quite pale and she reached up and pinched them to add some color. Her mascara had survived the accident and all that followed it without smudging beneath her very dark brown eyes, but unfortunately her thin, straight nose had a bit of a shine that she didn’t like to see.

She tried to blot that with the back of her hand, regretting that she’d left her purse in her SUV with her compact in it. And with her lip gloss in it, too.

Not that, in the midst of possible peril, she was actually thinking about putting on lipstick to accentuate lips she sometimes thought were not full enough. She merely wanted to moisten those lips to keep them from chapping, she told herself. Certainly it wasn’t that she cared at all what she

looked like at that moment. Especially to a Traub. When she'd just had a car accident. When she could potentially be going into labor.

But, oh, she wished this particular Traub would come back....

She considered yanking on the rope just to get him to, but she didn't let herself. They needed help and if there was any chance that he might find cell reception she couldn't cut that short.

But soon, come back soon....

Then, as if in answer to her silent plea, the rear passenger door opened and there he was.

She also didn't understand why the way he looked registered in that instant, but she was struck by how tall and capable-looking he was. She guessed him to be about six foot three inches of broad-shouldered, Western masculinity.

But it wasn't merely his size that impressed her. He was remarkably handsome—something else that she'd never noticed in all the times they must have crossed paths around Rust Creek Falls.

Nina knew all the Traubs in general, but she'd never really noted much about them in any kind of detail. Now it struck her that Dallas really did have rugged good looks with a squarish forehead, a nose that was a bit hooked, but in a dashing sort of way, lips that were full and almost lush, and striking blue eyes that had enough of a hint of gray to add more depth than she'd ever have attributed to a Traub.

"Did you get a call out?" she asked as he extracted the end of the rope through the window, tossed the re-coiled mass into the truck bed again and then climbed into the backseat with her, closing the door and the window after himself.

"No," he said. "We're really in a dead zone out here. But don't worry about it. Somebody will come looking for us. My folks are stuck at home with my three boys—believe me, before too long they'll start to wonder where I am." Then he switched gears and asked, "How are you doing?"

"I'm okay...." Nina answered uncertainly.

"Any more pains?"

"One," she admitted.

"And how about heat? Think we can turn it off for a little while?"

"Sure. If you're warm enough."

He stood to lean over the front seat to reach the key, and Nina found herself sneaking a glance at him from that angle.

He was wearing jeans that hugged an impressive derriere and thick thighs, and she knew she had no business taking note of any of that.

Then the engine went off and he sat back down, turning toward her and perching on the very edge of the seat so he could pull down the rear cushion as he said, "There should be a blanket in here..."

He produced a heavy plaid blanket from the compartment hidden behind the seat.

"You're probably not going to like this, but we'll both stay warmer if we share the blanket and some body heat," he said then.

"It's okay," Nina agreed, knowing he was right.

And not totally hating the idea of having him close beside her or of sharing the blanket with him. But she didn't analyze that.

Opening the heavy emergency blanket, he set it over Nina and reached across her to tuck it in on her other side.

Then he sat near enough to share the warmth he exuded and laid it across himself, too.

"You're sure you feel better sitting up?" he asked.

"I am."

"If something changes and you need to lie down just let me know...."

"I will," Nina said.

She did slump a little more into the blanket, though. And somehow that brought her a bit closer to him, too. But he didn't seem to mind that she was slightly tucked to his side and it seemed as though it might be insulting if she moved away again, so she pretended that she didn't notice.

"So..." he said when she was settled, turning his head toward her and looking down at her. "You're Nina Crawford, right? You run the General Store in town?"

Apparently Dallas Traub wasn't any clearer about the details of his Crawford rivals than Nina was about the Traubs. And since they'd never had any one-on-one, face-to-face contact before this, Nina was even surprised that he knew her name.

"I'm Nina, right. And yes, I run the store." The store that the Traubs rarely frequented, making it well-known that they chose to do their shopping in nearby Kalispell rather than give business to the Crawfords.

"I'm Dallas—in case you didn't know..."

"You live on your family's ranch—the Triple T, right?"

"I do work on the ranch, but I have my own house on the property. I'm divorced, and with three boys—Ryder, who's ten, Jake, eight, and Robbie, who just turned six a couple of weeks ago."

"And you have custody of them?" Nina asked, recalling that no one was too sure what had happened to his marriage, but that it had ended about this time last year. Gossip had been rampant and she remembered thinking that, since he was a Traub, his wife had probably just wised up. Nina hadn't found it so easy to understand why his ex-wife had left her kids behind, though.

Now, appreciating the way Dallas had been caring for her, appreciating the effort he was putting into distracting her by making conversation, how just plain kind and friendly he was being toward her, she had less understanding of his wife's leaving him, too.

"Yep, it's all me, all the time..." he said somewhat forlornly and without any of the confidence he'd shown in every other way since he'd opened her car door. "Not that my family isn't good about helping out—they are. But still—"

"You're the Number One in Charge. Of three kids."

"And there's nothing easy about being a single parent," he said, clearly feeling the weight of it. His gaze went for a split second in the direction of her middle. "I guess I don't know many specifics about the Crawfords," he said then. "I probably know the most about your brother Nate now, just from the election for mayor—"

"Since he was running against your brother Collin and lost," Nina pointed out.

"But I don't think I knew you were married or pregnant..."

"Pregnant, not married. Never have been."

"But you were with someone weren't you? Leo Steadler? He did some work for us a couple of years back and—"

"I was with Leo for four years." Four years that had led only to disappointment.

"But he left town, didn't he?"

Nina could hear the confusion and suspicions that were mounting. "He did."

"Rather than stepping up?"

There was outrage in that that made Nina smile. "The baby isn't Leo's."

"Oh."

She smiled again, having a pretty good idea what he was filling in the blanks with. The same things her own family had assumed—first that the baby was Leo's, then that she'd had some kind of rebound fling that had resulted in an unwanted pregnancy.

But they were all wrong. And since she wasn't ashamed of the choice she'd made and had been perfectly honest with everyone else, she decided to be perfectly honest now, even with Dallas Traub.

"After four wasted years with Leo, when it ended I decided I wasn't going to wait for another man to come along." And make more empty promises of someday. "There was no telling how long it might take to meet someone—"

“If ever,” he muttered as if he held absolutely no optimism when it came to finding a soul mate.

“And then what?” Nina went on. “What if I used up another year or two or three or four and found myself right where I was after Leo? I’d just be older and I still wouldn’t have the baby I’ve always wanted. The family. And sometimes you just have to go after what you want, regardless of what anyone else thinks. So I took some time off, went to a sperm bank in Denver without telling my family—”

“You just did that on your own?”

“I did,” Nina said with all the conviction she’d felt then still in her voice. “I didn’t see the point in sitting through people trying to talk me out of it, so I just did it. And, voilà! The magic of modern medicine—I’m having the baby I want, on my own.”

Looking up at him, Nina watched him nod slowly, ruminatively, his well-shaped eyebrows arching over those gray-tinged blue eyes. “Wow,” he said, as if he didn’t quite know what to make of her. “My family is very big on marriage and would freak out over something like that. How did yours take it?”

“They freaked out,” Nina confirmed. “But when the dust settled...” She shrugged. “I’ve always been my own person and strong-willed and...well, hard to stop once I put my mind to something. My family has just sort of gotten used to that. And a baby? That’s a good thing. So after the initial shock, they got on board.”

“I’d say that was a good thing, otherwise having a baby on your own might be kind of an overwhelming proposition.”

“But I just didn’t want to wait anymore.”

“You seem kind of young for the clock to be ticking loud enough to go that route.”

“That was something my family said. I’m twenty-five, so sure, my age isn’t an issue. Except that I’ve always wanted to have kids fairly young, in my twenties. I don’t know how old you are, but if you have a ten-year-old, that’s probably about when you got started, isn’t it?”

“I’m thirty-four, so yeah. Ryder was born when I was twenty-four.”

“And that means that you have the chance to be around to see your kids at forty, at fifty or sixty. To know your grandchildren and maybe even your great-grandchildren. That’s how I want it, too. Family is the most important thing to me. As far as I’m concerned, that’s what life is about.”

“But isn’t it about doing all that with a partner?” he asked, still sounding baffled.

“Ideally. But look at you—there are no guarantees that even if you start out with a partner you’ll end up with one.”

“Yeah...” he conceded a bit dourly. “It’s just...single-parenthood is a tough road. I’m never sure whether or not I might be dropping the ball in some way. Especially lately...”

Nina was curious about that, but out of the blue a pain more severe than any she’d felt yet hit her, pulling her away from the back of the seat.

Dallas sat up just as quickly, angled toward her and put an arm around her from behind.

“It’s okay,” he said in that deep masculine voice that she was finding tremendously soothing. “Just ride it out. Don’t fight it. Breathe...”

She tried to do all of that, but this pain was sharp. She closed her eyes against it and the renewed fear that came with it.

“It’s okay,” he repeated. “It’ll all be okay.”

Then she felt him press his lips to her temple in a sweet, tender, bolstering kiss that she knew had to have been a purely involuntary reaction of his own when he didn’t know what else to say to her.

The pain disappeared as fast as it had come on, and Nina wilted.

The fact that she wilted against Dallas Traub was also not something she thought about before it just seemed to happen.

But he held her as if it were something he’d done a million times before, and it seemed perfectly natural for her head to rest against his chest.

“There was a long time between pains,” Nina said when she was able. “I thought they’d stopped.”

“It’s good that they aren’t coming with any kind of regularity. Real labor is like clockwork. Maybe these are just muscle spasms.”

The baby had been moving and kicking normally as they were talking so it didn’t seem as if it was in distress, but still, there was nothing heartening about the situation.

“But you know,” Dallas said in a lighter vein. “If I end up delivering this guy you’ll have to name him after me—Dallas Traub Crawford.”

That did make Nina laugh. “Both of our families would freak out over that,” she said. “And I haven’t let them tell me if the baby is a boy or a girl—I want to be surprised.”

“The name still works even if it’s a girl.”

“Dallas Crawford.” Nina tried it on for size and then laughed again. “Let’s see...first I had to convince everyone that Leo isn’t the father, that I actually had artificial insemination. Then we’ll throw you into the mix? I can just imagine the rumors.”

“Rust Creek’d be talking about it for years.”

“And both of our families would probably stop speaking to us for consorting with the enemy.”

“Seems possible,” Dallas agreed with a laugh of his own.

Headlights suddenly appeared through the snow, coming from the direction of town, and within moments a vehicle pulled up beside them.

“What did I tell you? Help has arrived,” Dallas said.

Nina sat up and away from him, regretting the loss of his arm around her when he let go of her and turned to open the door.

Gage Christensen, the local sheriff, was standing just outside.

“You out here joyriding?” Dallas joked, but Nina heard the relief in his tone.

“When the storm hit your mother called the farm where you were delivering hay to find out if you’d left there. They said you had, and since you hadn’t gotten home, she called me.”

Dallas glanced over his shoulder at Nina. “What did I tell you? The thought of being stuck for too long with my three boys got the troops sent out to find me in a hurry.”

Then, back to Gage Christensen, he said. “I have Nina Crawford in here and I think she needs to get to the hospital in Kalispell—the sooner the better...”

So he was clearly more worried about her condition than he’d originally let on.

“Looks to me like I can pull around behind you and push you forward enough to get you going. Then I’ll do the hospital run,” Gage Christensen said.

“Why don’t you get me out of this ditch and just follow us? It’s probably not a great idea to move Nina but I’d like to know we have some backup. And maybe after the storm someone can come out here and get her SUV.”

Nina was surprised that Dallas hadn’t jumped at the opportunity to be off the hook. But she appreciated that he hadn’t, that he still seemed concerned for her.

“Let’s see what we can do,” the sheriff said, returning to his own vehicle.

Turning back to Nina, Dallas grasped her upper arm in one of those big hands and squeezed. “Just relax, we’ll be on the way before you know it,” he said, once more sounding confident.

Nina nodded, relieved that they were going to get out of there.

Then Dallas left, closed the rear door, and came in from the passenger side of the front seat to slide across and restart the engine, turning on the heat again.

It wasn’t long before there was a slight bump to the rear of Dallas’s truck. Then there was the sound of spinning tires and the feel of the truck inching forward until Dallas’s wheels caught enough traction to move onto the road.

“Now we’re cooking,” he said victoriously.

“My purse—I should have my insurance card,” Nina said as it became clear that they actually were going to be able to travel.

“I’ll get it,” he said, coming to a slow stop, then rushing out of the truck’s cab into the storm again to return with her oversize hobo bag and her keys.

“Thank you,” she said when he handed everything to her over the front seat. Then, a bit emotionally, she added, “Thank you for everything today....”

“Let’s just get you to the hospital,” he said, putting the truck into gear and setting off cautiously into the still-blinding blizzard.

Watching the back of his head as he drove, Nina couldn’t help marveling at the fact that she was continuing to be looked after by none other than Dallas Traub.

Personable, kind, caring, strong, reassuring and more handsome than she’d ever realized before, he couldn’t know how glad she was that he hadn’t merely handed her off to the sheriff.

And in that moment she couldn’t help wondering why it was that she was supposed to hate him.

Chapter Two

“Is anyone here for Nina Crawford?”

Dallas got to his feet the moment he heard that. He was in the waiting area for the emergency room of the hospital in Kalispell, where he’d been since arriving with Nina and having her whisked away.

“I’m Dr. Axel,” the woman introduced herself.

Dallas wasn’t sure whether or not to admit he wasn’t family but before he could say anything the woman continued.

“Nina and the baby are doing fine. The pains she was having were the result of hitting the steering wheel, not labor. There’s no indication that she’s about to deliver. We’ve done an ultrasound and the baby looks good, plus Nina is hooked up to a fetal monitor and there are no signs of any kind of distress.”

“Great!” Dallas said, relief ringing clear.

“As I’m sure you know,” the doctor went on, “Nina is at thirty-five weeks so birth at this stage—while inadvisable—would still likely not pose unusual problems for mom or baby should something change suddenly. But with the storm and the difficulties on the roads, getting her back here in a hurry might pose a problem and I’d rather err on the side of safety. So we’re keeping her overnight. That way we can continue to monitor things and watch them both, just in case.”

“Sure.”

“She’s being taken to a room now—if you check with one of the people at the desk they’ll be able to tell you the number.”

Dallas thanked the doctor, then he went to the reception desk, gave Nina’s name and learned what room she’d been taken to.

It was only after he had that information that he wondered if he should stay.

After all, he wasn’t family.

But while Gage Christensen had promised to notify the Crawfords of the accident and tell them Nina’s whereabouts, none of them had arrived yet. Despite the fact that the blizzard had stopped and only a light snow was falling, the roads still weren’t great, so there was no surprise there. And Dallas didn’t like the thought of Nina being alone, even if everything was okay.

So he opted to stay. Just the way he’d opted to stay after getting Nina here, despite the sheriff pointing out that he’d done enough, that there was nothing more he could do now that she was in the hands of the professionals, and that he might as well go home to his own family.

His family—his boys—were being well taken care of by his parents, all of whom he’d talked to while he was in the waiting room. Everything was going on as usual. But for now, without him, Nina had no one.

And he just couldn’t bring himself to leave her.

So he went to the elevator, got in and hit the button for her floor.

The maternity floor.

He knew it well. He'd been there for the birth of each of his three sons. With Laurel...
That memory wrenched his gut. The way countless other memories had during the past year.
The past year of hell...

It just wasn't easy.

Not waking up to find his wife had left him.

Not raising three kids on his own.

Not dealing with his own anger and grief and sometimes rage and despair.

Not dealing with his sons' emotions, which were sometimes right on the surface and other times came out so subtly he missed them until it was too late.

Not going on, living in the same town where they'd both grown up, being where almost everything in their life had happened, revisiting places like this hospital, where events had come about that were apparently not as meaningful to his ex-wife as they were to him....

Yeah, hell pretty much described it. And he was just trying to work his way through the emotional muck, in much the same way that Rust Creek Falls was still working its way through the muck left from the flood.

But he had confidence that Rust Creek Falls would get through its reconstruction and come out on the other end. He still wasn't altogether sure about himself. Or about Ryder or Jake or Robbie.

When the elevator arrived on the maternity floor, he found Nina's room without a problem and breathed a sigh of relief. It was a private room on a different corridor than where new mothers were located.

If he'd had to walk into one of the same rooms Laurel had been in with any of the boys he didn't know if he could have done it. He could only push himself so far, even though he was doing his damndest to get out of this hell he'd been in since Laurel had left.

Just pretend you're okay even if you aren't—that was what he'd decided he had to do. And maybe if he pretended he wasn't buried under the blues, he'd finally start to actually see daylight again.

But one way or another, he'd already made an early New Year's resolution—he was determined to spare his family and friends any more of what he'd been wallowing in for the past twelve months. No more telling everyone to beware of love, to avoid relationships. No more being the naysayer as he watched people couple up. He'd at least keep his mouth shut.

The door from the corridor was open and the curtain around the bed was only partially drawn so he could see that Nina was asleep, and he reconsidered staying once again. After the day they'd had she was probably exhausted and she could well sleep until her family got there, or even until morning.

But he really, really didn't want to go yet. Just in case.

So he went silently to the visitor's chair and sat down, settling in to study Nina rather than thinking more about the other times he'd been on the maternity floor or about the misery of this past year.

Nina Crawford...

Jeez, she was beautiful.

Her long, shiny hair was the color of chestnuts and it fanned out like silk on the pillow.

Her skin was pure porcelain.

Her nose was perfect, thin and sleek, and just slightly pointed at the end.

Her mouth was petal-pink, her lips just lush enough to make a man want to kiss them.

Her face was finely boned with a chin that was well-defined, cheekbones that were high and sculpted, and a brow that was straight and not too high, not too narrow.

And even though her eyes were closed and her long, thick lashes dusted her cheeks, he had a vivid recollection of just how big and brown they were—doelike and sparkling, they were the dark, rich color of coffee.

Yep, beautiful. Exquisitely, delicately beautiful.

Without the doctor telling him, he would have never guessed that she was as far along as she was. By now, with all three of the boys, Laurel had not looked the way Nina did. Not that he hadn't thought Laurel was beautiful, because he had.

He was a man of nature, and he'd genuinely thought the entire process had that feel to it—natural and as beautiful as a sunrise evolving out of the dark of night.

But the more weight his ex-wife had gained, the more unhappy she'd become. Even more unhappy than she'd been during the rest of the marriage she'd never really been happy in....

Laurel was the last thing he wanted to think about, though, so he sealed off the memory and focused on Nina, who honestly did make true the adage about pregnant women glowing.

Or maybe that was just the way she looked all the time....

Since he'd never noticed her before, he couldn't actually be the judge.

Although sitting there now, studying her, he wondered why he'd never noticed her before. How could anyone who looked the way she did have gone unnoticed?

She was only twenty-five—that was probably a factor because she was too young for him to have paid attention to. Plus he'd been so involved with his marriage—first in the early throes of love, and then trying to save it—that he hadn't really paid attention to any other females. And even as an adult, Nina's being a Crawford just automatically clumped her together with the rest of her family, who had all been cast under the shadow of contempt. Put it all together and he supposed that he'd just been blind to her.

But he wasn't blind to her anymore.

At that moment he was sorry he wasn't sitting as close to her as he'd been in the backseat of his truck. With the blanket over the two of them. With his arm around her—the way it had been when he'd put it there without even thinking about it.

The same way he'd kissed her without even thinking about it....

A Crawford. He'd kissed a Crawford.

A pregnant Crawford.

This had been a very strange day....

But still, thinking about it, here he was wishing he was back there. Stuck in a blizzard. At risk of having to deliver that baby.

Because it had somehow been nice there like that. With her.

It had been the best time he'd had in a very, very long while....

Okay, maybe he'd lost it. The best time he'd had in a long time, and it had been in that situation, with a Crawford?

That was crazy.

And yet, true...

Because she was something, this Nina Crawford.

Even under the worst circumstances, out there stuck in the snow, there had still been something positive and affirming about her. Strong. He'd known she was worried and scared, and even in the face of that she hadn't bemoaned anything, she'd held her head high about making the choice she'd made to have that baby on her own, and she was just...

Something.

Something a whole lot better than he'd been for the past year since his divorce.

Something a whole lot better than the cranky naysayer he sometimes felt as though he'd turned into.

She was a positive force. He was a negative one.

Figured. The Crawfords and the Traubs—oil and water. That was how they'd always been. How they always would be. Except that he and Nina hadn't been oil and water today.

Not that that meant anything. Or mattered.

Even if she wasn't a Crawford, he thought, she was still only twenty-five and pregnant, while he was thirty-four and had three kids. Nothing about any of that put them on the same page. And people who weren't on the same page couldn't—or at least shouldn't—come together. He'd learned that the hard way with Laurel.

Not that what had gone on today was anything like he and Nina Crawford coming together, he told himself when his own thoughts alarmed him a little.

He just felt responsible for her for the moment. Because he was the other party involved in the near-collision that had put her in the hospital.

There wasn't any more to it than that.

If he could just stop recalling every minute of being alone with her in his backseat.

"Dallas Traub? What are you doing here?"

Now that was a Crawford that Dallas recognized.

"Nate," Dallas answered in a whisper, glancing up to find Nina's brother Nathan Crawford in the doorway with their parents—Todd and Laura, who had also been front and center through the recent mayoral election in support of their son—who had lost the race to Dallas's brother, Collin.

Dallas stood instantly to face them. "Didn't Gage tell you what happened?" he whispered, both in response and as a signal to keep voices low.

"He said Nina went off the road and had to be brought here. He didn't say anything about you," the matriarch of the Crawford family whispered back harshly, obviously having taken the cue.

But the attempt to keep things quiet was already too late because from the bed Nina said, "Stop. Dallas isn't to blame. It was all my fault. I couldn't see him coming until it was too late and I'd pulled out in front of him. We both swerved to keep from crashing."

"Still bad enough. What are you doing here now?" Todd Crawford demanded.

"Daddy, Dallas has been great!" Nina informed her father. "He took care of me until the sheriff got there and even then he didn't let Gage move me, and he had Gage follow us to make sure we got here all right. And here he is, even now!"

Dr. Axel joined the group then and Nina seemed to seize the sudden presence of the obstetrician as help in mediating, because she said, "Hi, Dr. Axel. Could you maybe take my family out in the hallway and let them know what's going on with the baby?"

The doctor did as requested, herding the other Crawfords from the room.

"Thought I needed to be rescued, did you?" Dallas said with a laugh, moving to stand directly at the foot of the bed.

"Three against one—bad odds," she answered, sounding groggy and worn-out.

"I didn't want to leave you by yourself," Dallas explained his continuing presence.

"That was thoughtful." She gestured in the direction her family had gone. "I'm sorry that was your reward for being so nice."

"No big deal," he assured her, finding that what was feeling like a big deal to him was the idea that he was going to have to leave her now....

"Everything with you and the baby is fine, you know that, right?" he said then.

"I do. I'm giving you credit for that."

"Nah. I didn't do anything."

"You did—"

"I'm just glad you and the baby are okay."

"And that you didn't have to deliver it," Nina said with a smile that let him know she was teasing him.

"That, too," he agreed, laughing in return and basking in the warmth of that smile that he liked more than seemed possible.

"Is it still snowing?" she asked then.

"It is, but the wind stopped so it isn't as bad out there."

“You should get home, then. To your boys.”

Dallas nodded. He did need to get home. He just couldn't figure out why he was so reluctant to leave Nina. Nina Crawford, he reminded himself, as if that would help. “I suppose your family can take over from here.”

“They will. And everything is okay anyway, so there isn't really anything to take over. I'll lie in this bed and get waited on tonight, then go home tomorrow.”

Again Dallas nodded, lingering. “I'm sorry for all of this. That it happened,” he said, although that wasn't strictly the case. He was sorry for what had happened. Just not for the time he'd had with her after it had happened.

“I'm sorry, too,” Nina said. “I'm sure you had better plans today than to end up stuck on the side of a road in a blizzard thinking you might have to turn your backseat into a delivery room, and then sitting at this hospital for the past four hours.”

“Believe it or not, I've had worse days,” he declared with a laugh.

The reappearance of her family and the doctor at the door made it clear that he had to go whether he liked it or not. “Anyway, since you're in good hands, I'll head for home.”

“Thank you,” Nina said in a tone that had some intimacy to it.

“Anytime,” he answered with humor.

“Be careful going back.”

“I will be,” he promised.

And that was that.

But for another moment Dallas stayed there, still finding it oddly difficult to leave. To walk out and put this day behind him. To sever the connection that somehow seemed to have formed between them through the adversity they'd shared. To return to the way things had been before—to barely being aware that Nina Crawford existed.

He had to go, though. What else was he going to do? Especially when her family and doctor all came to stand around her bed, the Crawfords' scorn for him thick in the air as they pretended he was invisible.

He stole one last glance at Nina, whose big brown eyes met his, who gave him a smile that spoke of the connection they'd made, if only for a little while today. Then he raised a palm to her in a goodbye wave and finally did manage to leave.

Wishing—for no reason he understood—that a lot of things might be different.

And realizing only as he got back on the elevator to go down to the lobby that for just a little while with her he hadn't felt so bad....

* * *

By Friday, Nina was home in her small apartment above the General Store and feeling good again. Better than ever, in fact. But she was still following doctor's orders not to return to work until Saturday.

Her mother had been hovering. Laura Crawford had even spent Thursday night with Nina. But over lunch Friday afternoon, when Laura was still there and giving no indication of leaving, Nina had convinced her that everything was back to normal, and that Laura should go home.

Once she had and Nina was alone, her thoughts turned to Dallas Traub.

Since Wednesday's near-collision she'd been finding it nearly impossible not to think about him and had used the presence of family to distract herself. But, finally left to her own devices, she couldn't seem to think about anything but the swaggeringly sexy, blue-eyed Traub with the great head of hair who had taken such kind and tender care of her.

She wanted to thank him again for everything he'd done on Wednesday.

That was all there was to her constant thoughts of him, she told herself. And it was reasonable to want to express her gratitude.

After all, not only had he put aside whatever petty differences their families had, but he'd gone out of his way for her at every juncture.

Until her family had arrived and been rude to him.

And even then he'd been calm and courteous. He'd absorbed their scorn and contempt with aplomb and without dishing out any of his own before he'd gone on his way.

She owed him more than gratitude, she decided.

But thanking him again was a start, in order to let him know just how much she appreciated everything.

And if she also felt the need to hear his voice again and make some kind—any kind—of contact with him?

Maybe it was an odd phenomenon where a person developed a sense of kinship with their rescuer.

That seemed possible.

It seemed more possible than any kind of alternative. Like wanting contact with him because she was attracted to him....

How crazy would that be? she asked herself.

Attracted to someone when she was eight months pregnant?

Attracted to a Traub?

Completely crazy, that's how crazy it would be.

And even more crazy still when she factored in his age.

That was the frosting on the cake.

Dallas was nine years older than she was, so even if she wasn't pregnant, and even if he wasn't a Traub, his age alone was enough for her to steer completely clear of him.

Leo had been ten years older than she was, and Nina had had enough of the disadvantages that came with a relationship with a wide gap in ages. Enough of accommodating and adapting and making all the adjustments because that age seemed to bring with it the privilege of some kind of seniority.

And Leo hadn't had kids.

Dallas Traub did. Three of them.

Kids only increased the need for any woman who got involved with him to be accommodating. Involved?

She didn't know why Dallas Traub and involvement had even come in the same thought. Of course she wasn't and would never get involved with him!

She just wanted to talk to him, for crying out loud. And then maybe find a way to show her appreciation. Like with a fruit basket or something.

To reiterate her thanks. To apologize for the way her family had treated him.

It was all just the right thing, given what he'd done for her. Nothing more to it. Dallas had done her a huge kindness and service, and she owed him her gratitude.

And, hey, maybe if the two of them could treat each other courteously it could be the beginning of some kind of bridge between the two families, so that her child and his sons might not have to hate each other for no reason anyone could actually explain.

That was probably a stretch. The bad blood between the Traubs and the Crawfords had been going on for generations, and the mere act of reiterating her thanks to him wasn't likely to cure that.

But still, she felt compelled to make the phone call.

It required a few other calls to friends to get Dallas's cell phone number, but she finally did. When she dialed it he answered right away.

The sound of that deep, deep voice filled her with something she couldn't explain. Something warm and satisfying.

But she ignored the response and said, "Dallas? This is Nina Crawford."

He laughed. “You’re the only Nina I know. Hi!” he added, sounding happy to hear from her. Which was somewhat of a relief because it had crossed her mind that, now that they weren’t in dire straits, things between them might return to the normal state of affairs. At least, normal for their families.

“I’ve been thinking and thinking about you—how are you?” he asked immediately and in a tone that held only friendliness.

“I’m really good,” she said. “I got home yesterday and can’t work until tomorrow. But I feel fine and I would be downstairs doing everything I usually do right now if not for doctor’s orders.”

“Downstairs? In your store?”

“That’s where I work,” she answered with a laugh.

“I’m there now.”

He was just downstairs?

Knowing he was that nearby sent a sense of elation through her. Strange as it seemed...

“I live in the apartment above the store,” she informed him. “Want to come and see for yourself that—thanks to you—I’m faring very well?”

Nina had no idea where that had come from. It was nothing but impulse.

But Dallas didn’t hesitate before he said, “I’d like that! How do I get there?”

“Go to the back of the store. There’s a staircase behind Women’s Sleepwear and Intimates—”

“The boys will love that,” he said facetiously. Then he added, “Oh, I didn’t think about that. My boys are with me. Maybe we shouldn’t come up—”

“I’m kid-friendly,” she assured. Then she laughed again. “I’d better be.”

“You’re sure you don’t mind? And that you’re well enough?”

“I’m sure. Come on up.”

That was all the convincing it took for him to say eagerly, “Be right there.”

Hanging up, Nina knew that it was absurd to be as excited as she was by the fact that she was about to get to see Dallas again right now.

But that’s the way it was.

She was excited enough to make a quick detour to the nearest mirror to make sure her hair didn’t need brushing and to hurriedly apply a little mascara and blush.

She was wearing jeans and a red turtleneck sweater that was long enough and just loose enough to accommodate her not-too-large belly. And while she was shoeless, her socks were red-and-green argyle for the holiday so she stayed in her stocking feet to open the door.

Dallas was there when she did, his fisted hand ready to knock.

“Whoa,” he said, stopping short so she didn’t get the knock in the face.

Nina couldn’t help grinning at that first glimpse of him. Tall, broad-shouldered, wearing boots, jeans and that same suede coat over a plaid flannel shirt with the collar button open to expose a white T-shirt underneath it.

Rugged, masculine, rock-solid and drop-dead gorgeous—so her mind hadn’t built him up to be more than he actually was, she thought. She’d been wondering if that might be the case.

“Come in! Take off your coats,” she invited, stepping aside.

Dallas crossed the threshold, trailed by three boys of varying heights, all of them younger versions of him, with the same blue eyes hazed with gray, the same heads of thick brown hair, the same bone structure.

“This is Ryder.” He began the introductions with a hand on the head of the tallest as they all removed their coats. “And Jake.” Clearly the middle child. “And Robbie—”

“I just got to be six and I go to kinnergarten,” Robbie announced.

“Then I’ll bet your teacher is Willa Christensen,” Nina said.

“No. It’s my aunt Willa but in school I need to call her Mrs. Traub. Like me, Robbie Traub. But she’s not my mom, she’s my aunt since she married my Uncle Collin.”

“Ah, that’s right. I guess I sort of forgot that Willa married your brother,” Nina said to Dallas.

“Lookit all this Christmas stuff! Lookit that tree!” Robbie said then, wasting no time moving into Nina’s apartment to survey her many Christmas decorations.

“It is pretty festive in here,” Dallas agreed.

“I love Christmas,” Nina said before focusing on the other two boys, who were staying near to their father. “So Robbie is six. You’re eight, Jake? And Ryder, you’re ten, right?”

“Yeah,” Jake confirmed while Ryder said nothing at all.

“Well, come on in. You can have a look around, too, if you want. There’s a dish of candy canes and taffy—if it’s all right with your dad you can help yourselves. And how would you all like some hot chocolate and Christmas cookies?”

“I would!” Robbie answered first.

“Me, too,” Jake seconded.

Ryder merely shrugged his concession just before Dallas said, “What do you say?”

“I would, please,” Robbie amended.

“Me, too, please.” Jake added some attitude while a simple “Please” was muttered by Ryder as the older boys joined the younger in looking around and ultimately being drawn to the train that circled the tree skirt.

“Does this work?” Jake asked.

“It does. The switch is on the side of the station house,” Nina answered, closing the door behind them all.

“Watch what you’re doing,” Dallas warned his sons.

“It’s okay,” Nina told him. “They can’t hurt anything. Like I said, kid-friendly.”

She led the way into the kitchen portion of the big open room that included a fair-sized kitchen and dining area separated from the large living room by an island counter.

“This is a nice place. I didn’t even know it was up here,” Dallas said as Nina set about heating milk and adding cocoa and broken chocolate bars.

“It’s where the first Crawfords in Rust Creek Falls lived when they started the store. A lot of us have taken advantage of it over the years. You can’t beat the commute to work,” she joked.

“You’ll bring your baby home here?”

“I will. There are two bedrooms—the nursery is almost ready, I just have a few finishing touches to put on it. And living up here after the baby is born—even before I’ve actually gone back to work—will let me still oversee some things. Then when I can get back to business as usual, I’ll have a nanny or a sitter here with the baby, but I’ll be able to carry a baby monitor with me to listen in and I’ll also be able to come up as many times a day as I want or need to.”

“Handy,” he agreed.

“I think it will be.”

“And is this still going to be a house of sugar when you have your own kid?” he asked as she set iced cookies out on a plate and then brought the pan of hot chocolate from the stove.

He was teasing her again and it struck her that there was already some familiarity in it. Familiarity she liked...

“It’s Christmas,” she defended. “And the middle of the afternoon—I’m sure they had lunch and dinner is far enough away that this won’t spoil their appetites.”

“And they’ll be so wired they won’t have to ride home in the truck, they’ll be able to run behind it,” he joked before advising, “Give them all half cups of hot chocolate.”

“Killjoy,” Nina accused playfully. And slightly flirtatiously, though she didn’t know where that had come from....

“Oh, so you’ve heard about how glum I’ve been the past year,” he joked back, smiling that crooked smile that lifted one side of his agile-looking mouth higher than the other.

His eyes were intent on her, and the humor allowed them to share a moment that told Nina she wasn't alone in whatever it was she'd been feeling about him as her rescuer. That, regardless of the old feud between their families, things between the two of them were different now even if they were no longer in dire straits.

It pleased her. A lot.

Dallas took two mugs of hot chocolate in each of his big, capable hands, leaving Nina to carry the fifth and the plate of cookies into the living room. They set everything on her oval oak coffee table and the boys gathered around it, sitting on the floor while Nina and Dallas sat on her overstuffed black-and-gray buffalo-checked sofa.

After the boys tasted their hot chocolate and each took a cookie, Robbie looked to his father and said, "When are we gonna put up our tree?"

"You don't have a tree yet?" Nina asked, surprised.

"Dad's been too busy," Jake answered, disappointment and complaint ringing in his tone as the three boys carried their cookies and hot chocolate with them and went back to playing with the train.

"Busy and not much in the mood," Dallas confessed, quietly enough for the boys not to be able to hear.

"Scrooge," she teased him the same way.

"I'm not usually," he admitted, his voice still low and echoing with sorrow. "But this year...I don't know. It's felt all year like this family has been left sort of in shreds and I'm not quite sure how to sew it back together again. Or if I'm even up to it."

"Kids need their holidays kept, no matter what," Nina insisted.

But she couldn't be too hard on him, considering that this was the anniversary of the end of his marriage and it couldn't be an easy time for him.

So rather than criticizing any more, she decided to fall back on the reason she'd contacted him in the first place.

"I called because I wanted to thank you again for helping me on Wednesday," she said, setting her own cup of hot chocolate on the coffee table and breaking off a section of a bell-shaped cookie. "I also wanted to apologize for the way my family treated you at the hospital."

"I'm sure they were worried and upset about you and the baby—"

Robbie overheard that and perked up to look at them over his shoulder. "You're gonna have a baby? I thought you just liked beer."

Confused, Nina looked from the youngest Traub to Dallas and found Dallas grimacing. "We met an old friend of mine earlier today. He was a lot heavier than the last time I saw him and I razzed him about his beer belly."

"Ah..." Nina said.

"But you," Dallas went on in a hurry, obviously doing damage control. "It doesn't seem like you've gained an ounce anywhere but baby—you really look...well, beautiful..."

It sounded as if he genuinely meant that—not like the gratuitous things that often came with people talking about her pregnancy. And that, too, pleased Nina. And when their eyes met once again, when she really could see that he didn't find anything about her condition off-putting at all, and when Nina had the feeling that there was suddenly no one else in the world but the two of them, it made her all warm inside.

But there were other people in the world, in the room, in fact. His kids.

And just then Ryder said, "I need to get to Tyler's."

Dallas seemed to draw up short, as if he, too, had been lost in that moment between them and was jolted out of it by his eldest son's reminder.

"His friend Tyler is having a sleepover," Dallas explained. "And I still need to pick up a few things downstairs—our houses and the main barns were spared by the flood but some of the outbuildings and lean-tos had some damage. I thought we'd fixed everything but the blizzard showed

us more weak spots, and I came for some lumber and some nails.” He paused, smiled slyly, then said, “And I figured if I came here rather than going to Kalispell I’d get the chance to ask how you’re doing...”

“I’m doing fabulously,” she answered as if he’d asked her.

The sly smile widened to a grin that lit up his handsome face.

“I told Tyler I’d be at his house by now,” Ryder persisted.

Dallas rolled his eyes but allowed his attention to be dragged away. “Okay, cups to the kitchen,” he ordered in a tone that sounded reluctant.

“I’ll take care of it,” Nina said.

“Not a chance.” Dallas overruled her, even cleaning up after her by taking her hot chocolate mug, too, and leaving her to merely follow behind them all with the cookie plate.

Once the cups were rinsed and in the sink, and coats were replaced, Nina went with them to the apartment door, opening it for them.

The boys immediately went out and headed for the stairs.

“Wait for me right there,” Dallas warned as he lingered with Nina.

Then he glanced at her again with the same look in his blue eyes that had been there when he’d told her she was beautiful. “I’m really glad to see that you’re okay. Better than okay.”

“It’s all thanks to you,” she told him.

He flashed that one-sided smile again. “All me, huh? Doctors, the hospital—none of that had anything to do with it?”

“They just did the checkup. It was you who got me through the worst. And then took heat from my family for it.”

“Just happy to help,” he said as if he meant that, too.

“I owe you...”

“Nah. You don’t owe me anything.”

Nina merely smiled. “I’m glad you came up today.”

“Me, too.”

“Dad!” Ryder chastised from the top of the stairs.

“In a minute,” Dallas said without taking his eyes off Nina. He was clearly reluctant to leave. “Guess I better go. Take care of yourself. And that baby,” he advised.

“I will,” she agreed.

Then he had no choice but to go, and Nina leaned out of her apartment door so she could watch him join his sons, so she could watch the four of them descend the steps.

And all the while she was still smiling to herself.

Because she’d thought of a much, much better thank-you gift than a fruit basket.

A gift that would put her in the company of Dallas Traub one more time.

Chapter Three

“You have to be kidding. You want me to tie a Christmas tree to the top of your SUV so you can surprise some Traubs with it?”

It was after five on Sunday. Nate had dropped by the store just before closing and Nina had asked her brother to do her a favor so the teenager who was running the Christmas tree lot didn’t have to stay late to do it.

“Dallas needs a tree,” she told Nate matter-of-factly. “And it’s the least I can do after Wednesday. It’s a thank-you Christmas tree.”

“Thanks for running you off the road and nearly killing you?”

“I pulled out in front of him,” Nina repeated what she’d said to her family numerous times since the near-collision. “I don’t know what I would have done without him.”

“You wouldn’t have ended up in a ditch.”

“Nathan!” Nina said in a louder voice, attempting to get through to her brother. “Dallas Traub saved me and my baby!”

Okay, maybe that was somewhat of an exaggeration, but in the thick of things on Wednesday, Dallas had felt like a lifesaver.

“I want to repay him with this Christmas tree,” she insisted.

“We don’t owe any Traub anything,” Nate said, scowling at her.

“I owe Dallas,” Nina said firmly and succinctly.

She’d always been a strong, independent person who acted on her own instincts and answered whatever beliefs, desires or drives she might have, even if they went against popular opinion. Like having this baby on her own. And like giving Dallas and his boys a Christmas tree whether anyone in her stubborn family approved or not.

“If you’re bound and determined to give a Traub a tree then have it delivered,” her brother reasoned. “Why do you have to take it out to him yourself?”

“I want to take it out to him myself,” she said defensively, trying not to think about just how much she wanted to do this herself. “He inconvenienced himself and even put himself in danger by taking me into Kalispell during a blizzard when he could have just let the sheriff do it and gone home to his own family. Delivering my gift in person is only right.”

Which she believed.

But she also couldn’t stop thinking about Dallas and wanting to see him again—that was a strong part of her determination to do the delivery herself, too.

Of course, she told herself that now that she’d met Dallas’s kids, now that she knew Dallas was having trouble getting into the holiday spirit those kids deserved—the holiday spirit that every kid deserved—it just seemed appropriate that she step up and provide it. In her time of need, Dallas had come to the rescue. Now, in this small way, maybe she could come to his.

And getting to spend a little time with him in the process was inconsequential and meaningless—that was what she kept telling herself.

“Some Traub will probably shoot you on sight when you drive onto their property,” Nate said.

Nina rolled her eyes. “This isn’t the Wild West anymore. Besides, I’ve been asking around at the store yesterday and today to get an idea of the actual arrangement of the houses at the Triple T ranch. Dallas and his boys have their own place that sits on one of the borders of the ranch. I can get to it from a side road without going any farther onto the property.”

“He’s still likely to shoot you,” Nathan muttered. Her brother’s grumblings about angry Traubs were so ridiculous they made Nina laugh. Regardless of the conflicts between the Crawford family and the Traub family, her own current feelings about Dallas—and his sons—didn’t hold any animosity. And she was reasonably certain that Dallas didn’t bear her ill will at this point, either.

Certain enough that she had no compunctions about showing up at his doorstep unannounced to surprise him with the tree. And some ornaments and some lights and just a bit of Christmas cheer that her brother didn’t know she already had loaded into the rear of her SUV.

“Yes, I’m sure Dallas went to all the trouble of saving me only to turn around and shoot me today,” she said facetiously in answer to her brother’s comment.

“I don’t like it, Nina,” Nate said then, seriously, solemnly, showing genuine concern. “You know how things are with the Traubs—they’re the enemy.”

“In what?” Nina challenged. “Some stupid generations-old family feud? They’re the Hatfields and we’re the McCoys? Or vice versa? I’m beginning to think that that’s just plain dumb.”

“You might not think it was so dumb if it was you who just lost that race for mayor to a Traub.”

Nathan couldn’t seem to say the name without rancor—actually no one in her family ever could—but still Nina thought maybe she was being insensitive to her brother. Nate had poured his heart and soul into the campaign for the office of Rust Creek’s mayor and then lost. To Collin Traub.

“I understand, and I don’t blame you for having hard feelings about losing the run for mayor,” she assured Nathan. “But this is something just between Dallas and me. Separate from any family squabbles or defeats or any of the rest of it. After all, he did me a great kindness separate from everything. Or would you have rather he had looked at the situation on Wednesday and left me to fend for myself because I’m a Crawford?”

“No...” Nate admitted with clear reluctance. “I just don’t think you owe him anything for it.”

“If it had been someone else who did what he did, would you feel the same way?” Nina reasoned. Her brother scowled again but refused to answer.

Nina knew why and said, “No, you wouldn’t feel the same way. You and Mom and Dad would have rushed into the hospital room and fallen all over yourselves thanking him. And right now you’d have that tree tied to my luggage rack and you’d probably be telling me to tell whoever how grateful you all are that he helped me out.”

Nate didn’t respond to that but he did hoist the tall pine tree up onto her luggage rack and reach down for the bungee cords to hold it there.

After securing the cords and yanking on the tree to make sure it was held tight, Nate got down off her running board and returned to her, still frowning his disapproval.

“It’s a good thing we’ve had nothing but sunshine since Wednesday and the roads are clear or I wouldn’t let you do this,” he said.

As if he could stop her.

Nina refrained from saying that and instead said, “But the roads are clear, there isn’t another storm in sight and thanks for that.” She nodded toward the tree now fastened to the roof of her SUV.

Nate would only accept her gratitude with a shrug, letting her know he still didn’t approve of what she was doing or of her having contact with any Traub.

But Nina merely kissed her brother on the cheek and sent him on his way.

So that she could be on her way, too.

Even as she tried to contain the wave of excitement that flooded through her at the thought that she was on her way to seeing Dallas again....

* * *

Dallas’s house was a large two-story that sat not too far back from the side road that bordered the Traub’s Triple T ranch.

Nina was glad to see the glow of lights on behind the curtained windows when she pulled up in front of it. On the drive from Rust Creek Falls proper it had occurred to her that he might be having Sunday dinner with his parents, who lived in the main house on the property. But if the lights were on, he was probably there. Which meant she was going to get to see him again after all, and that made her happier than she wanted to admit.

Turning off her engine, she got out of her SUV and went up the four steps onto the porch, crossing it to get to the front door.

There were butterflies in her stomach suddenly, as the thought flitted through her mind that Dallas might not be happy to see her. What if she’d merely been enjoying a temporary truce?

Or what if his parents or his brothers were here for Sunday dinner?

Even if things were still okay between her and Dallas, Nina had no doubt that his family’s response to her would be as bad as her family’s response to him had been. And the thought of that put a damper on what she had planned.

But she’d come to do this and she couldn’t let these last-minute concerns stop her. She had to at least find out what was going on inside that house. She couldn’t just turn tail and run because things might be different than what she’d envisioned. So she raised a finger to the doorbell and rang it.

Holding her breath.

Then the door opened, and Dallas was standing there—somehow looking even taller, more broad-shouldered and even more handsome, too, despite the fact that he was obviously in stay-at-

home clothes that included faded, ages-old jeans and a gray sweatshirt with the sleeves pushed to midforearms.

He also had a kitchen towel slung over one of those broad shoulders and a shadow of beard on the lower half of his face that gave him an extra-rugged appeal Nina tried not to notice. Instead, she focused on the fact that his expression showed shock, then pleased shock as his eyebrows arched and he gave her a glimpse of that lopsided smile of his.

“Nina!”

“Hi. I hope this isn’t a bad time.”

His eyebrows arched higher, as if to ask, “A bad time for what?”

She nodded over her shoulder at her car. “I was going to get you a fruit basket or something to say thanks, but after Friday I thought a Christmas tree, some decorations and a few other holiday things were a better idea. And if you’re up for it, I’d like to help you trim the tree and get some cheer going for your boys.”

The arched eyebrows dipped into an almost-frown. “I can’t let you do all that,” he said.

“You can’t let me say thank you?”

“You’ve said thank you. A couple of times.”

He seemed kind of down tonight and that only made Nina more determined to do this.

“Still, what you did was huge to me, and I want to do this for you to show you how much I appreciated it. For you and the boys...” She added the boys at the end because for some reason there seemed to be an undertone of intimacy in her voice that she wanted to dispel.

“Are you even supposed to be out? Let alone carting Christmas trees around and decorating them for people?” Dallas asked then.

“I was back at work yesterday and today without any limitations, and I feel great. I don’t know if it’s supposed to be this way this close to the end, but I have a ton of energy—some to spare—and I’d really like to do this.”

“Decorate a tree for me?”

“For you and the boys,” she said, qualifying this time because there was a hint of intimacy in his voice now, and regardless of how excited she was to be looking up into his oh-so-handsome face she was also warning herself to keep things in perspective.

After a brief moment of seeming to consider what she was offering, Dallas shrugged in a way that made her think he was shrugging off some of his low spirits. Then he laughed a little and said, “Well, okay, I guess. If you’re up for it.”

“I am. If you’ll get the tree off the car, I’ll get the stuff out of the back—I brought a tree stand so you can just plunk it into that and we can get going.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said with a wider smile at the take-charge attitude she was showing, the take-charge attitude that wasn’t too different than what he’d shown on Wednesday in the blizzard.

Then he called over his shoulders for his sons to come and put on their coats while he removed the dish towel from his shoulder, slung it over the banister on the staircase behind him and thrust his arms into the largest of the four coats hanging on hooks beside the door.

“Lead the way...” he suggested to Nina as the boys came to the door like a tiny herd of elephants, their curiosity piqued, as well.

“Coats!” Dallas ordered a second time, explaining what was happening as the boys put them on and they all joined Nina on the porch.

“You brought us a Christmas tree?” Robbie exclaimed as they went out to the SUV.

“I did,” Nina confirmed. “And a few other things that you can help me carry in while your dad and your brothers get the tree down.”

“I been wantin’ a tree!” Robbie said as if it were a revelation.

“Now you’ll have one,” Nina said with a laugh.

Even the oldest boy—Ryder, who had been so solemn on Friday when they'd met—seemed to perk up at the prospect of decorating for Christmas. And the more childish side of middle-son, Jake—who Nina had already realized liked to play it tough—was revealed as the two older boys aided their father in getting the tree unlashd from the roof of the SUV.

“Go on in and get out of the cold,” Dallas commanded Nina when she and Robbie had taken the sacks from her rear cargo compartment. “The family room is to the left—that’s where we put the tree.”

Thinking more of the little boy than of herself, Nina did as she'd been told.

Inside the house, Nina took off her coat and so did Robbie—dropping his on the floor in his excitement to take the sacks into the other room and see what was in them.

Still in the entry, Nina picked up the child's coat and replaced it on the hook it had come from. Then she draped her own jacket over the newel post at the foot of the wide staircase that led to the second level of the house rather than taking someone else's hook.

She was wearing a turtleneck fisherman's-knit cable sweater that reached to midthigh of the skinny jeans she had on with her fur-lined, calf-high boots. After making sure the sweater wasn't bunched up over her rear end, she took the dish towel from where Dallas had set it over the banister and went in the direction Robbie had gone—to the left of the staircase.

The family room was a wide-open space paneled in a rustic wood, with man-sized leather furniture arranged around the entertainment center and the stone fireplace beside it.

Nina took the dish towel into the kitchen that was in the rear portion of the same area, separated from it only by a big round table surrounded by eight ladder-backed chairs.

On the counter beside the sink were four TV dinners with most of their contents left uneaten, and Nina wondered how often Dallas served frozen meals like that, hoping it wasn't too often. And hoping, too, that the whole household hadn't been feeling so sad tonight that none of them had felt like eating.

She left the dish towel folded neatly on the other side of the double sink and went to Robbie to help unload the bags she'd brought, explaining as she took things out what they were intended for.

“Dad! We have lights and tinsel and ornaments and these sparkly balls and candy canes, and Nina's gonna make us apple cider to drink while we put the tree up!” Robbie announced when his father and brothers carried the evergreen into the family room.

“I can see that,” Dallas answered as he leaned the tree against a wall.

When the other boys were following Dallas's instructions to take his coat and theirs to hang up, and Robbie was still engrossed in emptying the bags, Nina said in an aside to Dallas, “I brought a bunch of new ornaments in case you didn't want memories raised with ones you used before....”

“Good idea. We can decide later what we might want to add and what we might not.”

The older boys returned then. At Nina's suggestion Christmas music was turned on as she heated the cider and put it into mugs, and everyone got busy putting up the tree and decorating Dallas's house.

Nina half expected Dallas to merely sit on the sofa and watch her and the boys do the decorating, because in the four years she'd been with Leo, that was what he'd done. Christmas spirit seemed to have been something he'd outgrown, and while he'd assured her that he enjoyed the sight of a well-lit tree, he'd refused to exert the energy to actually decorate it.

But Dallas pitched in and did every bit as much as she did until the room was decorated—not quite as elaborately as Nina's apartment, but enough so that it looked very festive.

When all the work was done, Robbie demanded that all the lights be turned off except for the tree lights, and that they all stand back to see how the tree looked in the dark. It looked beautiful, and Nina had the sense that the activity and the addition of the holiday cheer had lifted some of the cloud from the household. If not permanently, then at least for the time being.

Then Dallas said, “Tomorrow is a school day and you guys are late getting to sleep. Tell Nina thank-you for all of this and then upstairs to showers and pajamas and bed.”

Ryder and Jake thanked her perfunctorily, but Robbie gave her an impromptu hug around the middle to accompany his expression of gratitude. Then the boys went up the stairs in a thunderous retreat that seemed louder than a mere three kids could cause, and Nina and Dallas were suddenly alone.

“This was a really, really nice thing you did,” Dallas said when the noise had dwindled to thumps and bumps overhead. He seemed inordinately grateful. As grateful as she’d been for his help during the blizzard. As grateful as if she’d done something for him that he just hadn’t had it in him to do on his own.

“I wanted to do it,” Nina assured him.

“Now sit and catch your breath,” he insisted. “I’ll reheat the cider and have another cup with you.”

Better judgment told Nina to decline, to just head for home. She’d done what she’d come to do and she should just leave.

But she couldn’t deny herself a few minutes alone with Dallas now that the work was finished and the boys were elsewhere.

So she sat on the big overstuffed leather sofa across from the Christmas tree that they’d set beside the fireplace.

She enjoyed the view of her handiwork and how much more cheerful the room looked while Dallas microwaved refills of cider for just the two of them. Then he brought the mugs and joined her.

Nina was at one end of the long couch, and after handing her the mug he sat on the opposite end. Far, far away.

Or, at least, that was how it seemed.

But it was good, Nina told herself. Because even if she was liking that scruff of beard on his face a little too much and thinking that it was sooo sexy, sitting at a distance from each other proved that there was nothing more to this than two relatively new acquaintances sharing a friendly evening together topped off by a cup of cider.

She took a sip of hers and said, “I wasn’t exactly sure what I’d find when I came out here. You know, a Crawford setting foot on the Traub’s Triple T ranch...”

“You thought you might be shot on sight?” Dallas joked, gazing at her over his own mug just before he took a drink, too.

“That’s what Nate thought—he loaded the tree onto the car for me. I gave him grief for saying such a dumb thing, but I have to admit that I was glad when I found someone at the store today who could tell me which place out here was yours so I didn’t have to go to the main house and ask. I sort of figured if I did I’d run into the same kind of wrath from your family that you got from mine.”

“At least the hospital was a public place—that probably made it a little safer.”

“But obviously not much,” Nina said.

“I can’t imagine Nathan was any too happy to load up a Christmas tree for you to bring to me,” Dallas said then.

Nina shrugged her concession to that. “Losing the election to your brother has riled up my family all over again. I’m sure you know how that goes.”

“Oh, I know. The slightest thing that happens with a Crawford and everyone on my side is up in arms.”

“But it’s gotten me to thinking...” Nina mused. “And it occurred to me that I don’t even know for sure what started the Crawfords and the Traubs hating each other in the first place. Do you know?” she asked, having wondered a great deal about that since Wednesday when she’d discovered that she couldn’t find a single thing wrong with Dallas. When, in fact, she could only find things more right than she wanted them to be.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about that, too,” Dallas admitted. “Here you are, a nice person, great to be around—” and if the warmth in his gaze meant anything, he didn’t hate the way she looked,

either “—and I keep wondering why I’m supposed to think you’re the devil incarnate just because you’re a Crawford. But to tell you the truth, I don’t know, either.”

“I know there’s been a history of Crawfords and Traubs competing for the same public positions—like this last election for mayor,” Nina said.

“Right. There have been Traubs and Crawfords vying for the sheriff’s job and city council seats along the way—I remember our fathers both running for an empty seat on the city council when I was a teenager.”

“And that time my dad won—I’d forgotten that he sat on the city council for a while back then,” Nina said.

“But there’s always a winner and a loser in those things—sometimes in favor of a Traub, sometimes in favor of a Crawford—”

“And then there are hard feelings on the part of whichever side loses,” Nina finished for him.

“Sure,” Dallas agreed. “Plus I think I remember hearing something about a romance—a long, long time ago, when Rust Creek was nothing but cowboys and farmers. I think there was a story about a Traub and a Crawford both wanting the same woman, or something. And when neither of them got her they blamed each other...”

“I hadn’t even heard that one,” Nina said, laughing again. “I did hear one once about a business deal gone wrong, but all I know for sure is that whenever I’ve asked why the Crawfords and the Traubs hate each other it’s started a tirade against the Traubs without any real answer. But it sounds like it’s a matter of the Traubs and the Crawfords being too much alike and wanting the same things over and over again.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” Dallas agreed, laughing with her. “But at this point it just seems silly to me.”

Nina was so glad to hear him say that. Probably because it was how she felt, as well, she told herself. It probably didn’t have anything to do with the fact that she was enjoying being there with him so much, or the fact that she kept remembering how he’d taken care of her during the blizzard and the feel of him carrying her to his truck, the comforting feel of his arm around her when she’d had pain.

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