



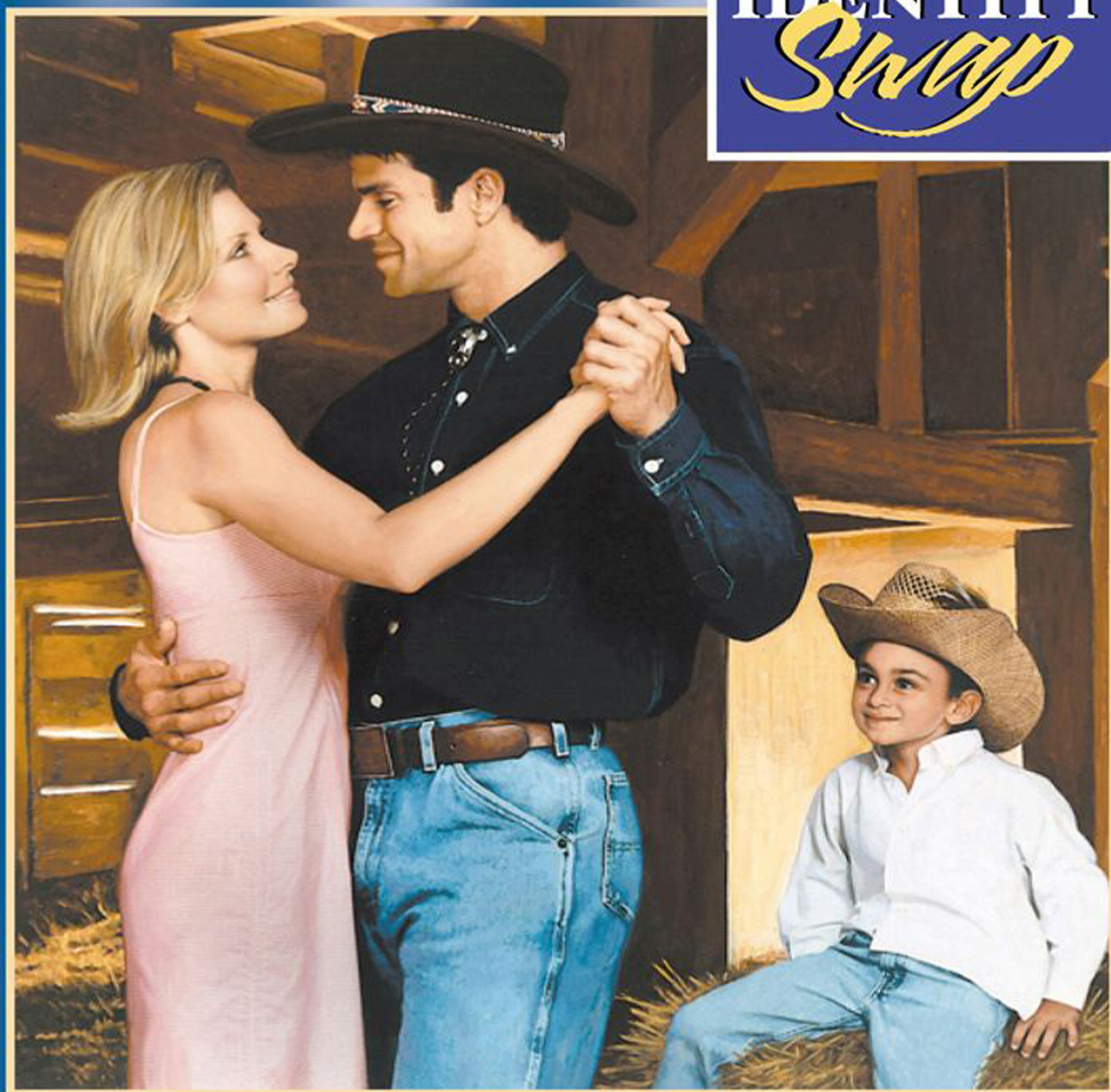
HARLEQUIN®

AMERICAN *Romance*®

MONTANA MAIL-ORDER WIFE

Charlotte Douglas

IDENTITY
Swap



Charlotte Douglas

Montana Mail-Order Wife

«HarperCollins»

Douglas C.

Montana Mail-Order Wife / C. Douglas — «HarperCollins»,

Marrying a stranger! Rancher Wade Garrett's mailorder bride showed up with a boulder-sized bump on her forehead, an unrecognizable ID and a case of amnesia. Rachel O'Riley didn't know who she was—or that she'd agreed to a marriage in name only! But much to Wade's delight she didn't want a pretend marriage. Rachel wanted Wade to be a real husband to her, and he fell for his beautiful bride-to-be like a ton of bricks. And just when he knew waiting for their wedding night was going to be impossible, he uncovered a secret that changed everything.... The woman in his arms wasn't Rachel O'Riley. **IDENTITY SWAP:** Two women's lives have become hopelessly entangled—and only love will set them free!

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“Your train derailed. You were airlifted here to the hospital.”

So far, Wade had given her only fragments of her life, certainly not enough for her to piece together her identity, but too much for a total stranger to know. She studied his face with more care than before, seeing past the composed veneer to a restless energy beneath. “Do I know you?”

“We’ve never met.”

Confusion made her head ache. “Then why are you here with me?”

“Maybe the rest can wait.” He avoided her eyes.

“Tell me now. Why are you being so attentive to someone you’ve never met?”

He raised his head and caught her in the powerful gaze of eyes so deep and murky she could have drowned in them.

“Because you were going to marry me.”

Dear Reader,

Welcome to Harlequin American Romance...where each month we offer four wonderful new books bursting with love!

Linda Randall Wisdom kicks off the month with *Bride of Dreams*, the latest installment in the RETURN TO TYLER series, in which a handsome Native American lawman is undeniably drawn to the pretty and mysterious new waitress in town. Watch for the Tyler series to continue next month in Harlequin Historicals. Next, a lovely schoolteacher is in for a big surprise when she wakes up in a hospital with no memory of her past—or how she’d gotten pregnant. Meet the last of the three identical sisters in Muriel Jensen’s WHO’S THE DADDY? series in *Father Found*.

Bestselling author Judy Christenberry’s *Rent a Millionaire Groom* launches Harlequin American Romance’s new series, 2001 WAYS TO WED, about three best friends searching for Mr. Right who turn to a book guaranteed to help them make it to the altar. IDENTITY SWAP, Charlotte Douglas’s new cross-line series, debuts with *Montana Mail-Order Wife*. In this exciting story, two women involved in a train accident switch identities and find much more than they bargained for. Follow the series next month in Harlequin Intrigue.

Enjoy this month’s offerings, and make sure to return each and every month to Harlequin American Romance!

Wishing you happy reading,

Melissa Jeglinski

Associate Senior Editor

Harlequin American Romance

Montana Mail-Order Wife

Charlotte Douglas



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For the brave men and women who fought the Montana wildfires of the summer of 2000.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charlotte Douglas has loved a good story since she learned to read at the age of three. After years of teaching that love of books to her students, she now enjoys creating stories of her own. Often her books are set in one of her three favorite places: Montana, where she and her husband spent their honeymoon, the mountains of North Carolina where they're building a summer home, and Florida, near the Gulf of Mexico on Florida's west coast, where she's lived most of her life.

Books by Charlotte Douglas

HARLEQUIN AMERICAN ROMANCE
591—IT'S ABOUT TIME
623—BRINGING UP BABY
868—MONTANA MAIL-ORDER WIFE*
HARLEQUIN INTRIGUE
380—DREAM MAKER
434—BEN'S WIFE
482—FIRST-CLASS FATHER
515—A WOMAN OF MYSTERY
536—UNDERCOVER DAD

NEWS FLASH SPECIAL REPORT!

We interrupt your regularly scheduled program to bring you this breaking news.

A Westward Railways train has derailed just outside Kalispell. Police have reported several injuries, mostly minor. Several passengers have been taken to local area hospitals.

One young woman, traveling alone, identified as Rachel O'Riley, is suffering from a concussion and what appears to be amnesia. Her fiancé has been contacted by local authorities and is at her bedside.

Only one passenger is unaccounted for—another young woman identified from her ticket receipt as Jennifer Reid. Police have called off the search, as they believe she was unharmed in the accident and left the scene. Her whereabouts and her destination are unknown...

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Chapter One

Wade Garrett awoke with a start, jerked upright in his chair and slammed his boots from the windowsill to the floor. Perspiration speckled his forehead, and his heart raced from the still-vivid nightmare. His son had been lost and calling to him, but he couldn't find the boy anywhere.

He rubbed his eyes and shoved his fingers through his hair. Only a dream. Jordan was fine, at home with Ursula.

Rolling his shoulders to stretch his stiff muscles, he hoisted himself from the depths of the chair he'd slept in for the past two nights. A quick glance assured him he hadn't disturbed the still figure in the hospital bed beside him. Rachel O'Riley lay bruised, battered and comatose, and in her vulnerable state, she tugged at his heartstrings, reminding him of his son, an angel when asleep.

Jordan, an angel?

Wade grimaced with bitter humor. Jordan awake was a holy terror. And Jordan was the reason Wade kept vigil in Rachel O'Riley's hospital room.

He stumbled through the predawn twilight into the tiny bathroom. At the lavatory he sluiced cold water over his face to drive away the dregs of sleep, raised his head and confronted a memory in the mirror.

Six years ago he'd spent several nights in a hospital room, not caring then, either, about unkempt hair, eyes red rimmed with fatigue, or the three-day stubble on his chin. Maggie had been dying from complications of a stillbirth, and he'd kept watch, consumed with anger and pain at the circumstances that had brought her there.

Déjà vu.

Except the woman in the hospital bed wasn't Maggie. She wasn't dying. And he wasn't angry. Or in pain. Why should he be? He'd never laid eyes on Rachel O'Riley until Sheriff Howard called him to the hospital after finding Wade's name and address in her backpack.

Wade scowled at his mirror image, scrubbed his face dry with a rough paper towel and turned away, unwilling to admit, even to himself, that the mysterious Rachel had triggered a deep reaction and stirred emotions he had believed, hoped, had atrophied and died with Maggie. With the demands of the ranch and raising eight-year-old Jordan, he had no time for sentimental entanglements.

He swished cold water in his mouth, spit as if to expel his unwanted thoughts, and longed for hot, black coffee. A solid jolt of caffeine should banish his outlandish notions.

When he came out of the bathroom, the day nurse stood beside the bed, taking her patient's pulse and making notes on a chart. Her round, pleasant face broke into a smile. "Good morning, Mr. Garrett."

Wade nodded toward the bed. "How is she?"

"Her vital signs are strong. The doctor's certain she'll regain consciousness soon."

When he headed toward his chair, the nurse waved him away. "You're the one we're worried about. Not enough sleep or food to keep a bird alive, much less a big man like you. Get some breakfast in the cafeteria. I'll page you if there's any change."

Wade scrutinized Rachel, quiescent and pale, so slight her body barely mounded the hospital blanket above the mattress. Her tranquil face fired his interest in a disturbing way. High, sculpted cheekbones as ashen as her pillow were framed by thick blond hair that reminded him of his prize palomino in the sunlight. She had the kind of hair a man liked to run his fingers through.

The surprising sweetness of her bow-shaped mouth and the gracefulness of feathery brows arching across her smooth, high forehead were details her letters had omitted.

Her chatty correspondence had left him unmoved, so he'd been unprepared for the tightening in his gut and the heat surging through his blood at seeing her for the first time.

And every time he'd looked at her since.

Gritting his teeth until his jaw ached, he ignored the unwelcome hankering and squelched his preoccupation with her stunning face.

He'd need a whole bucket of coffee to purge the sentiment cluttering his mind—and the hormones tormenting his body.

He was overreacting to the woman because he was bone-tired, he assured himself. What he felt was only sympathy, same as he'd feel for anybody banged up as she'd been in the train accident. Once she was on her feet again and he'd had a good night's rest, his emotional balance would return. Then he could handle the demands of the ranch he'd let slide since Sheriff Howard had called to say he was needed at the county hospital.

"You okay, Mr. Garrett?" the nurse asked.

She'd caught him gawking at Rachel like he was plumb weak north of his ears. He'd been under too much stress lately, what with Jordan's troubles and the extra workload at the ranch, and his moonstruck behavior proved it.

"Call me if there's any change." Striding from the room, he ignored the impulse for one last glance.

He halted at the pay phone in the hall and dialed home. Ursula's gravelly voice greeted him. "How is she?"

"Doc says she should be okay, but she hasn't regained consciousness yet." He massaged a crick in his neck. "Is Jordan staying out of trouble?"

The old housekeeper's initial hesitation told him more than her words. "He's fine. Just keeps asking when his daddy's coming home."

A mixture of guilt and frustration scoured through him, and he cursed silently. After all, the boy was the reason he was here. "I'll be home tonight."

"Are you going to tell him?"

He pretended not to understand. "About the train wreck?"

Ursula's ironic expletive burst in his ear. "You know what I mean."

"I'll tell him. Eventually."

He hung up the receiver and rammed his hands in his pockets. Trouble always came in threes. First Jordan's rebellion, then the train derailment. God only knew what was next. The disturbing speculation accompanied him all the way to the cafeteria.

SHE NOTICED THE SOUNDS first. The clanking of an ice machine across the hall, the whirl of rubberized wheels on a linoleum floor, hushed voices outside the door. And a strange, unrelenting pounding.

She lay quiet, eyes closed, absorbing the unfamiliar noises. The other sounds diminished, but the pounding persisted as blood rushed through her veins and her temples throbbed. She struggled against a consuming weakness and opened her eyes.

Directly above, a metal track etched the white ceiling. Her gaze followed it to the wall, where a muslin curtain was gathered back beside the bed. Beside her, a plastic bag hung from an aluminum stand, and clear tubing filled with fluid snaked from it to her wrist. When she flexed her left hand, a needle pinched her vein.

She was in a hospital.

She gazed through a wide window across from the bed at a broad, boulder-filled river, frothy with whitewater tinted pink by the sun's slanting rays. Beyond the river, a stand of towering evergreens formed an impenetrable barricade. She knotted her forehead in concentration, but try as she might, she couldn't identify where she was or whether the sun was rising or setting.

Her next discovery banished all thoughts of time or place. A thirty-something man sprawled in the chair beside the window, sound asleep. Who was he?

Her doctor?

He was dressed more like a cowboy, in well-worn jeans that enveloped long legs, a chambray shirt stretched taut over powerful muscles, and tooled leather boots that could stand a good polish. The sun streaks in his mahogany-colored hair and the tanned, rugged planes of his attractive face suggested someone who worked outdoors.

She flushed when she realized he'd awakened during her scrutiny and was staring back with eyes as serene and brown as the river boulders outside the window.

"Welcome back." His agreeable voice rolled through the room, a rich baritone.

"Back?" She attempted to draw herself to a sitting position, but the effort exhausted her and she collapsed against the pillows.

"You've been unconscious almost three days." He shoved himself to his feet in a graceful movement and approached her bed with the rolling gait of a man more comfortable on a horse than on his feet.

Giddiness and disorientation washed over her. "What happened?"

He hooked his thumbs in the back pockets of his jeans and lifted dark eyebrows with a look so galvanizing she averted her eyes. "You don't remember?"

"No." She fidgeted beneath his piercing inspection and wished she was wearing something more substantial than a thin hospital gown.

"I'd better get the doctor." His probing expression relaxed as if he was pleased by an excuse to bolt.

Loneliness and an unnamed yearning overwhelmed her. Between the pounding in her head and the weakness of her body, she couldn't pinpoint who—or what—she longed for. All she knew was that she didn't want to be alone.

"Please, don't go," she begged.

The skin around his eyes crinkled in appealing lines and his mouth angled in a reassuring smile. He reached above her pillow and depressed a call button.

"Nurses' station," a chirpy voice responded.

"Tell Dr. Sinclair Miss O'Riley is awake," he said.

"That's good news," the voice said. "I'll page the doctor."

When he started to move away, she grasped his sleeve. "Who's Miss O'Riley?"

He frowned before composing his face into a neutral expression. "Don't you know?"

Her misgivings multiplied by the second. She concentrated on the tenacious squareness of his jaw, the dark hair tumbling across his broad forehead, a tiny scar across one dark eyebrow—anything to block the other questions that assaulted her.

The one about O'Riley terrified her enough.

She gathered her courage with a deep breath. "Who is Miss O'Riley?"

His widened eyes conveyed his surprise. "You are."

The answer stunned her, and the questions she'd tried to evade converged until she slipped again toward the black void from which she'd just emerged. In a futile attempt to conquer confusion, she thrashed her aching head from side to side on the pillow.

"Whoa, hold still." The stranger cupped her cheeks with firm but gentle hands. "You've had a bad concussion. You don't want to aggravate it."

Closing her eyes to avoid his warm, searching gaze, she relaxed against the soothing pressure of his palms. "You don't understand."

"Try me."

His simple, direct proposal inspired her trust. When she opened her eyes, tears misted her vision, and she observed the stranger through a watery haze.

"I don't know who I am." She choked back panic. "I can't remember anything."

"Nothing?" he asked, as if disbelieving.

Her throat tightened with anxiety, and she clasped his hands as if they were a lifeline. “Not even my own name.”

He freed himself from her grasp, fumbled in his shirt pocket and pulled out a letter. “Maybe this will jog your memory. It’s from you.”

She seized the pages and scanned the lines of looping scrawl, but nothing connected. No name, no remembrances. She blinked back tears of frustration. “This means nothing to me.”

More concerned with the stranger than the letter, she handed back the pages. Reeling from lack of memory, she battled her befuddling attraction to the good-looking man.

A disturbing possibility struck her. “Who are you?”

“Wade Garrett.”

She glanced at her left hand and her unadorned ring finger. “That’s a relief. I thought for a moment you might be Mr. O’Riley.”

“No.”

The mysterious glint in his eye intrigued her, but his lack of information was irritating. “Are you related to me?”

He shook his head.

Her disappointment stung. Wade appeared to be the kind of man she could lean on in a crisis—not only physically strong, with broad shoulders and hard muscles, but with a disposition that didn’t rattle easily.

If he wasn’t her relative or her husband... a tremor shook her at the very idea... who was he? “Do I know you?”

“Not yet.”

Behind a facade of calm, she hid her irritation at his refusal to provide more information. Obviously he wasn’t ready to tell her why he was here, but maybe he’d answer other questions.

Again she experienced the unsettling but sourceless longing. “What about my family?”

Uncertainty flickered over his handsome face. “We’ll discuss your family later.”

Between the ache in her temples and an avalanche of unanswered questions, she couldn’t think straight. The mysterious Wade Garrett, talking in generalities, was no help at all.

Fatigue depleted her last reserves of strength, and she closed her eyes. Maybe she was only dreaming, and once she awoke, she’d remember everything she was supposed to, including who she was and what part Wade Garrett played in her life.

All she wanted now was sleep.

WADE WATCHED HER DRIFT into unconsciousness again. He’d been totally unprepared for the impact of those eyes, the deep pine-green of a ponderosa, and so wide they almost swallowed her face. And her kick-in-the-gut smile had almost done him in, especially when he noted the fleeting unhappiness beneath it. That look reminded him of a stray dog Jordan had adopted years ago after its human family moved away and left it behind.

Maybe, like Shep, the woman would need lots of care before her loneliness left her. Wade’s thoughts snarled like barbed wire as he combed his fingers through his hair and massaged his neck, stiff again from sleeping in the chair. She hadn’t mentioned any unhappiness in her letters. And love definitely wasn’t part of their deal.

But she looked so vulnerable, lying there asleep, that he couldn’t resist reaching for her hand, fingers curled like a half-opened blossom atop the blanket. At the contact with her warm, smooth skin, testosterone bucked through his blood like an untamed mustang.

When the doctor entered, Wade jerked his hand away and blushed like a green adolescent caught necking on the porch.

Dr. Sinclair, a tiny, birdlike woman with enough nervous energy to power a city, marched to the bed and checked Rachel’s pulse. She removed a penlight from the pocket of her white coat, lifted Rachel’s eyelids and examined her pupils.

Straightening as if her back ached, the doctor brushed a strand of salt-and-pepper hair from her forehead and confronted Wade. “Did she speak to you?”

“Briefly.” Long enough for him to learn her voice was as soft as a mountain breeze.

“Was she lucid?”

“She was rational, if that’s what you mean.”

The doctor’s shrewd gaze skewered him. “What aren’t you telling me, Mr. Garrett?”

“Her memory’s gone.”

Her intense blue eyes behind gold-framed glasses gave nothing away, and she gestured toward the door.

He followed her into the hall before posing his question. “Is it a brain injury?”

Dr. Sinclair shook her head and stuffed her stethoscope into her pocket. “CAT scan and EEG are both normal, now that her concussion is subsiding.”

He rammed his fingers through his hair. He hadn’t expected this crimp in his plans. He should have been halfway home by now, as he’d promised Jordan, but how could he leave Rachel alone and frightened, not knowing who she was? “Why can’t she remember?”

“She suffered a bad bump on the back of her head. Amnesia caused by physical trauma should clear up within a couple of days.”

He expelled a sigh of relief. “So she’ll be all right?”

“Unless we’re dealing with hysteria.”

He frowned. “She seemed calm enough. But she did shed a few tears.”

Dr. Sinclair smiled and shook her head. “Not that kind of hysteria. Amnesia caused by psychological trauma. Imagine what she experienced, plunging into that deep ravine in a tumbling, burning railroad car.”

Wade nodded. Rachel had been air-lifted to Libby, partly because Wade was there, but mostly because the Kalispell hospital was filled to capacity with other wreck victims. He jerked his wandering attention back to the doctor.

“Her mind may be protecting her from reexperiencing that nightmare by shutting down her memories.”

“But she’ll get them back?”

Sinclair patted his hand, reminding him of his long-dead mother. “In a few days, if her memory loss is due to physical trauma.”

“And if it isn’t?”

“When she’s strong enough to face the memories.”

“Soon?”

The little doctor shrugged. “Maybe the next time she awakens, maybe in a few days.” Her voice had an upward inflection, hinting of things left unsaid.

“Or?”

Dr. Sinclair avoided his eyes. “Maybe never.”

“Never? But you said there’s no permanent injury to her brain—”

“In spite of medical advances, many mysteries of the human mind are still unsolved.” Her smile didn’t hide her weariness. “But you’re worrying prematurely. She may recall everything when she awakes again.”

“And if she doesn’t?”

“Her memories could come rushing back anytime, or they could return gradually in bits and pieces.”

He glanced into the room at the sleeping Rachel. If she didn’t remember soon, she’d be in for a rough time. She’d need care, attention and reassurance. The prospect of providing for her warmed him—until his common sense kicked in.

Feelings played no part in their relationship, and Jordan was enough to worry about. Rachel was supposed to ease his troubles, not add to them.

He hardened his heart and looked away. No point in worrying about what only time could cure. He glanced at his watch. If he hurried, he might reach home before Jordan's bedtime. "What about her family?"

Dr. Sinclair shook her head. "The local authorities traced her to Atlanta, then back to Missouri. Her parents are deceased. She was their only child."

"No aunts or uncles, cousins?"

The doctor shook her head. "Not that they could find."

"What about close friends?"

"There's no one."

The tenderness he'd tried to suppress surged through him. "Poor kid."

"I wouldn't say that." Dr. Sinclair patted his hand again. "After all, she has you."

Chapter Two

“Rachel.”

Sitting up in bed, she shaped the alien name with her lips, but it lacked familiarity.

She grimaced in disgust. So what else was new? Nothing seemed familiar. Nothing except her face in the mirror. She choked back a derisive laugh. What a big help. She recognized herself.

When she'd awakened this morning, she'd thought at first she'd dreamed Wade Garrett and her amnesia, until she had to admit her encounter with Wade was the only memory she possessed.

He'd said they weren't related and had never met. But who was he?

Some religious zealot dedicating his life to visiting the sick? She quickly rejected that idea. The man had too much devil in his deep brown eyes.

Maybe he was a plainclothes policeman. Had she been fleeing some crime when her train crashed? After her heart stopped thundering in her chest, she discarded that possibility, too. Although she couldn't remember, she could still feel, and she didn't feel like a criminal.

In frustration, she pounded her pillow with her fists. No use wondering who Wade Garrett was when she'd probably never see him again.

The thought gave her no comfort.

“Rachel. Rachel O'Riley.”

She repeated the name, hoping to trigger a response, but her mind remained a wasteland, barren of any recollection except the most mundane.

“The doctor says fresh air will do you good.” Wade Garrett lounged in the doorway of her room, one elbow propped against the doorjamb, the thumb of his other hand tucked in the low-slung waistband of his jeans.

His sudden appearance delighted and annoyed her, immobilizing her with indecision. “Who are you?”

His intriguing face crumpled with dismay. “Don't you remember?”

“I know you're Wade Garrett,” she said with impatience, “but what do you have to do with me?”

“You feel up to a walk around the grounds?” His slow smile heated up the room.

“If I walk with you, will you answer my question?”

He regarded her solemnly for a moment, then nodded.

A younger, more handsome version of the Marlboro Man, that's who he reminded her of, with his chiseled features, sun-streaked hair and wind-burned skin. Another useless bit of information remembered. She clenched her fists in frustration at the quickening of her pulse and the flush that seared her cheeks.

Hoping to fill the emptiness with his presence, she couldn't deny she'd been waiting for him all morning. But only for what he could tell her, she assured herself. Her racing blood and somersaulting stomach at the sight of the stranger were due strictly to her thirst for information. Neither Dr. Sinclair nor the nurses would tell her anything, but maybe Wade could furnish the facts she couldn't recall.

She forced a smile with more bravery than she felt. After all, he'd promised answers. “I'd take you up on that walk, but my legs are a bit shaky.”

They'd gotten a whole lot shakier since he arrived.

His gaze scanned her legs, from the bottom of her short hospital gown to her ankles, crossed atop the covers. “They look fine to me.”

Her misgivings melted as the heat in his dark eyes transferred to the pit of her stomach. In a futile effort, she tugged at the hem of her gown. No sense going all warm and snuggly over Wade Garrett, when, for all she knew, she had a husband and three kids somewhere, waiting for her to come home.

Home.

Where was home? And what was she doing here, fighting the desire to throw herself into a tall stranger's arms and have him take care of her?

She swung her legs off the bed on the side away from Wade and tugged on the shapeless cotton robe the hospital had provided. Shaky legs or not, she'd accompany him until he'd given her some explanations. She slid her feet into frumpy hospital slippers and stood on wobbly limbs.

In an instant, Wade was beside her, gripping her elbow to steady her. "Lean on me."

She jumped at his touch and would have fallen if he hadn't grabbed her.

What was the matter with her? Why had she hopped like water on a hot griddle at the pressure of his hand? She glanced into bottomless brown eyes that registered his confusion at her reaction. He'd offered a simple gesture of help and thoughtful words. She'd responded as if he'd electrocuted her.

Bewilderment brought tears to her eyes. She dashed them away with the back of her hand. Undeterred, Wade reached for her elbow again, but she shook off his assistance, hesitant to be indebted to a man she knew nothing about.

"I'll be okay." She didn't sound convincing, even to herself.

Ignoring her protest, he slid an arm around her waist and bore the brunt of her weight. She would have protested further, but without his support, her legs would have buckled.

With Wade's help, she shuffled into the hallway. He nodded toward the exit at the end of the hall. "The hospital garden's just past those doors."

She traversed the hall, aware of the searing heat of Wade's strong hip pressed against her torso. She forced weak muscles to carry her forward, and Wade matched his pace to hers. When she stepped from beneath the entrance portico, morning sunlight toasted her face, banishing the chill of air conditioning.

If only it could unlock her memories as well.

She glanced up at the stranger at her side, hoping he held the key to who she was. If he did, he exhibited no haste to reveal it. A shiver joined the trembling in her legs. Maybe he was hiding something, something she wouldn't want to hear.

She chastised herself for her fears. Surely nothing could be worse than not knowing. She'd make him tell. The sooner the better.

Bolstered by Wade's strong arm, she ambled along the brick path through elliptical pools of shade cast by tall Douglas firs. Intent on the enigmatic man at her side, she spared only a cursory glance for the deep purple petunias and mounds of white alyssum that bordered the walk.

When they reached a concrete bench set back from the path under a small maple, he steadied her as she sat, then stepped away.

She drew the cotton robe around her and confronted him. "Isn't it time you answered my questions?"

Seemingly unperturbed by her abruptness, he dropped to the ground with a natural gracefulness, leaned back against the bench and stared across the garden. She couldn't see his eyes, only the angle of his cheek and the silky texture of sun-bleached hair that brushed the top of his collar. A twitching muscle in his jaw betrayed his calm.

"What do you want to know?" Something in his even tone hinted at emotions held firmly in check.

She looked around in confusion at the pine-covered hills rising beyond the river toward a range of snow-capped mountains in the distance. "Where am I?"

"You're just outside Libby."

"Where's that?"

"Northwest Montana."

"Do I live here?"

"You were traveling to your new home at Longhorn Lake, less than an hour west of here."

Montana didn't seem familiar, but then nothing else did, either. Her most pressing question concerned her identity. She leaned forward until she could watch his expression. "Who am I?"

His eyes glowed briefly with a curious longing before he looked away. "You're Rachel O'Riley."

"That's only a name. Who am I?"

He shifted toward her, grasped her fists clenched on her lap and smoothed her fingers open with a gentleness unexpected in such a big man. "You're coiled tighter than a spring. Dr. Sinclair says you mustn't get worked up over this."

"How can I not—"

"Shh." He lifted his index finger to her lips, creating an unaccustomed tingle along the sensitive skin. "If you promise to relax, I promise to answer any questions I can."

His composure irritated her, but his unyielding expression convinced her to follow his instructions. She inhaled, drawing in the resinous scent of evergreens and the fragrance of unfamiliar flowers on the cool mountain air. Slowly, her tension eased.

"That's better." He released her hands with a nod of satisfaction, but his eyes held a burning, distant look, as if he wished he was anywhere but there.

She resisted the urge to grab his hand again, yearning for his touch to drive away her lack of connection to anyone or anything. "Please, tell me about myself, my family, what I'm doing here."

"You're twenty-eight years old. You grew up in Missouri." With a calm she envied, he ticked off the facts on long, capable fingers with clean, square nails. "You're an only child. Both your parents died years ago in an automobile accident."

His words generated no response.

No memories.

No pain.

He scanned her face as if looking for signs of the recognition she longed for, but she couldn't reveal what wasn't there. For all the impact his words had, he could have been talking about a total stranger.

"And after my parents died?" she prodded.

"A few years ago you sold your home in Missouri and moved to Atlanta."

The breeze changed direction, gusting across Wade, carrying a pleasantly masculine scent of leather and soap and lifting his hair to expose a high, wide forehead, slightly less tanned than his cheeks.

Had she lost her mind as well as her memories? She should be concentrating on the missing facts of her life, not the all-too-fascinating man before her.

"Did I have a job in Atlanta?" She silently cursed the breathlessness in her voice.

Wade didn't seem to notice, but if he did, she hoped he blamed it on curiosity. "You worked as a paralegal in a firm that practiced corporate law."

Corporate law? When she drew another blank at the term, her frustration grew, and she had to force herself to relax again. "What about the rest of my family?"

He shook his head and compassion glittered in his eyes. "There's nobody. The hospital's had the authorities searching for next of kin ever since you were brought here. After the accident."

As if uneasy, he shifted and assessed her with a wary eye, but again she experienced nothing except curiosity in reaction to his words. "What accident?"

"Your train derailed west of Kalispell. You were airlifted to the hospital here."

So far, he'd given her only fragments of her life, certainly not enough for her to piece together her identity, but too much for a total stranger to know. "How do you know so much about me?"

He shrugged, and the compassion in his face gave way to discomfort. "I learned most of it from your letters."

"Letters? Like the one you showed me yesterday?"

He nodded, then sat unmoving, almost as if holding his breath.

She studied his face with more care than before, seeing past the composed veneer to a restless energy beneath. “Do I know you?”

“We’ve never met.”

Confusion made her head ache. “Then why was I writing to you?”

“Maybe the rest can wait.” He avoided her eyes.

His evasiveness alarmed her and made her pulse quicken. The rest had been dry facts, meaningless, but she could tell from the tension in his posture that this answer was crucial. “Tell me now. Why was I writing to someone I’ve never met?”

He raised his head and caught her in the powerful gaze of eyes so deep and murky she could have drowned in them.

“Because you were going to marry me.”

WADE SCRAMBLED to his feet and caught the fainting Rachel before she slid off the bench. As he jogged back toward the building with her in his arms, her thick lashes brushed cheeks gone pale, and her warm, supple body bounced, featherlight, against his chest. A fierce protectiveness flared deep in his gut, white-hot with forgotten longing.

You scared her to death, you dadburned fool. Maybe her promise to marry you is something she doesn’t want to remember.

The automatic door glided open at his approach. He rushed past the nurses’ station to her room and laid her on the bed. Drawing the covers to hide her long, sculpted legs, slender hips and the firm, round curves of her breasts from his covetous glance, he stepped back and shoved hands that ached to touch her into his pockets.

He was acting like such a damned idiot, no wonder she’d fainted at the thought of marrying him. Between the train wreck and her amnesia, she’d already suffered too many shocks. News of their engagement had been the last straw. Guilt seeped through him for telling her so abruptly.

And tenderness followed as he noted the sweet curve of her cheek against the pillow, reminding him of countless times he’d carried a sleeping Jordan to his room and tucked him in without waking him.

Ah, Jordan. I thought I’d worked out everything for you, and now look what I’ve gone and done.

“Will she be okay?” He shifted aside for the nurse to check Rachel.

Rachel’s lids fluttered, and she opened her eyes. “I’m fine. Just a little tired.”

The nurse concurred with Rachel’s assessment. “But no more outings until tomorrow. In the meantime, rest.”

Rachel propped herself on her elbows, watched the door close behind the nurse, then turned amazing emerald eyes toward him. “Sorry if I worried you. I’m fine, really.”

Weak with relief, he grinned. “Coulda fooled me. I thought you’d gone into cardiac arrest at the mention of marriage.”

A delightful blush brought the pinkness back to her cheeks, and a dancing smile brightened her eyes. “You’re the first man who’s ever proposed to me.” Her smile dimmed. “That I can remember, anyway.”

His face flamed with discomfort. Because she couldn’t recall the circumstances of their engagement, she’d jumped to all the wrong conclusions.

Not that he blamed her.

Ever since she’d first met him, she couldn’t help noticing the unintended signals of his unexpected and definitely unwelcome attraction to her that he’d been relaying like a microwave tower. He had to set her straight before she embarrassed herself, or him, further.

He dragged a straight chair beside the bed, straddled it backward, and folded his arms on the backrest. Explaining in a letter would have been a lot easier, without his tongue wrapping itself around his teeth. And without the distraction of too-green eyes, kissable lips and a pert nose turned up at just the right angle.

“My, uh, proposal,” he said, “isn’t what you think.”

She had punched the automatic control and raised the head of the bed so her face was even with his. At his disclaimer, she grew so still that, if her eyes hadn’t blinked, he would have sworn she’d gone comatose again.

“If your proposal isn’t what I think, maybe you’d better tell me what it is.” Her clear, steady voice projected an inner strength he hadn’t noticed before.

“We weren’t, uh, aren’t...in love,” he blurted with more emphasis than he’d intended.

She blinked again, but didn’t move. He wished he could guess what she was thinking behind those wide eyes the color of summer leaves.

He tried to explain. “I didn’t want you to expect—”

He hit a dead end. How could he renounce caring for her when his rebellious heart contradicted him with every beat? But such attraction was ridiculous. A grown man didn’t fall head over heels for a stranger, no matter how perfect. Rachel O’Riley had cast a spell that had to be broken. Otherwise, his well-laid plans were ruined.

“What I mean,” he chose his words carefully, “is that sometimes people do fall in love just by exchanging letters, but...”

Her feathery eyebrows peaked, laughter sparked in her eyes and she blinked again. She seemed to be enjoying his discomfort.

Her amusement goaded him to be more blunt than he’d planned. “Anyway, I don’t love you.”

There, he’d said it.

When he looked at her, he wished he’d cut out his tongue before uttering the words. Her lower lip trembled, tears filled her eyes and her shoulders shook. For a horrible instant, he feared she would break into sobs.

Then, as if she could contain herself no longer, she burst out laughing.

He shoved his chair away from the bed and stood, scratching his head at her reaction. Maybe the knock on her head had caused more problems than amnesia.

“That,” she gasped, “is the most unromantic proposal I hope I’ll ever receive. If it was that awful the first time, I must have been crazy to accept. It’s probably best I can’t remember.”

She wiped her eyes with a corner of the sheet and stared at him, her lips twitching as if she wanted to laugh again.

He stuffed his hands in the back pockets of his jeans and gazed out the window to avoid her ironic smile. He should be happy she wasn’t taking his proposal too seriously, but her amusement annoyed him. “Maybe talking about this should wait until your memory returns.”

“No, please.”

He whirled back toward her at the panic in her voice. “But without all the details, it sounds so...”

“Cold?”

He nodded. He hadn’t had a problem with their agreement before, but now, seeing her so fragile that a puff of wind could blow her away, staring at him from the hospital bed with those big eyes...

“Maybe you’d better tell me all the details,” she suggested in a calmer voice.

“The nurse wants you to rest.”

He needed time to think, to figure out the best way to explain. Time to cool his simmering desire, brought about, he assured himself, only by the intimacy of the hospital room and her scanty attire. He barely knew the woman. How could he be attracted to her?

“I’ll rest better once you’ve told me everything.” Her guileless expression pleaded with him. “If I know the facts, my imagination won’t exaggerate things.”

He couldn’t understand his reluctance. She’d known all the particulars before her accident and had agreed to the arrangement. Why should stating them a second time make any difference?

Because she’s not just words on a page anymore. She’s a real person, flesh and blood with feelings, who makes me feel alive again for the first time in years.

“Okay,” he said with a sigh of resignation, “I’ll try to explain.”

He opened his mouth, but again words failed him. He’d never felt this stupid before. If she’d been a lame horse or an ailing cow, a broken chainsaw or a clogged pump, he’d know exactly what to do, but she was a woman, a beautiful and charming female, and he had almost no experience to fall back on. What little know-how he’d once possessed was rusty from lack of practice.

“Maybe,” she suggested gently, “you should start at the beginning.”

In the beginning there was Maggie, he thought.

“I was married before,” Wade said.

Chapter Three

Rachel tamped down her rising panic. What had she gotten herself into, agreeing to marry a man she didn't know, a man whose first marriage had obviously ended in divorce?

Out of nowhere, a visceral reluctance to commit herself to any man bore down, engulfed her, then vanished as quickly as mist on the river evaporated in the sunlight. The irrational sensation made her fear the wreck had affected more than her memory.

Maybe she was losing her mind.

Or maybe Wade Garrett's faltering revelation had induced her fleeting dread of intimacy.

He was taking his sweet time explaining their so-called engagement, but she wouldn't pressure him. She wasn't going anywhere, not anytime soon. And if his details were as disastrous as his proposal, maybe she had better absorb them slowly.

Clearing her face of any reaction, she waited.

"My wife, Maggie, died in childbirth six years ago."

"I'm sorry," she said with sincerity, feeling stupid for jumping to conclusions about divorce.

His face had hardened when he spoke his wife's name. Rachel swallowed hard. She remembered nothing about herself or her past, but at that instant, more than anything in the world, she hoped Wade Garrett would never look like that at the mention of her name.

His antagonism toward his wife, inscribed all over his handsome face, went a long way toward communicating why he had proposed to a woman he didn't love. Maybe he'd married Maggie, expecting happily ever after, and when it hadn't worked out that way, decided marriage wasn't for him.

But why had the-Rachel-she-couldn't-remember agreed to a loveless marriage? She wouldn't know the answer until her memories returned.

Unless Wade could tell her.

"My son, Jordan, is eight now." Affection mixed with frustration glimmered in his deep brown eyes.

An intriguing image of Wade as husband and father flitted through her mind. "It must have been tough, raising a child alone all those years."

He settled back on his chair. "Ursula did most of the raising."

"Ursula?"

"Ursula's my housekeeper," he said, "and she's done a good job with Jordan. But now her arthritis is so bad, she can't keep up with the little rascal."

Comprehension flooded through her, leaving disappointment in its wake. "So that's why you need a wife. To take care of Jordan."

He nodded and relaxed. "I knew you'd understand. You did before when we discussed this in our letters."

Letters. He'd already told her they'd never met. "Why did you choose me to write to?"

He leaned forward and rested his strong chin with its charming cleft on his forearms, crossed on the back of the chair. His tanned face beamed with enthusiasm. "Your letter was hands down the best answer to my ad."

"I answered an ad?" She failed to keep the horror from her voice. What kind of woman was she to have answered a personal ad from a stranger?

Desperate?

Lonely?

Crazy?

All of the above?

"I saved your letters," he said. "If you want, I'll bring them next time I visit."

She struggled to dredge up lost memories, but the vast hole where her recollections should have been yielded nothing. “What did I say in my letters?”

“You described how much you’d enjoyed growing up on a farm.”

“I lived on a farm?” The concept seemed so alien, she shuddered. Whatever trauma she had suffered had erased her memories so completely that she couldn’t imagine farm life, much less remember it.

“Until four years ago.”

Without evidence to contradict him, she’d have to take his word. “Anything else?”

“Your experience with country life is important, considering the way I live.”

What kind of life had she agreed to? “You’re a farmer?”

He frowned at the label. “No.”

“Then why is my farm experience important?”

“I’m a rancher. I raise cattle and timber.”

Nothing he said rang any bells, and her head swam with efforts to remember. A single mystery looming in her mind distressed her most. “Did I explain in my letters why I was willing to marry a perfect stranger and care for his child without—”

She floundered, searching for the right word.

Wade was no help. He just sat there, staring at her with amusement sparkling in his eyes. Again he reminded her of the Marlboro Man. A tall, rugged, sexy outdoorsman about as anxious to commit to love as a tumbleweed.

“Without...” She groped for a suitable phrase, bewailing silently that she’d lost not only her memories but her vocabulary, too.

“Without sex?” he suggested.

“That’s not what I meant.” Embarrassment scorched her face, and with relief, she latched on to the words she’d been searching for. “Without all the advantages of marriage. That’s what I was trying to say.”

He lifted his right brow and considered her with a grin. “You don’t think sex is an advantage of marriage?”

“No.” Memories, hovering at the edge of her consciousness, contradicted her.

“No?” Wade’s raised brows registered his surprise.

The memory faded. “I mean yes, but I was talking about love, affection, mutual respect...” She widened her eyes as a possibility hit her. “Sex wasn’t part of our agreement, was it?”

He straightened in his chair, and his teasing expression sobered. “Our agreement is purely business. You take care of Jordan and help run the house and ranch. In return, you have your own room, all expenses paid, and you receive a percentage of the yearly profits. When Jordan reaches adulthood, you can have a divorce, no questions asked.”

She collapsed against her pillows, shocked to learn she’d agreed to such a sad, barren life. As for Wade, his cold, unsentimental terms clashed with his warm personality, and she wondered what had driven him to demand such an impersonal arrangement.

“Why go through the motions of getting married?” she said. “Why not just hire another housekeeper?”

He tunneled his fingers through his thick hair, a gesture she’d come to associate with him, and clasped his hands behind his head. The movement stretched his denim shirt across well-developed chest muscles. Wade Garrett was a good-looking, agreeable man who probably had hordes of local single women beating down his door. Why hadn’t he married one of them?

“Longhorn Lake is a small community,” he said. “A young housekeeper couldn’t live at the ranch without causing a scandal.”

“Then hire an older woman.”

He dropped his hands to his knees and shook his head. “Jordan needs a mother, a real mother —”

“A real mother is the woman his father loves, not a business partner.”

Wade avoided her gaze. “I don’t intend to fall in love. And I can’t marry anyone from the community.”

“Why not?”

“Maggie’s memory,” he said cryptically.

She rubbed her throbbing temples with her fingertips to try to ease her pain and confusion. “I don’t understand.”

He scooted from his chair to the bed, pulled her back against his chest and began massaging her forehead. “I’d rather not talk about Maggie,” he said in a flat tone.

She would have pushed him further, but the lazy circles of his fingers against her temples, the comforting pressure of his chest against her back and the warmth of his breath against her neck distracted her and caused the discontent constantly hovering inside to dwindle for the first time since she’d regained consciousness.

She had never felt so safe in a man’s arms.

Wade’s fingers stalled in their circling, and he dropped his hands to her shoulders. “Jordan needs a woman who’ll be a permanent fixture in his life, someone he can be proud of. Someone he can introduce at school and church as his mom, so he’ll be like the other kids and maybe stop—” He halted abruptly, as if he’d said too much.

So Jordan had some kind of problem, and Wade wanted a ready-made mother to deal with him. “How can you be sure Jordan will like me?”

His fingers, toying with a curl of her hair, brushed the sensitive skin of her ear, transmitting dangerous flutters down her spine.

“You love children,” he explained, as if that fact transcended all difficulties. “You said so in your letters.”

What had she gotten herself into? She had problems enough already. No memory. No family. No money. And no idea how long she’d be confined to this hospital bed.

Just thinking about her troubles exhausted her. She sagged against Wade’s chest and closed her eyes.

“I’m a stupid fool,” Wade said with a growl.

She opened her eyes and forced a weak smile, but her weariness prevented further movement. “From the arrangement you’ve described, I tend to agree with you.”

“I meant—” he stood up, laid her back on her pillow and leaned with one hand on each side of her, his face hovering inches from hers “—I’m a stupid fool to keep you talking when you should be sleeping.”

She inhaled the pleasing scent of leather, soap and sunshine, and gazed into genial brown eyes flecked with gold. The closeness of his deeply tanned face with its sweep of dark lashes and appealing smile made her skin hot.

“I wanted answers to my questions,” she said.

“No more questions now. You need to rest. Sweet dreams, Rachel. I’ll stop in tomorrow. Maybe all those memories will have flooded back by then.”

He patted her cheek with a warm, callused hand, then settled his battered Stetson low on his forehead. At the door, he turned and touched his fingers to the brim of his hat, looking for all the world like a Western movie hero. When he disappeared into the hall, her hospital room seemed empty and cold.

She drifted into a twilight slumber between consciousness and sleep, only to wake with a jolt.

Wade hadn’t answered her most important question: why she had agreed to a marriage without love.

TEN DAYS LATER, although Wade had visited her every day, she hadn't found the courage to ask the question again. She had hoped for a rapid return of her memories, and with them, her rationale for accepting Wade's unusual marriage proposal, but her past remained a frustrating blank. With her future and all its uncertainties a gaping void, she clung now to the one solid and steadfast element of her present.

Wade Garrett.

The day of her release had arrived, and she thanked the nurses and Dr. Sinclair for their care. Happy to have exchanged the shapeless hospital gown for jeans, a T-shirt and sneakers the nurse said were hers, she waited for Wade in her hospital room.

A half hour later, Rachel left the hospital and walked at Wade's side across the asphalt parking lot beneath the sweeping dome of Montana's big sky.

As they headed west in his pickup along Highway 2, she gazed at his tanned profile, partially obscured by the brim of his Stetson and his mirrored sunglasses. She wondered if he'd sent a picture with his letters, and if the-Rachel-she-couldn't-remember had fallen hopelessly in love with his sturdy good looks, in spite of his insistence on a strictly business liaison.

No wonder she'd said yes in her letters. Handsome, considerate, good-humored and stable, Wade embodied all the traits of the perfect husband.

Except he didn't love her. He'd made that crystal clear.

Unable to remember why she'd agreed to marry him in the first place, she struggled now with whether to go through with his bizarre marriage proposal.

She hoped she wouldn't regret accepting his invitation to stay at his ranch, but, broke and remembering no one, she had nowhere else to go. According to Wade, the authorities reported she had closed her bank account and canceled her credit cards before leaving Atlanta. If she'd had any money, it had disappeared. Her wallet was empty of everything but her ID card and a paper with Wade's name and address, the information that had caused the local sheriff to summon Wade to her bedside.

"Thanks for offering me a place to stay."

"No problem." His agreeable smile hit her with the scorching intensity of the noonday sun. "It was the least I could do, since you gave up your apartment and job in Atlanta to marry me."

Just the thought of marriage to the mesmerizing rancher created an erratic quiver in her stomach. "You promised—"

"I know," he said with another heart-stopping smile, "no mention of marriage until you're ready to discuss it."

She reclined against the seat and barely registered the unfamiliar landscape flashing by. Her traitorous mind refused to yield its captive memories, swelling instead with seductive images of life as Mrs. Wade Garrett. She had extracted Wade's promise of silence on the subject of matrimony, not because the prospect was distasteful but because of its disturbing attractiveness.

Twenty minutes out of Libby, Wade turned off the highway, which paralleled a river road signs identified as the Kootenai, swollen now with melting snow, onto a blacktop road that cut straight through a broad, green valley nestled between two majestic mountain ranges.

"We call this God's country," he said. "Bet you've never seen this part of Montana before."

She laughed with bittersweet humor. "That's a safe bet. Even if I had, I wouldn't remember."

On the narrow, two-lane road, they traveled past broad pastures where cattle grazed, and sped through intermittent stands of cedars and pines. A cloudless sky of vivid blue arched above the endless miles.

She rolled down her window and inhaled the fragrance of warm grasses and invigorating pine. "It's good to breathe fresh air instead of the smell of antiseptic."

"You're an outdoor girl. Maybe," he said with rough gentleness as he slowed the truck, "living on the ranch will jar your memories loose."

"Maybe."

Wade lifted his hand from the wheel and gave hers an encouraging squeeze. “You mustn’t worry. Everything’s going to be fine.”

His touch cheered her. With hope, she clung to the expectation that her past would soon be restored, and rejected the possibility of her memory loss being permanent. Dr. Sinclair had advised her not to worry about her amnesia, but to take one day at a time.

Wade turned off the blacktop and drove beneath an arched sign of rough-hewn timber with Longhorn Valley Ranch burned into the wood in tall, rustic letters.

His face lit with pride as he pointed west across a wide pasture edged on the far side by a curving line of trees. “The river runs through our property there. The Garretts have owned these grazing lands and forests for over a century.”

She envied his heritage, stretching back a hundred years. He belonged to the land. She could hear the attachment in his voice, see it in his eyes.

She belonged nowhere.

The truck had proceeded only a hundred yards between the ancient cedars that lined the drive when the acrid stench of smoke filled the cab.

She wrinkled her nose. “What’s burning?”

Wade slammed on the brakes, swung out of the truck and lifted his face to the wind. Blowing out of the east, the breeze reeked of burning wood.

“There.” He indicated smoke rising from a stand of mature trees.

“A forest fire. On your land?”

He nodded and his mouth hardened into a grim line. “My best timber, ready for harvest.”

He leaped back into the truck and, with a grinding of gears, floored the accelerator. She braced against the door as the truck bounced along the miles of dirt track beneath the trees. Within a few minutes, the road ended in a circular drive in front of a large house, and the pickup screeched to a halt.

Two sprawling stories made of weathered logs, with a wide porch shaded by rambler roses heavy with crimson blooms, the century-old house sat between two gigantic ponderosa pines. Although Wade had said she’d never visited his ranch before, she experienced an illogical sensation of coming home.

Her rush of pleasure at the sight of the stalwart but gracious house was interrupted by the shout of a tiny woman, white haired and frail, who waited on the front porch, her hands wrapped in her apron. “Wade Garrett, you came up that drive like a bat outta hell. Ain’t no sense in getting yourself killed over a little fire.”

Wade wrenched open the door and jumped from the truck. “A little fire! It’s dry season, Ursula, and the wind’s blowing! The whole mountain could go up in flames.”

“No need to panic.” Ursula appeared unruffled by Wade’s outburst. “The Forest Service and volunteers already have everything under control. I’m fixing to feed ’em supper soon as they finish mopping up.”

Rachel climbed down from the cab. “If you’re expecting a crowd, may I help?”

She’d taken a chance, asking. She didn’t remember if she could cook, but memories weren’t required to wash dishes.

Ursula’s smile subtracted years from her weathered face, and she extended a gnarled hand. “You must be Rachel. Thanks for offering.”

The old woman’s demeanor conveyed not only welcome but acceptance, and as Rachel shook her hand, she experienced again an impression of homecoming.

Wade pivoted and headed back to his truck. “I’d better see if they need help.”

“You got more important work—” Ursula jerked her thumb toward the house “—upstairs.”

Wade turned. “Jordan? Is he hurt?”

Rachel registered a shock of empathy at the fear and concern on Wade’s face.

“No,” Ursula said, “but he’s in his room, crying his eyes out, afraid you’ll tan his hide good this time.”

“You know I’ve never laid a hand on...” He glanced toward the smoking pines. “Jordan started the fire?”

Feeling like an intruder, Rachel retreated into the shade of the porch, but she couldn’t avoid the argument between Wade and his housekeeper.

“Don’t be too hard on the boy,” Ursula said. “He was just trying to please you.”

“By burning down my best timber? I’ll—”

“Wade Garrett!” Ursula drilled him with a scowl. “For the past twenty years, you’ve been like a son to me, but if you don’t start giving that boy what he needs, I swear, I’ll disown you.”

Wade yanked off his hat, slapped it against his thigh and pointed at Rachel. “I’ve brought him what he needs. A mother.”

Rachel flinched as the full impact of mail-order bride status hit her. Wade had treated her with no more respect than some fourth-class package.

Ursula stepped toward Wade and shook her finger at him. “Sometimes I think you couldn’t pour water out of a boot with instructions on the heel—”

“Tell Jordan I’ll talk to him at supper.” Wade crushed his hat back on and strode to the truck. With a ferocious grinding of gears, he peeled off in a flurry of dust.

Ursula climbed the porch steps as if her arthritis pained her, and approached Rachel. “Thank God, you’re here, girl. Don’t mind Wade’s rough ways. He’s all heart underneath his bluster. But both Wade and Jordan, they need you more than you could ever imagine.”

Rachel watched the haze of dust that marked Wade’s progress toward the fire. She didn’t doubt his love for Jordan. In the surprising outburst from the man who had impressed her with his even-tempered nature, she had recognized his frustration over Jordan’s mischief.

Most telling of all, Wade obviously believed all his boy needed to cure his troubles was a mother.

Rachel wasn’t so sure. After all, she wasn’t the boy’s mother, but a total stranger. Not the woman his father loved, only someone who had responded to a personal ad. And any skills or experience she might once have used to benefit a troubled boy lay buried deep in her damaged psyche.

With a sinking sensation that she’d stumbled into more than she could handle, Rachel followed Ursula into the house.

Chapter Four

Rachel accompanied Ursula through the broad central hall of the house. Doors to adjoining rooms opened on either side, and a wide staircase rose to the second floor, but she paid little attention to her surroundings, beyond the walls' chinked-log construction, polished hardwood floors, spaciousness created by high ceilings, and the tantalizing aroma of cinnamon in the air.

Ursula stepped through a door at the end of the hall and preceded Rachel into a bright, oversize kitchen. Cheery yellow-checked curtains flanked the ample windows, and a monstrous, black wood-burning stove with logs stacked beside it dominated one end of the room.

The logs reminded Rachel of Wade's timber. "The forest fire—did it do much damage?"

From a hook behind the door, Ursula removed a gingham apron, a twin to the one she wore, and handed it to Rachel. Her pleasant features darkened. "Enough to take a bite out of Wade's timber profits this year."

"I'm sorry."

Rachel recalled the agony on Wade's face when he realized the blaze was on his land. After the kindness he had shown her, losing his timber didn't seem fair.

The housekeeper gave her a peeler and indicated a small mountain of potatoes on the well-scrubbed wooden table. "Wade planned to use the money from that timber to buy more land this year."

"Can't he use the income from his cattle?" As Rachel hefted a potato and fumbled with the unfamiliar feel of the peeler, the rudeness of her question struck her. "Sorry, it's really none of my—"

"Course it's your business. You're going to be his partner, aren't you?"

"Maybe." She glanced at her hands to conceal her blushing and avoid the housekeeper's probing look.

"Cattle business ain't what it used to be," Ursula grumbled as she filled a pot the size of a washtub with water and set it on the massive stove, "but Wade's better at raising beef than anyone else in this part of the state."

If Rachel entertained the slightest inclination toward accepting Wade's strange proposal, she'd need all the information she could gather. Encouraged by Ursula's openness, she posed another question. "Doesn't it take a lot of money to operate a huge ranch like this?"

Ursula picked up a paring knife and attacked the skin of a potato. "Wade's a good manager. When cattle prices are up, he sets something aside for leaner years. His timber's always been icing on the cake. Investing the money from those sales has made him the wealthiest man in the valley."

Ursula had already peeled two potatoes to Rachel's one, assaulting the spuds as if they were enemies. Rachel marveled at the swiftness of the weathered hands, misshapen by arthritis. If Wade expected her to replace this paragon of domesticity, she had a lot to learn.

"This year's timber's gone," Ursula said, "but because of Wade's investments, he won't ever have to break the promise he made his daddy."

"What promise was that?" Rachel wiped the finger she'd nicked with the peeler on her apron.

"Never to sell off part of Longhorn Valley Ranch. A real estate agent from Great Falls has been hovering around here like a buzzard, offering to buy the land along the river for an outrageous price."

"If the ranch's profits are variable, why would someone else offer outrageous money for just a strip of it?"

"The Realtor wants to subdivide it into 'estates' for all them wealthy folks moving from California to escape crime." Ursula spoke as if the words left a bad taste in her mouth.

Rachel shrugged. "If the land's standing empty, why doesn't Wade sell and invest the profit?"

"You got a lot to learn about Wade Garrett, girl. He never breaks a promise." Ursula laughed with sardonic humor. "You got a lot to learn about working a ranch, too. If he sold that land, he'd lose his water rights."

Rachel glanced at the faucets on the sink. "But you have water."

"Without the river, Wade couldn't water his cattle or the tree seedlings he'll be planting soon. So without the river frontage, he might as well sell the whole kit and caboodle."

"Is Dad gonna sell the ranch?" a high, thin voice behind Ursula asked. "It's my fault, isn't it?"

Ursula swiveled in her chair, allowing Rachel a view of a small boy standing in the doorway, his eyes red and swollen and his sooty cheeks tracked with tears. Even if she hadn't known who he was, she would have recognized Jordan as a startling miniature of his father, less muscular and self-assured, but with the same heart-stopping good looks that would one day drive women wild.

For now, he was a very frightened and unhappy little boy. Despite her act of bravado over her lost memory, Rachel knew exactly how he felt.

"Come in and meet Rachel," Ursula said.

The boy hunched his thin shoulder to wipe his face on the sleeve of his T-shirt, and approached Rachel as if he had lead in his sneakers. The loneliness in his big brown eyes stabbed at her heart and mirrored her own.

"Hello, Jordan. Your daddy's told me lots about you."

"He did?" His gamin face brightened at the mention of Wade.

"You bet," Rachel said. "From what I can tell, you're the most important person in your daddy's whole world."

A transforming smile filled with the innocence and hope of childhood swept across his face before the sadness returned. "Not anymore. Not after today."

"Everybody makes mistakes, Jordan. Even if your father is angry at what you've done, he still loves you." Rachel reached out and grasped his shoulders lightly.

For one small instant, the boy looked as if he'd like to throw himself into her arms. Then his expression hardened, and he jerked from her grasp. "He just wants me to stay out of trouble and out of his way."

Across the table, Ursula raised her eyebrows and flashed Rachel a knowing look that said, See what you're in for?

Rachel understood loneliness and fear. She'd had her fill of both the last two weeks. But she was an adult and, even without memories, more equipped to deal with life than this small boy, trying so hard to be brave. Her heart ached for him.

He headed toward the door, then turned back with a suspicious glare. "Are you going to live here?"

"I don't know." She told the truth, not only because he deserved it, but because he'd know if she lied. "I haven't decided yet."

"Guess you don't want to be around a kid who causes so much trouble." His narrowed eyes and the aggressive jut of his chin dared her to disagree.

She rose to the bait with honesty. "If I do stay, you'll be the main reason."

"Me?" Astonishment replaced his pugnacious look.

"You." The smile of warmth and approval she gave him originated deep inside. "I think I'm going to like you very much."

Grinning as if she'd given him a priceless gift, Jordan turned and rushed out the door.

A FEW HOURS LATER, with Band-Aids plastered on her cuts from the potato peeler, Rachel crossed the grassy back lawn and followed a dirt track toward the barn. The Forest Service firefighters and volunteers had already gathered at makeshift picnic tables on the side lawn and helped themselves to Ursula's grilled steaks, mashed potatoes and fresh-picked salad. When she and Ursula had served the apple pies and Wade still hadn't appeared, Rachel had gone in search of him.

She found him at a large washtub beside the barn, stripped to the waist.

He dunked his head into the water just as she approached, and the broad, smooth muscles of his back glistened golden in the last rays of the sun as it dropped behind the mountains. He pulled

his head from the water and whipped his streaming hair back from his face, radiating strength and virility like the sun projects light.

At the sight of him, she wondered anew why every unattached female in the county wasn't set on marrying him. He'd said he wouldn't marry a local girl because of Maggie's memory, but had refused to elaborate. His unspoken anger at the mention of Maggie's name suggested his reluctance had nothing to do with honoring Maggie's memory. But what else it could be was a mystery. If Wade wouldn't tell her, maybe Ursula would.

Still, it was a shame some woman couldn't wake up every morning to those seductive brown eyes, closed now as he groped along the bench beside the tub for his towel.

She scurried forward and grabbed the cloth, which had fallen into the dirt. Flicking it clean, she thrust it into his hands. He dried his face before opening his eyes.

"Thanks." He towed his hair, seeming unsurprised to find her there.

She averted her eyes from his bare chest and muscled arms and gazed instead over the adjacent field of tall grass that stretched toward the river. But looking away didn't prevent the scent of spicy soap and a faint whiff of wood smoke from reminding her of his presence.

His deal with her was only business, she reminded her mutinous senses.

"You had supper?" he asked.

"The others are almost finished, but I was waiting for you."

"Why?"

At the surprise in his tone, she wheeled to face him. "I want to talk to you about Jordan."

He shrugged into a clean denim shirt and began fastening the buttons. "What about him?"

She'd spent a half hour with the boy while he picked at his supper and cast anxious glances toward the barn in anticipation of his father's return. "He's scared to death."

Finished with his buttons, Wade turned his back, a small concession to modesty, unzipped his jeans and tucked in his shirt. The intimacy of standing with a man she barely knew as he bathed and dressed in the gathering twilight would have unnerved her more if she hadn't been so concerned for the boy.

He zipped his jeans and swiveled to face her. "Jordan doesn't have anything to be scared of."

She wanted to shake Wade as, without a clue to his son's torment, he calmly rolled up his sleeves. "He's scared to death of you."

He flinched as if she'd struck him. "Me? That's ridiculous."

"Is it?" She had learned a lot from the boy in her short interval with him. "When did you last spend any time with him?"

"I can't be everywhere. I've been at the hospital with you for almost two weeks."

Lucky for him, a trace of guilt filtered through the defensiveness in his voice, or her anger would have exploded. "And before that?"

He stopped and thought. "Week before last, when final report cards came out. I set him straight about his C in language arts."

"What were his other grades?"

He shrugged. "A's and B's."

Common sense told her to back off from the man who was offering her the hospitality of his home, but the terror she'd witnessed in Jordan's face prodded her on. "What did you say about his good grades?"

He combed his damp hair with his fingers. "What was there to say? They were fine."

When he set off toward the house, she took three strides to his one to keep pace. "Wade Garrett, if you want me to honor the promise I made before my accident, you'd better stop right now and hear me out."

"We're not married yet, Rachel girl." He stopped and faced her. A muscle twitched at the corner of his mouth in an insinuation of a grin. "It's a little early for you to start bossing me around."

“Bossing...?” She held her breath and counted silently to ten while he stared with a provocative half smile on his too-darned-handsome face. She exhaled, calmer, and broached the reason for her confrontation. “Jordan’s terrified you’ll punish him for starting the fire.”

A rock-hard grimness replaced the half smile. “He should be punished.”

Her stomach churned with frustration. “Punished for trying to get his daddy’s attention by doing something you’d be proud of?”

The harsh line of his mouth remained taut. “I don’t recall anybody handing out prizes to firebugs. The boy’s got to learn the difference between right and wrong.”

“He knows the difference. What Jordan needs to learn is that his father loves him.” If Wade hadn’t been so huge, with a build like a boulder, she’d have jostled him till his teeth rattled. “He didn’t set that fire on purpose. You should know him better than that.”

Wade lifted one dark eyebrow in question, but his mouth remained stern.

Undeterred, Rachel plowed ahead. “From the short time I’ve been around him, I can tell Jordan’s not a troublemaker.”

“He could’ve fooled me.” Wade lowered his face to within inches of hers and heaved a frustrated sigh. “I could make a list as long as my arm of the trouble that kid’s been in, just in the last month.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and glared. “And it never occurred to you to wonder why?”

“Because he doesn’t have a mother to keep him in line, that’s why. That’s where you come in.” His slow grin sent shivers of delight coursing down her back.

But she refused to be distracted. “Jordan wants you to notice him.”

Wade regarded her with a look half quizzical, half amused. “What are you, a psychologist?”

She gritted her teeth. “It doesn’t take a psychologist, or a rocket scientist, to see Jordan needs your attention. Today he was trying, all by himself, to fulfill the requirements for a camping award.”

“What?” At least Wade had the grace to look bewildered.

“You didn’t know he was working on the project?”

He flung his arms wide and rolled his eyes. “That’s Ursula’s job.”

Her temper rising, Rachel scowled. “Your attitude explains why the poor kid’s been struggling on his own to master camping skills.”

“A camping award isn’t worth burning down my timber,” Wade said, but he sounded less sure of himself than before.

“He didn’t intend to burn your timber! He was teaching himself to start a fire without matches.”

Wade massaged the back of his neck as if he had a pain. “Judging from ten acres of ashes, I’d say he’s mastered the technique.”

Rachel rammed her fists on her hips and lifted her chin to meet Wade’s mellow gaze. “The wind picked up and blew sparks into dry grass. Jordan tried to stomp it out. When that didn’t work, he attempted to beat it out with his shirt. You’re lucky your son wasn’t burned alive trying to save your precious timber.”

Wade shook his head in disbelief. “All over a camping award?”

“Didn’t you hear what I just said? Your son could have been burned to a crisp, a part of those ashes you’re complaining about.”

For a moment, when his assured expression slipped and doubt glinted in his eyes, she thought she’d made her point.

Then he broke into a grin. “Now that you’re here, you can keep him safe.”

“Aargh!”

Rachel wheeled and hurried toward the house, leaving him alone in the driveway. She shouldn’t have bothered explaining. Despite the compassion Wade had shown her after the train wreck, he was as ignorant as a mule where Jordan was concerned.

Recalling the boy’s tear-streaked face, Rachel whirled and returned to Wade.

“Why can’t you get it through your thick head it’s his father’s approval, not some award, that’s important to Jordan?” She poked her finger against the hard muscles of his chest. “The poor kid believes he has to win a medal, just so his own father will love him.”

She snatched her finger away and clenched her trembling hands at her side, astonished by the strong maternal urge that had overwhelmed her, infusing her with an unfamiliar courage. Either some repressed memory had activated her response, or the skinny little kid had worked some kind of spell on her.

A glance at Wade made her rethink her last assumption. His eyes, alight with growing awareness, gleamed in the twilight like polished stones. She squirmed beneath his rapt gaze.

Maybe it wasn’t Jordan who had cast a spell.

Horrified at her boldness, she raced across the dew-wet grass toward the house, fleeing Wade’s probing scrutiny and the corresponding quiver in her heart.

WADE WATCHED HER GO. He’d wanted a mother for Jordan, so why wasn’t he delighted when Rachel acted like one?

Because she’s pointing out your faults.

He ignored the twinge of conscience. He’d done his best with Jordan, raising the boy as his own dad had raised him, with an iron hand, strict rules and swift and speedy punishment for misbehavior. And he, Wade, had turned out all right, hadn’t he? True, he’d always had more fear than fondness for his father, but the ornery old cuss had taught him right from wrong and how to run a ranch. Passing on those values was more important than love, wasn’t it?

Besides, Wade had to instill in Jordan a strong moral fiber, so he wouldn’t grow up to be like his mother.

The memory of Rachel’s green eyes reproached him, and he attempted to relieve his guilty conscience with more excuses, but he was too bone-tired to argue, even with himself. He’d spent hours helping the firefighters hose down hot spots. All he wanted now was a hot meal and a good night’s sleep.

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