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The Lawman's Christmas Wish

Linda Goodnight


ALASKAN *Bride* RUSH



Linda Goodnight

The Lawman's Christmas Wish

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Widow Amy James can't get through grocery shopping in Treasure Creek, Alaska, without a marriage proposal. And she's hardly flattered. Most of her "suitors" are after the treasure her great-grandfather had buried on her property. But only one man promised her late husband he'd take care of her and the boys: police chief Reed Truscott. True, Reed is handsome and honest and makes her feel safe. But his honorable marriage proposal is about obligation—not love. Unless he can convince her that his Christmas wish is to join her family forever.

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**“Sit still for two minutes, relax
and drink that cider,” Reed said.**

“Or what? You gonna arrest me?” Before Ben’s death, she and Reed had been good friends. The ill-begotten marriage proposal had raised a hedge between them and Amy missed the silly give-and-take they’d once shared.

At her cheekiness, Reed grinned. Breath clogged in Amy’s chest. He scowled and grumbled at her so much, she’d forgotten about his killer grin.

“Could be.”

“What’s the charge?” she asked.

“Resisting an officer. Disturbing the peace.”

“Whose peace am I disturbing?”

His eyes narrowed into slits, but the dark brown irises twinkled. “Mine.”

LINDA GOODNIGHT

Winner of a RITA[®] Award for excellence in inspirational fiction, Linda Goodnight has also won a Booksellers' Best, ACFW Book of the Year and a Reviewers' Choice Award from RT Book Reviews. Linda has appeared on the Christian bestseller list and her romance novels have been translated into more than a dozen languages. Active in orphan ministry, this former nurse and teacher enjoys writing fiction that carries a message of hope and light in a sometimes dark world. She and her husband, Gene, live in Oklahoma. Readers can write to her at linda@lindagoodnight.com, or c/o Steeple Hill Books, 233 Broadway, Suite 1001, New York, NY 10279.

The Lawman's Christmas Wish

Linda Goodnight



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And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily,
as to the Lord, and not unto men.
—Colossians 3:23
For Maria Masha with love

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Chapter One

"You might as well give up and marry me, Miss Amy."

Amy James, in the Treasure Creek General Store shopping for milk and bread—a never-ending need with her two sons—looked at the speaker, Myron Scroggins, without a bit of surprise. Lately, no matter where she went someone proposed marriage. The situation had become beyond ridiculous.

"Oh, Myron, you're just after my money," she said, trying to make light of the silly offer. Everyone in the tiny town of Treasure Creek, Alaska, knew her tour business was struggling. During the last few months, business had improved, but it would be another year before she was back on solid footing.

"Now, Miss Amy, you know better."

She did. Myron was one of the good guys. The burly man was also forty years her senior, lived far outside town and was seriously set in his ways. His scraggly beard probably housed a family of mice. He rarely came to town, and then only to collect supplies and hightail it back to his ramshackle cabin.

Carl Branch, a sixtysomething farmer in brown duck coveralls and a feed-store ball cap, came around from behind a stack of horse feed and protested. "Hey, I asked her first!"

Myron's weathered face fell. He looked from Carl to Amy and back. "You did?"

Amy laughed. She couldn't help herself. In an Alaskan town with few women and plenty of men, she'd become a valuable commodity. Some wanted her tour business, and others simply wanted to take care of the young widow whose family had founded this town. This was the case with both Myron and Carl, two older men she'd known since she was born.

"Myron. Carl. Please. I'm honored by your kindness. Truly, I am, but the boys and I are getting along great. Don't worry about us."

Myron's loose jowls jiggled insistently. "A woman needs a man to look after her."

That notion didn't set too well with Amy's independent spirit, but she didn't take offense.

"Leave Amy alone." A scowling Harry Peterson, owner-operator of Treasure Creek's General Store, slapped a pound of butter on the counter in front of Carl. The pot-bellied proprietor had been particularly grumpy lately. "Just because all those fancy women came flooding in here to find a man, doesn't mean every woman in town is interested in marrying you slobs."

"Ah, Harry," Carl said. "You're just mad 'cause Joleen's been flirting with Neville Weeks and he's flirting back."

Harry made a harrumphing noise and rattled a paper bag, the furrows in his brow deepening by the second. Amy had a feeling the old farmer had hit too close to home. Joleen Jones was a fluffy, overblown blonde who tried too hard, but she was as good as gold. She'd been hot after Harry since her arrival from Tennessee, but after so many rebuffs, the Southern belle had apparently given up. Amy felt sorry for the woman, though she had to wonder what Joleen saw in Harry in the first place.

"You gotta marry somebody, Miss Amy," Myron said as he scratched his wooly, gray beard. "Might as well be me. This town would dry up and die without you, and we want to help you out, now that Ben is gone."

The too familiar pang of loss sliced through the open wound Amy called a heart. Her husband, Ben, had died nearly a year ago, and though the agonizing grief had diminished, she didn't want to marry anyone.

Ben's last letter flashed through her head, but she instantly blocked it. He'd loved her and wanted the best for her, and Amy was not about to settle for less than a God kind of marriage such as they'd had. No matter what his letter had asked her to do.

She felt a responsibility to this historic little town, founded during the Yukon Gold Rush by her great-great-grandfather, Mack Tanner. She would fight with her last breath to keep it afloat, but that did not require marriage.

"Tell you what, Myron. I won't marry you, but I'll bake a batch of those cinnamon rolls you like. You, too, Carl."

Both men perked up.

Myron spoke for both of them when he said, "That's a better deal than getting hitched any day."

Amy agreed. With a smile and a wave, she gathered her bag of groceries and exited the store, nearly bumping into Reed Truscott, the local chief of police.

"Oops, excuse me," she said, sidestepping the tall, lean lawman.

He stepped in front of her, blocking the way. "How you doing, Amy?"

"Good. Yourself?"

He shifted in his boots, glanced across the quiet street and cleared his throat. The police chief obviously had something on his mind.

"Look, Amy, we need to talk. About this situation between us—"

She held up a hand, stop sign style. There was no "situation," and if he asked her to marry him again—check that—if he demanded she marry him, she would stomp his toe. Of all the men who'd offered proposals, this was the one that bothered her most.

"Don't even think it, Reed. And do not say it. Whatever it is."

Whirling, she stalked off down the sidewalk. As she went, she heard him grumble, "Frustrating woman."

Well, it was frustrating to her, too. After Reed's first, arrogant, pushy proposal on the night of Ben's death, of all the inappropriate times, Amy had avoided any hint of personal conversation. She liked Reed Truscott, but she didn't pretend to understand his tight-lipped, overly macho attitude.

After picking up her two boys from the church preschool, Amy headed home, listening to their sweet chatter. As she pulled into the drive of her aging two-story clapboard and killed the SUV motor, an odd feeling came over her. She frowned at the blue house and then gazed around the yard, shrouded now in the hazy, dying light. Everything seemed all right. The red front door she'd painted herself beckoned cheerfully from its white, arched frame. Evergreens frosted with snow hugged the concrete steps swept clean this morning. And yet, her skin crawled in the oddest manner. Something didn't feel right, and after having a gun held to her head a few weeks ago, she'd learned to listen to that little voice inside. God was trying to tell her something.

Slowly, she exited the SUV and glanced around before getting Dexter and Sammy out of their car seats. She'd pull into the detached garage later. First, she had to check things out.

Four-year-old Dexter hopped down from the vehicle and bounded for the back door.

"Dexter, wait. Let Mama go first."

The dark-haired boy stopped and looked back at her, clearly puzzled by his mother's tone. Hoisting three-year-old Sammy and his ever-present stuffed dog onto one hip, she grabbed the groceries and her purse, balancing everything as she crossed the yard to enter through the back way, directly into the kitchen.

Stepping upon the single-stepped porch, her heart bumped. The back door stood ajar.

Had she failed to close it well this morning? The house was old and out of square. Some of the doors, including the back one, needed to be replaced and didn't fit properly—one more project that had ceased with Ben's death.

Easing Sammy to the ground, she scanned the yard and house again but saw nothing. Last night's snow revealed no footprints. Everything appeared normal except the open door.

Calling herself overcautious, she pushed the door wider and waited. After hearing or seeing nothing, she led the way into the kitchen.

"Oh, no!" The gasp tore from her throat.

Her house looked like a war had broken out and she'd been defeated.

Cabinet contents littered the floor. Jumbled drawers hung open like slack-jawed dogs. And the open refrigerator hummed incessantly, milk and juice spilling out in dripping puddles. Amy's hands fisted at her sides. Whoever did this had been searching for something. And she knew exactly what.

"Mom?" Dexter tugged on her jeans. Dark gray eyes, so like his father's, were as round as Frisbees. Above the tiny cleft in his chin, his bottom lip quivered. "Someone broke our stuff."

"It's okay, baby." Though of course, it was not okay. "Sammy, get away from that shattered glass."

The barely three-year-old, too small to comprehend the disaster, had dragged his stuffed pal, Puppy, straight into the broken, jumbled, sticky mess. She took his hand and tugged him back to her side. "Stay here by Mommy."

Grappling in her jeans pocket for the cell phone, Amy punched in a number. Her fingers shook. On the second brrr, a strong, male voice barked, "Police department. What is your emergency?"

"Reed?"

"Amy?"

Regardless of his inopportune marriage proposal, she trusted Reed Truscott with her life. "What's wrong?"

She drew a shaky breath, struggling to keep the fear out of her voice. "Someone broke into my house."

Reed hissed. She could practically see his lips drawn back and the tight expression on his face. "Are you okay?"

"We just walked in. This very minute." In spite of her determination to stay calm in front of the boys, Amy's voice began to shake along with her knees. "Everything's a wreck."

In the background, over the phone, she heard a drawer open and keys rattle. Chief Truscott was already moving. "Where are you?"

"In the kitchen." The flip phone quivered against her ear.

"Whoever did this—"

Reed's sharp tone interrupted. "Have you been in any of the other rooms?"

Goose bumps rose on her arms. Her house was a two-story. "No."

She glanced down the hall leading from the kitchen to the side office. The normally comfortable space seemed ominously long and dark. Her gaze went to the small alcove off the dining room that housed the staircase to the second floor. Was that a squeak overhead?

Lord Jesus, protect us. Protect my boys.

Cradling the phone between her chin and shoulder, she grasped Dexter and Sammy by the shoulders.

"Take the boys and get out." Reed's usually calm tone tensed. "Do it now, Amy. Get out of the house."

He didn't have to tell her twice. Someone could still be inside.

"Amy? Do you hear me?"

"I'm going." If her knees would hold her up.

"I'll be there in five." The security of Reed's voice was lost as the line went dead.

Hurrying now, aware that her children could be in danger, Amy shuffled her sons out into the cold gray of a late November Alaska.

"Get in the car."

Ever alert to her surroundings, she opened the back door to the red SUV, hoisted Sammy and Dexter inside and quickly slammed the door. Car seats could wait.

More jittery than she wanted to be, she bolted around to the driver's side and hopped in. Her fingers trembled as she jabbed the key into the ignition, turned the switch and popped the locks. She leaned her head back against the seat and sighed but didn't close her eyes.

If someone was still in the house, she needed to know. If not for the boys, she would have searched the rooms herself and beamed the rats who'd invaded her safe and happy home.

But she had the boys to think about, and they came first—always.

As if he'd read her mind, Dexter leaned through the console. A tear trickled down his cheek. "I want Daddy."

Sammy heard the tremor in his big brother's voice. His small head poked through the space, too. Tears streamed down his round, baby face. "I want Daddy, too. Where's Daddy?"

Both began to cry.

The words were a spear through Amy's heart. She wanted Ben, too. Even after nearly a year, she still expected him to walk in the door any moment, eyes dancing, face rosy from the outdoor work he loved. But Ben, her love, her best friend, her partner in Alaska's Treasures tour company, would never be here again to protect and comfort his sons. Or her.

The now-familiar heaviness pressed down on her chest. Life was not fair sometimes. She was strongly tempted to cry with her sons, but after Ben's death on the Wild Rapids Tour, she'd cried the Yukon River full of tears. Being strong for her boys and her floundering town were the things that mattered now. She had a job to do, people depending on her, and she would not fail them. Ben would have expected no less.

"Don't cry, Dex." She stroked her eldest's dark hair, so different from her own. "Come on. Crawl up here beside Mama while we wait for Chief Reed."

Dexter sniffed. "Is he coming? I mean, right now?"

"Any minute, baby."

Both her sons were more their father than her, which was fine with Amy, although looking into their faces was like looking at miniature versions of Ben. Dexter even bore Ben's chin cleft. The reminder was both pain and pleasure. She'd loved Ben James with everything in her. And he'd loved her the same way.

They'd been building a good life here in Treasure Creek, Alaska, where they had both grown up. The Alaska's Treasures tour company had been their dream, a dream that had cost Ben his life. But she never blamed the business or the lifestyle. Danger, like beauty, was part of life and work in rugged Alaska.

Without the revenue from the tour company and the business it generated for the hotels, eateries and other enterprises, the little town of Treasure Creek could become another forgotten ghost town.

A siren ripped the cold, crisp air, and Amy found the sound as sweet as a Christmas carol. After another quick glance at the house, she turned to watch the rotating lights of Reed's four-wheel drive. His ever-present dog, Cy, sat in the passenger seat, mouth open in a smile.

Dexter stopped crying and moved to a side window. Sammy followed his big brother, dragging the stuffed puppy along at his side. Cy was a particular favorite of her two sons. The one-eyed malamute was usually more personable than his master.

Some of the tension left Amy's shoulders. Reed was here.

The tough, sinewy chief of police had been Ben's best friend. Regardless of that awkward, humiliating marriage proposal, Reed was a loyal friend and a great cop. Whoever had broken into her house had just made a fearsome enemy.

Reed Truscott slammed the vehicle into Park and bolted out the door before the truck stopped rocking. In more than a dozen years on the job, he'd never seen this much trouble in Treasure Creek.

"Mack Tanner and his treasure," he grumbled. People had been traipsing up on Chilkoot Trail for years, searching for the treasure Amy's great-great-grandfather had buried there during the Gold Rush of 1889. Why did the thing have to be found in his lifetime? And why did Amy have to be in the line of fire?

It was that crazy magazine interview Amy had done. That's what started all the trouble.

His boots crunched on last night's new snow as he stalked toward Amy's Jeep. Part of him expected Miss Iron Woman to still be inside the house. When he told her to get out, he'd intended for her to leave, to get completely away from the crime scene and any hint of danger. But Amy did things her way, so he was relieved to spot her and her little ones safely inside the red vehicle.

How was he supposed to take care of Ben's family when Amy was so uncooperative?

With her usual, vibrant energy, she hopped out of the car and came to meet him.

An invisible fist clutched his insides. Looking at Amy seemed to do that to him lately.

Stress, he supposed. Or responsibility. The problem had started after Ben insisted Reed take care of Amy and the boys if anything should happen to him. Reed had tried to laugh off the request, but when Ben pressed, he'd agreed. It was almost as if Ben knew he wouldn't be around to care for his loved ones. And Reed Truscott was a man of his word. He was honor-bound to look after Amy James. To his way of thinking, that honor was exactly why she should marry him.

But he probably shouldn't mention that to Amy today. She looked in no mood for another marriage proposal. He'd bungled the first time badly enough, though he was still trying to figure out where he went wrong.

Hands shoved into the pockets of her open parka, Amy strode toward him in jeans and a yellow-green sweater that turned her hair to copper fire. The cold, fading sunlight caught in the shoulder-length waves and shot sparks in every direction. She had glorious hair, the kind a man wanted to touch.

Reed's gut clenched again. He didn't like thinking of Ben's wife as pretty, but she was. Amy had been in his head and heart for a long time, first as a friend, but after Ben's death—well, things changed. And the feelings rolling around inside him were downright uncomfortable.

"You and the boys okay?" He barked the question, more worried about the town's main citizen than he wanted to show.

Amy nodded, pretending calm, but he'd heard the quiver in her voice on the phone. He was still angry about that. Any scuzzball who upset Amy was going to answer to him.

"Whoever broke in wasn't after us."

"This isn't the first time, Amy. Somebody will do anything to get their hands on that treasure of yours."

"I know." Her reply was quiet and reflective as she gazed off toward the mountains to the west. He knew she was remembering the day they'd finally found Mack Tanner's buried treasure chest. A pair of gun-toting thieves had found it at the same time.

He'd nearly had a heart attack when one of the thugs shoved a pistol against Amy's temple. If not for Tucker Lawson's help Amy could have been killed. That moment haunted his dreams.

Since this frenzy over buried treasure began he'd not had a moment of peace. Even though the heavy metal box was locked up in the safe in his office only he and Amy had that information.

The town's excitement wasn't helping, either. "Last rumor I heard down at the Lizbet's Diner estimates the contents of that box at over a million dollars."

Amy's eyes widened. "What? Reed, that's crazy. We don't even know what's in the box yet."

"Tell me about it. The price goes up every day." Grimly, he perched a hand on the butt of his service pistol. Until lately, he'd never worn it. Didn't need to. His adopted town was a peace-loving place, filled with good people. Mostly. "Men have killed for a lot less."

Amy had this crazy idea to wait until Christmas Eve, still four weeks away, to open the chest and present the treasure to the town. He understood in part because the town coffers were empty, and they needed money badly. The schools were in danger of consolidation, the library in danger of closing. Even his office budget was tighter than tree bark.

"You should open the treasure and be done with it," he said.

Amy took exception. "No! Treasure Creek has faced such difficult times these last couple of years. Thinking about this treasure and speculating about the good it will do for the town has lifted everyone's spirits. I will not allow low-life scums to rob us of the best Christmas possible."

Reed suppressed a sigh. He knew she'd say that. This was Amy, as tenacious as Alaskan winter and with a heart as big as the sun. All of Treasure Creek leaned on her, and she let them, encouraged them. Even though she was barely into her thirties, she carried a whole town on her small shoulders.

A man had to admire a woman like that.

But for the chief of police, Christmas couldn't come soon enough. Once the treasure chest was opened, maybe life would settle down and Amy would be safe again. Really safe.

He started up the drive. "I better have a look inside."

"I'll go with you."

"You and the kids stay out here."

"No way. If anyone was inside, they're probably long gone, but they also might be lurking in the bushes. I'll take my chances in the house with you."

Reed thought Amy might have just paid him a compliment. Though he'd rather she was somewhere safer, her logic made sense. An intruder could just as easily be outside as in. And Reed had the advantage of a loaded pistol.

They fell in step. As they passed Amy's vehicle, her two little boys tumbled out and followed.

"Chief Reed, someone broke our stuff."

Reed gazed down at the knee-high child. Dexter's little head was tilted back, looking up with big gray eyes that trusted the police to do something. Police business Reed could handle, but kids were a puzzle. "Don't be scared."

It was a lame thing to say, but Dexter seemed okay with it. Like his mother, the child bowed his head, shoved his hands in his coat pockets and traipsed across the yard, ready to face whatever was inside the house. Three-year-old Sammy, though, clung to his mother's hand and stayed as close to her as possible. Reed couldn't help feeling sorry for the little guy.

They reached the back door and Reed thrust out an arm to stop them from entering. "Lock's jimmied. Was the door open when you arrived?"

Amy nodded. "Yes."

Incredulous, he stared down into eyes bluer than arctic waters. His gut did that weird clutching thing again. "And you went inside anyway?"

"This is Treasure Creek. I never used to lock my doors at all. You know how out of square this old house is. I thought maybe I'd forgotten to shut the door hard enough this morning before I went to the office."

A reasonable explanation, but he still didn't like the idea that she'd gone inside. If something happened to her—well, he felt guilty enough about the way Ben died without letting him down again.

"Let me go in first. You and the boys stay close until I check all the rooms."

Amy scooped Sammy onto her hip and held Dexter's hand, doing as Reed asked without comment. The break-in had shaken her more than she wanted to admit.

It had shaken him, too.

Together they made the rounds downstairs. Amy remained tight-lipped, but her pallor told how upset she was. They bumped in a doorway and it was all he could do to keep from pulling her close for a moment, to tell her everything would be all right, to erase the lines of worry around her beautiful eyes.

Reed slapped the impulse away. This was Ben's wife. She was his responsibility, not his woman.

"What a mess," he grumbled, mostly to break his troubling train of thought, but furious, too, at whoever had done this.

"Upstairs next. Me first."

Whoever had been here was gone now. His gut instinct told him as much, but he was taking no chances.

As they started up, he reached out and took Sammy into his arms. The kid was barely three, but Amy wasn't as big as a house cat.

"I carry him all the time, Reed."

He just grunted and started climbing, his boots ringing hollow on the wooden steps. Lugging Sammy up the stairs was too much for her, whether she wanted to admit it or not. At the top, he returned the boy to his mother, needing to be alert and prepared in case of a nasty surprise.

"My room is here," she said, pointing to a green-paneled door. "I dread looking in there."

Reed bit down on his back teeth. He dreaded looking in there, too, but for more reasons than the break-in. Something about entering the bedroom that Amy and Ben had shared made him uncomfortable.

But he was a police officer. This was his job.

"Stay put. I'll look."

With the flat of his hand, he eased the door open and glanced inside. Anger bubbled up like a hot fountain. Ben had worked his tail off on this house. Reed knew, because he'd helped him. And now, like the rest of the house, the beige-and-blue bedroom was in shambles. Papers, books, clothes and toiletries were strewn everywhere. A lamp lay on the bed, the bulb broken and the shade crumpled. The room was as cold as the outside.

With a frown, he stepped inside. "Better come in here, Amy."

She did. "Oh, my."

The words were barely a breath, but they were filled with distress. Again, the need to hold and comfort assailed the chief of police.

Jaw tight, he pointed to the window. "Escape route. Your visitors were likely in the house when you arrived."

"I thought I heard something."

Frustration and worry and responsibility warred in his belly. This wasn't the first threat to Amy's safety. She was going to get hurt if he didn't do something and do it fast.

His inner voice demanded that he do the right thing—at least the right thing in his book—no matter how much personal turmoil it caused.

And so he did.

"That's it," he said. "You're moving in with me." He planted one hand on his hip and faced her, ready for the inevitable argument. "Today."

Chapter Two

Hair rose on the back of Amy's neck. Of all the arrogant, overreactive statements! She bit back a sharp retort while trying hard to see Reed's point. Ten seconds later she gave up. His point was ridiculous. Besides, the idea of moving in with Reed, for any reason, made her feel...funny.

"Don't be silly." She spun away and stalked out of the bedroom. Sammy and Dexter followed, little legs sprinting to keep up. They knew from experience that when Mommy moved, she moved fast.

She was already down the wooden staircase and making the turn toward the ransacked kitchen when Reed caught up with her. He grabbed her elbow. Amy stopped, not that she had much choice with fingers of steel and nearly two hundred pounds of muscle latched on to her.

"Come on, Amy, be reasonable. You have to."

Keeping her tone even, she said, "No, Reed. I don't. Now, kindly let go of my arm."

Reed glanced down at the place where he gripped and dropped her arm like a hot potato. He took half a step back, swallowed hard and looked about as comfortable as a grizzly in a tutu. If she wasn't so annoyed, Amy would have felt sorry for him.

"You're not safe here." Reed's words were ground out with all the gentle persuasion of a pencil sharpener. "You need protection."

"I can take care of myself." When the police chief looked as if he would argue, she held up one finger—and discovered the thing was still trembling. She yanked it down to her side.

"The subject is closed. I am not leaving my home."

Especially to move in with Reed. The idea of being in the same house day after day with him was—well—strange. Uncomfortable for some reason—though they'd been friends forever. Maybe that was the point. Reed and Ben had been friends, and Ben's final letter to her niggled at the back of her mind constantly. He'd written the usual things at first—his love for her and the boys, his faith, the business—but then, as if he'd known he would never return, Ben had asked the unthinkable. If anything happened to him, he wanted her to find someone else. And he wanted her to do it before Christmas.

Now Christmas wasn't that far away. Neither was Reed Truscott.

Fact of the matter, he and the boys dogged her footsteps all the way into the kitchen. Reed stalked her like a grizzly—and growled like one, too. Her sons had the deer-in-the-headlights look as their eyes volleyed between her and the police chief. Neither said a word. Dexter, she noticed, edged up against Reed's leg. The police officer dropped a wide hand on her son's small shoulder. Emotion curled in Amy's belly, but was snuffed as quickly as a candle in gale force winds.

"I'm not suggesting anything illicit. My grandmother lives with me," Reed said, still grumbling and insistent. "It's not like we're in love or anything."

Amy fought down a blush. Illicit? In love? An uncomfortable flutter invaded her chest. Reed Truscott had to be the most confusing man on the planet.

To avoid his penetrating gaze, she turned a chair upright. Egg dripped off the seat cushion, the smell ripe. She curled her nose. Cleaning would take forever.

Keeping her voice even and cool, Amy said, "I think the world of your grandmother." Irene Crisp was a tough little sourdough who looked as if a good Chinook wind would blow her away. But looks were deceiving with Granny Crisp as well as with Amy. Reed should know that. "But I can take care of myself and my boys."

"You don't know what you're up against."

It was so like Reed to shoot out orders and expect them to be obeyed. Granted, he was a great cop and often right, though not in this case. "I appreciate your concern, Reed. Really, I do."

But she didn't want to hear another word about moving in with a man who could propose a loveless marriage and not understand why she turned it down.

With the subject closed—at least in her mind—she took Sammy's hand to stop him from going farther into the messy kitchen.

"Why don't you and Dexter go into the living room and watch TV while Mama cleans up?" she said to the upturned face. "Then I'll make some dinner, and everything will be back to normal."

Sammy wasn't buying it. He stuck a thumb in his mouth and shook his head. He hadn't sucked his thumb in a long time. Not since Ben's funeral. Dexter didn't move from his position next to Reed, but his gray eyes remained wide and worried.

Amy's heart pinched. She crouched down to their level. "Boys, we're okay. The bad guys are gone."

Sammy's wet thumb popped from his mouth. "Will they come back?"

Amy pressed her lips together and couldn't keep from looking at Reed. If he said one word—

"Whoever broke in wasn't kidding around, Amy. Look at this place." Reed made a wide arc with one arm, taking in the scattered belongings, opened drawers and spilled foods.

"They will keep trying to find that treasure."

"Thanks a lot, officer," she said with a tinge of sarcasm. To the boys she said, "Tonight we'll make a tent in your room and all of us will sleep together. Just like one of Mama's wilderness tours. You can be the guides and I'll be the cheechako. Okay?"

Sammy nodded at the idea of Mama behaving like a green-horn, but Dexter, wise and old at nearly five, was silent.

"I'm serious, Amy," Reed said. "You can't stay here. You have to let me help."

Help was one thing. Moving into his house was quite another. "No thief is going to run me and my babies out of the only home we've ever known."

She and Ben had spent blood, sweat and tears remodeling this old house that her ancestor, Mack Tanner, had built for his reluctant bride more than a hundred years ago. It was old and crotchety and drafty in the brutal months, but the place had character and was filled with love and wonderful memories.

Reed shifted heavily and it occurred to her, reluctantly, that he was as exhausted by the last few months as she was. Like her, Reed would not back down. His sense of duty was legendary. And it was that sense of duty that bothered Amy. She didn't want to be anyone's "duty."

"What if they come back?" he asked.

Her blood chilled at the thought. She rubbed her palms along the arms of her sweater.

"I'll manage," she said, with more bravado than she felt. She was single-handedly running a business, booking tour guides, dealing with love-hungry women, directing the annual church Christmas pageant and raising two little boys. She might be tired, but she could handle anything. "I'm not helpless, you know."

Dark eyes narrowed in Reed's rugged, weather-tanned face. "Never said you were."

She jammed a fist on one hip. "Same as."

Reed rolled his eyes heavenward. "You are the most exasperating..."

Amy couldn't help smiling. "Okay, tough man, why would your house be any safer than mine?"

"Granny is there. I'm there. Cy is there. We can protect you."

Amy scoffed. "Cy wouldn't hurt a hot biscuit." The malamute was gentle as a kitten.

"And—" he held up a finger as if to stop her argument "—my place sits off the road, up an incline that requires a four-wheel drive and a lot of patience to climb. It's backed by a mountain. No one can get to you there. Come on, Amy. Be reasonable."

Amy softened. Reed really was trying to do the right thing. He was misguided but well intentioned. "I'm not afraid to stay here." Not much anyway. "God has always taken care of me, and He won't let me down now."

Reed gave one grunt that let her know what he thought about that. His brown eyes glazed over and Amy suspected that he was thinking of Ben. Well, so was she. God had carried her through the

nightmare of loss and the last year of struggling to make ends meet and to keep the town afloat. Without faith in God to sustain her, she would have given up.

Reed's gaze came back to hers. Jaw tight, he said, "Ben would expect me to take care of you."

Amy's hackles jumped up like barking dogs. Reed's twisted sense of loyalty to her dead husband was the final straw.

"I said no, Chief Truscott, and I meant it."

Reed was still stewing as he guided his Explorer back to the police station.

"She's going to get herself hurt, and then what?" If anything happened to Amy or her boys, he wasn't sure what he would do. A man could only live with so much guilt.

For one minute there, he'd been tempted to snatch her up, toss her over his shoulder like some barbarian, and drag her kicking and screaming to his place. Amy brought out the worst in him.

He shifted in the seat. Amy brought out something else in him, too.

"She's Ben's wife. End of story."

Only, Ben was gone.

The malamute in the passenger seat listened in silence, head cocked, his one good eye sympathetic. Reed reached across to ruffle the thick, dark fur. Cy was a lot easier to talk to than most humans, and a lot more dependable. A few years back, he'd given an eye to protect his owner, a fact that had earned him the right to sleep on the foot of Reed's bed. Reed Truscott put a lot of stock in loyalty. It was what had gotten him into this dilemma with Amy in the first place. "Aw, Ben."

As much as he missed his good friend Ben James, he couldn't imagine how hard the man's death was on Amy. But Amy was a whirlwind, staying so busy with saving the world—or at least with saving Treasure Creek—that she didn't realize how much she needed a man's help. She'd give him an ulcer if he wasn't careful.

With a sigh, he ran a weary hand down his face. He hadn't slept well since this mess over the treasure had started. Actually, he hadn't slept well since Ben's death. Nightmares brought him back to that moment on the rapids when Ben threw himself into the icy water to rescue a capsized tourist and never returned. Some friend Reed Truscott proved to be.

With a groan, he tried to focus on something else. Thinking of his part in Ben's death drove him crazy. He'd been helpless then and he felt helpless now. But he still believed he should have done something.

He'd never told Amy about Ben's final moments but he replayed them often in his thoughts. Reed could almost feel the icy, snow-laden wind of that horrible January day, the slippery, snowpacked rocks beneath his feet, and the taste of fear in his mouth as he ran toward the river, sliding, falling, only to scramble to his feet and fall some more. He knew the capsized kayak was too far out and the rapids too wild and frigid, but he tried anyway. Long after Ben disappeared beneath the foam, Reed had searched by raft and on foot, and with every step, every stroke of the oar, he'd chanted his promise to care for Ben's family.

Though a search party eventually arrived, he'd been the one to find Ben's broken body hours later, far downstream—a sight that was burned into his memory with painful clarity. While he'd held his friend in his arms, knowing he and no one else must take the news to Amy, he sobbed his grim promise one last time.

He'd told her that night, and in the process, he proposed marriage. He thought it was the right thing to do. The thing Ben wanted. Amy hadn't agreed.

To make matters more insane, shortly thereafter Amy had been interviewed by *Now Woman* magazine. She talked about the handsome tour guides who worked for her, in an effort to promote the business, and now every love-starved female in the Lower 48 had converged upon the tiny Alaskan settlement noted for having more males than female residents.

"Maybe not every love-starved female," he conceded to his canine companion. "But too many."

Several had made a play for him, which just proved their desperation.

Still, a few of his buddies were now engaged or married because of that influx of females. They seemed happy about it, too. Not that he gave a frozen frog about love or marriage. He was too busy trying to keep the peace amongst all the ones who did.

Turning down Treasure Creek Lane, the town's main thoroughfare, he eased the Explorer over the snow-dusted street and into a parking spot outside the brightly painted facade of Alaska's Treasures tour company. Amy's business matched the other rustic-looking buildings—bright paint, clapboard and turn-of-the-century style.

Treasure Creek remained much as it had been in the Gold Rush Days. So much so that a man could close his eyes and imagine the rinky-tink of piano and the clip-clop of horse hooves that had filled the town a hundred years ago.

He climbed out of the SUV and sucked in the chilly smell of snow coming down off the mountains. Treasure Creek enjoyed mild winters, comparatively speaking, and today's temperatures around freezing felt almost balmy. Black night would be upon them soon, and even now the streetlights sent a weak glow over the piles of shoveled snow. Dark or light, tired or rested, duty called the sheriff of Treasure Creek.

Amy employed a tight-knit group. The guides and office staff would want to know about the break-in.

"Come on, boy," he said to the waiting dog.

Cy leaped happily to the ground and shook out his fur, eager for exercise. His warm breath puffed gray around his muzzle as he hopped onto the curb. Reed moved more slowly, as tired today as he'd been as a teenager when he'd labored long hours on the freezing deck of a crab boat.

As far as his father, Wes Truscott, was concerned, his son was a dead weight who should be able to earn his keep. Reed had then, and he would now. Treasure Creek depended on him to keep its citizens safe. And that included Ben's widow.

Inside the small office of Alaska's Treasures tour company, he was greeted by the toasty, warm smell of fresh coffee and the friendly smile of Rachel Adams, Amy's receptionist. His belly growled, a reminder that his last meal had been somewhere around six this morning at Lizbet's Diner. Granny Crisp would have a hot meal in the microwave if he ever made it home.

"Amy's place was broken into," he said without fanfare.

Rachel's hand flew to her mouth. "Oh, no! Is she okay?"

"Fine." His answer was curt. "For now."

Gage Parker, one of the best search-and-rescue guides in the business, unwound himself from a chair where he'd been jotting notes on a yellow tablet. Next to him was his new wife, Karennia, and baby Matthew, Gage's nephew. The baby was trying to walk, holding on to the leather sofa as he toddled around.

Cy, who'd been waiting patiently next to Reed, ambled over and sniffed the little guy with interest. Matthew gurgled happily and patted the dog's head with an awkward baby pat. Gage and Karennia looked at each other with besotted smiles, as if no baby had ever done anything quite this adorable. The trio looked so right for each other, Reed got that heartburn feeling in his belly again. Love did weird things to people.

"What do you mean, for now?" Karennia asked, pulling Matthew into her arms.

"You know Amy. Too trusting for her own safety."

Gage snorted softly. "Typical."

The two men exchanged glances. Here, at least, was someone who understood Amy's propensity for being just a little too independent. He still didn't understand why she got all huffy when he'd asked her to move in with him and Granny. The idea made perfect sense. Staying in that rickety old house of hers made exactly none.

By now, Rachel was out from behind the desk and passing the cubicles as she headed toward the back of the office where another door led into the meeting room. There, guides and Amy met

to plan tours, hash out problems and otherwise run the business of taking tourists into the Alaskan wilderness. As Reed followed the blonde receptionist, the smell of coffee increased. Maybe he could snag a cup. Amy always offered. And if he was real lucky, there might be a donut or two back here with his name on them.

Rachel opened the door and hollered, "Hey, everyone, Amy's house was broken into."

The announcement was met with a sudden, stunned silence before chaos broke out. A chorus of concerned voices began asking questions Reed couldn't answer and expressing their general outrage that anyone would do such a thing—to Amy James, of all people. Amy, who was using everything she had to solve the town's financial crisis. Amy, who planned to donate her great-great-grandfather's treasure—worth an unknown fortune—to the town's coffers without a thought to herself. Amy, who was too stubborn to let him take care of her.

Reed took the final thought captive. He was still smarting from Amy's blunt, annoyed refusal. The truth hurt, but he got the point. Amy didn't want to be that close to him. But there was more than one way to keep his promise to protect Miss Independence. He knew Amy's employees, considered them friends. They had come to her assistance after Ben's death, and they'd stand by her now.

After a minute of noise, Reed raised one hand. "She'll need help cleaning up."

A tiny smile pulled at his lips. He'd feel a lot better knowing she had an army of friends on the lookout.

Before he left Amy's house, he'd found boot prints in the snow beneath her bedroom window, a fact he'd shared with Amy. Even that hadn't convinced her to move to his place. Instead, she'd flounced upstairs, come back down with a baseball bat and declared the puny thing an adequate weapon. By that point he'd given up.

He'd snapped some photos of the imprints, dusted the windowsill and other likely areas for fingerprints, but he didn't hold out a lot of hope of discovering who the perpetrator was anytime soon. He'd also personally locked every open window and relocked the doors. And he'd phoned the local handyman to fix the broken window in Amy's bedroom.

No matter what Amy said, she needed more than a baseball bat and her faith in God. If God was looking out for her best interests, why had the house been broken into in the first place? And why had Ben died on those rapids? Why hadn't Reed been able to get to him in time? He'd played the scene over in his head until he was nuts, and he still couldn't understand why he hadn't been able to save his best friend.

Guilt was a wicked companion.

Glass tinkled against glass as the willowy blonde and eminently elegant Penelope Lear swept a pile of shards onto a dustpan held by her sandy-haired fiancé, Tucker Lawson.

Penelope paused, one hand on Tucker's shoulder. The pair didn't have to say a word for everyone in the place to see how much in love they were. Though only recently engaged, Tucker and Penelope were a match made in heaven. And in the Alaskan wilderness.

"I don't understand why someone looking for the treasure would have to break your fine glassware," Penelope said to Amy, her tone totally disgusted.

Amy, busy sorting the ruined food from the salvageable, exchanged amused glances with Casey Donner, one of her guides and a dear friend. Both women were as practical as rain boots. Though a dear and gentle heart, Penelope was born a city girl, a wealthy socialite whose tastes ran to the finer things in life. Since coming to Treasure Creek, she'd toughened up considerably, following a wilderness trek that had almost cost her her life. Still, her expensive haircut and manicure were signs that Penelope would always enjoy the best. Amy's dollar-store tumblers probably weren't on Penelope's wedding registry.

"Don't worry about the dishes, Penelope. I'm just glad my boys are okay."

"Oh, Amy." Penelope's face paled. "I get a chill thinking about what might have happened if you had arrived home sooner."

So did Amy. Even now she dreaded the moment everyone would leave. No matter what she'd told her sons and Reed, she was badly shaken by the incident. The notion that some unknown enemy had handled her personal belongings inside the home she considered a sanctuary left her feeling violated and vulnerable.

Vulnerability was a luxury she couldn't afford.

"The important thing is she didn't." Nate McMann, one of her part-time, ultramasculine guides looked as out of place as Penelope as he crouched in front of the refrigerator with a scrubbing sponge. With his cowboy boots and Wrangler jeans, the rancher was more at home wrangling a five-hundred-pound steer than cleaning house.

"Aren't you scared to stay here by yourself?" Penelope asked, a tiny frown furrowing the perfect brow.

"I'll be fine," Amy said, but her thoughts returned to that moment of panic when she'd looked down the darkened hallway and wondered who might be lurking. A nervous knot spread from her belly to her shoulders.

"You could spend the night with me," Casey offered, expressing concern. Wearing her usual cargo pants and unisex thermal shirt, Casey Donner was tomboy-tough, with a reputation for being as strong and capable as a man, even though, beneath the strength she was every bit a woman. As oilman Jake Rodgers had happily discovered.

"I appreciate the offer, Casey." Amy glanced toward the breakfast nook where Karenna Parker was playing with the boys and baby Matthew to keep them out of the way. "But I don't want my sons to think there's any reason to be afraid."

"But there is a reason, Amy," Penelope said with a graceful shiver. "You could get hurt."

Amy rubbed at the back of her neck. A headache was starting, and she was certain it was from tension. But running away from a problem never solved anything, and she was telling the truth when she said she didn't want her boys to know there was a reason to be afraid. Still, talking about the break-in upset her more than she wanted them to know.

"I'm glad all of you are here now. That's what matters. Let's just forget the other for a while, okay?"

Her friends exchanged glances and a silent agreement seemed to circle the room. No more talk of the break-in.

Nate dipped a pair of sponges into a bucket of soap suds and squeezed. Ketchup bloodied the water. "Business was slow anyway."

Amy forced her gaze from the red water and the reminder that she or the boys could have been hurt—that instead of ketchup, someone could have been cleaning away blood. "No calls this afternoon?"

Her voice sounded high and strained, even to her own ears. The last thing she or the town needed after the miniboom of that last few months was a dead week. Without tourists, the town could not survive.

Rachel looked up from the kitchen sink where she was washing anything anyone stuck in front of her. If the company's receptionist had closed the office, business must have been really slow.

"A few. Don't worry." Rachel waved a drippy skillet.

"Snowmobile and ski season is upon us. We'll be wildly busy around Christmas and New Year's when the schoolkids are out on break."

"You're right, of course. The Lord has brought us this far. He won't let us fail now."

The pep talk was more for herself than anyone. Exhausted both physically and emotionally, she was running on fumes.

Nate pivoted on the toes of his boots. His green eyes rested on her, placid and sure. "Bethany's already booked a couple of December weddings. We're bound to attract a few tourists from those."

Amy's friend, Bethany Marlow, now Nate's fiancée, had returned to Treasure Creek a few months ago to establish a wedding planning business. Amy had once suffered doubts that such an enterprise was viable in the tiny town, but she'd been delightfully wrong. When Bethany moved back to Treasure Creek to set up her wedding shop, no one could have imagined how busy she would be. Although the now infamous magazine article had regenerated some unsavory interest in Amy's family's missing treasure, it had also proven a boon for the town.

The knot in her shoulders relaxed a little. Talking about weddings and business took the edge off.

"That's great news, Nate. Is the wedding party for anyone we know?" She glanced around pointedly at several faces glowing with love. Nate's was one of them.

"Not me and Bethany. At least not yet." He grinned, teeth flashing beneath his gorgeous green eyes. "She wants to make plans. Lots of plans. Gotta be perfect."

"Well, she is a wedding planner. Think of the publicity and the business the perfect wedding could bring. Not that either of you cares about that at your own wedding."

"You got that right." Nate was a tight-lipped rancher and part-time guide who naturally shied away from too much attention. Those who knew him knew the big wedding plans were a sure sign of how much he loved and wanted to please his bride-to-be.

"So if it's none of us, who is getting married?" Penelope asked as she dumped the dustpan into a large, plastic trashbag. Amy tried not to cringe at the clatter and clink of her broken belongings.

"A couple is coming up from Seattle to be married on skis, and Bethany's making all the arrangements, including accommodations for one hundred guests."

"A wedding on skis," Penelope mused. "Sounds...fun." Her expression said just the opposite. Her fiancé, Tucker, laughed. "Does that mean you want to get married on skis, too?"

Penelope pointed a manicured nail at him. "You're cute, but you'll be even cuter in tails and a cummerbund."

"What? No skis?" Tucker teased. "No edgy Fifth Avenue goggles? No trendy pink-and-lime ski wear?"

"Only if you wear the pink," she said, eyes sparkling with mischief.

A couple of the rugged guides looked aghast at the conversation, but Tucker was an attorney from the city. Even though he'd spent months stranded in the Alaskan wilderness, he and Penelope weren't exactly the rugged type. But they were a perfect match. And he was the right groom for the formal wedding Penelope was planning—with Bethany's help, of course.

Amy laughed, more anxiety easing away as Tucker stalked a squealing Penelope into the darkened living room—a fitting place for two romantics to sneak a kiss.

When the pair returned a couple of minutes later starry-eyed and grinning, a twinge of envy caught Amy by surprise. She and Ben had once been like this, though the last few years, with the babies and the business, had been hectic and they'd had less time for each other.

"The B and Bs must be thrilled to have so many customers this time of year," she said.

Casey's short brown hair bounced against her face as she nodded. "I talked to Juanita this morning at Lizbet's Diner." Juanita Phillips owned and operated the Treasure Creek Hotel. "She said the hotel was booked solid through the New Year and already had Valentine's bookings, too. She's in shock."

"Good shock, if you ask me," Rachel said. "We need that kind of shock at the tour office."

A knock sounded at the door. Anxiety, momentarily at bay during the pleasant conversation, leaped into Amy's pulse. She jumped and spun, hand flying to her throat.

"Hey." Nate rose, giving her a worried look. He tossed the sponge into the bucket and came to stand next to her. "You okay?"

"Of course I am." Amy forced a smile. "The knock was unexpected. That's all." Burglars didn't knock. Did they?

Casey flipped on the back porch light and yanked the door open. The tomboy guide feared nothing. “Reed. Hi. Come in.”

Hat in hand, the tall officer stepped inside. His gaze swept the room before landing on Amy. He frowned.

All her anxieties came rushing back and brought their friends along.

Chapter Three

Amy James was as slippery as a young salmon. No matter how hard he tried to keep an eye on her, Reed never quite felt in control of the situation. Even though he'd gone back to her house with the troubling news from Lizbet's Diner that a couple of strangers had been asking about the treasure, Amy had insisted on staying right where she was. She'd looked worried, nervous and shaken, but she'd thrust out that stubborn little chin and refused to even let him bring up the subject of moving to his place. As if he would have in front of half the town.

Short of camping on her doorstep in the frigid temperatures, all he could do was cruise past the cheerful blue dwelling every half hour after the unofficial cleanup committee gave up and went home. In a town as small as Treasure Creek, one deputy per shift was generally all the help a chief of police could afford, though during the busy seasons, Reed had a couple of part-time locals to call on. When exhaustion had overcome Reed, Deputy Ken Wallace had promised to keep an eye on Amy's place.

Eyes as gritty as sandpaper, he pulled his SUV into the garage attached to his ranch-style split-level. Dark was absolute at 2:00 a.m. in Alaska, but the dome light flared on when he opened the door and stepped out onto the concrete. Cy hopped down beside him and waited patiently at the locked entrance leading into the kitchen.

Though the garage was refrigerator-cold and ripe with the familiar smells of oil and grease, Reed paused on the single step to remove his boots. Granny Crisp was touchy about her clean floors. He took an old towel from a nail and carefully dried Cy's paws, too. No use getting Granny in a mood. He might own the house, but Granny was in charge of keeping things neat and tidy. For a little gnat of a woman, she could tear a strip off him with her black button eyes.

In his socks, he keyed the door and entered the kitchen, the only light glowing red from the microwave and stove clock. Cy's toenails clicked against Granny's polished linoleum. Reed reached for the light over the stove just as the overhead light flicked on. Temporarily blinded, he blinked rapidly until vision returned.

Granny Crisp stood in the doorway between the dining room and kitchen, a tiny twig of humanity. In gray thermal socks, a faded, red fleece robe that had seen too many washings, and sprouts of equally faded brown hair, she looked as harmless as a child. Reed knew better. The steel strength of her dark Russian ancestry ran through her veins.

Her gaze went first to his feet. He smiled inwardly. When it came to keeping a clean house, Granny was as predictable as the sunrise.

"Supper's in the oven," she said in her strong, blunt manner. Someone who didn't know her well might think her rude, but beneath the hard shell and sharp tongue was a loving granny who'd always been there for him.

"It's 2:00 a.m." With everything that went on today, Reed hadn't considered dinner, but right now all he wanted was a bed.

"I can tell time." She went to the microwave and pushed three beeps worth of buttons. The whirring sound started. "Amy and her kids all right?"

Reed accepted his fate. He would have to eat before he could sleep. Granny's law. A working man needs to eat. He scraped a chair out and sat, leaning his forehead on the heel of his hand. "At the moment."

"You're worried."

"Wouldn't be up half the night if I wasn't."

"You don't worry about the rest of the town's residents this much."

Reed squinted at her. Granny knew him too well. "Don't start."

"Just saying." She slid a plate in front of him, yanked a chair away from the table and perched. Cy collapsed on the floor between them with a sigh, rested his snout on crossed feet and closed his eyes.

Reed filled a fork with a steaming cube of beef and brown gravy. "You can go back to sleep."

"Don't want to talk about it?"

"I'll clean up my mess."

She chuffed. "Not what I meant and you know it. Trouble's been brewing ever since word of old Mack Tanner's treasure got out again."

"Yeah."

"Why doesn't Amy give it up? Why not open the silly thing once and for all, so whoever wants it so badly will have to back off?"

This was Granny. Do the practical thing. Do it now. Get it over with.

"She has some notion that waiting until Christmas is good for the town. Says they need this for morale."

"Won't do anyone any good if a lot of people get hurt."

"No argument from me."

Granny was silent for a few minutes while Reed chewed and swallowed, chewed and swallowed. Reed could practically see the wheels turning in her head.

"I think I see her point."

"You would."

"Don't sass." The admonition was mild and brought a grunt from Reed. "When times are hard, folks need hope. That treasure represents something bigger than the fortune it may hold."

If he hadn't been so tired, he would have rolled his eyes. "What it represents to me is trouble."

"In the form of a certain little redhead who doesn't know what's good for her?"

"I tried to get her to move out here with us."

Granny cocked her head, one eyebrow rising. "That a fact?"

"Temporarily." Reed's gaze slid away. He stabbed a piece of beef, not wanting to admit to Granny how distressed he was over Amy's refusal.

"Did you ever consider that a woman might want something more permanent in her life?"

A knot formed in his gut, a familiar phenomenon of late, with the issue of Amy and her boys ever on his mind. Granny didn't know about the ill-fated proposal. Make that proposals. What would she say if she did?

"She had Ben," he mumbled, and then shoved his mouth full.

"Had."

As if he needed another reminder that Ben was past tense and Amy James was unattached.

Two days after the break-in, Amy was starting to feel comfortable in her own home again. She regretted the loss of the lamp she and Ben had bought on their first anniversary, and she was furious that her photo albums had been ripped, but overall, she, Sammy and Dexter were okay.

Now, if the chief of police would find someone else to worry about, she'd be perfect.

Okay, maybe not perfect, but surviving.

She plopped down on the foot of Dexter's bed to pull on clean socks. Since the break-in, she'd slept in with the boys. Even though she claimed the move was for them, she felt safer in their room than hers. The thought of an unknown man—if it was a man—rifling through her underwear drawer gave her the creeps.

"Mama?" Dexter jumped onto the bed next to her.

"What, baby?" Tonight was practice at the church for the Christmas pageant. Time to break out her collection of crazy Christmas socks and to put away her Thanksgiving turkey tubes.

"Do you know what the teacher asked us today?"

"What?" She paused in sliding on a pair of lighted Rudolph knee-highs to smile down at her handsome son. Dexter and Sammy attended the preschool at the church and were forever asking, "Do you know what?"

"Teacher asked what we wanted to be when we grow up. Know what I said?"

"A cliff diver?" Last year, he'd seen a TV program on the subject and declared this his life's ambition.

"Nope. A policeman. Like Chief Reed."

Oh. "You'll make a fine police officer. Now, get your shoes on. We're leaving soon."

Dexter somersaulted from the bed and landed loudly and in a sprawl beside his shoes. "I might be a gymnast, too."

Amy held back a smile. "Very useful in police work."

Little Sammy, playing happily on the rug with Hot Wheels, looked up. "When I grow up, know what I'm gonna be?"

"What?"

His baby face full of innocent sincerity, he said, "A pink dolphin."

Sputtering with laughter and filled with joy, Amy swooped down upon her two sons for a noisy wrestling match on the rug. No matter how stressful life became, Dexter and Sammy made every day worthwhile.

"Chief Truscott, welcome."

Reed nodded politely as he ran a cautious gaze around the chaotic scene inside the sanctuary of Treasure Creek Christian Church. He preferred calm and controlled, though lately he'd settle for controlled. Calm hadn't reigned in Treasure Creek in months. He spoke before he thought. "Noisy."

Jenny Michaels, the pastor's friendly wife, chuckled. "If you think this is noise, stop by the day care sometime."

Reed allowed a half smile. Mrs. Michaels, in her mid-forties, with short, coifed blond hair, a moderate overbite, and a pair of reading glasses hanging around her neck, was known in town as a kind, gentle woman with a passion for children's ministry. She also ran the church's day-care center and preschool. Amy's kids attended the center. "Amy here yet?"

If the reverend's wife thought it odd that he asked after Amy James, she didn't react. Instead, she glanced at her watch. "Running late. Must have gotten delayed at the office."

A frisson of alarm skittered along Reed's nerve endings. It was past seven and dark as pitch outside. Amy had no business being out there alone. When he'd asked earlier in the day, she'd told him she would be here tonight, directing the Christmas pageant just as she was every Tuesday night at seven. She'd also added the oft-repeated invitation for him to join the festivities. So here he was, though not to join the festivities, but to keep an eye on a certain redhead who didn't comprehend the threat to her safety.

"She should be here by now." He reached for his cell phone and began stabbing numbers.

Mrs. Michaels lightly touched his arm. "There she is."

Sure enough, Amy, flanked by her sons, blew through the door like a swift, fresh breeze. Reed's chest clutched. He jammed his cell phone into his pocket and stalked toward her. "Are you all right?"

Amy ground to a halt in the entry between the foyer and the sanctuary. "Reed! What a surprise. I'm glad you could make it."

From the expression in her amused blue eyes, Amy suspected his presence at the church was not for spiritual reasons. She was right. He was here to keep an eye on her. And she wasn't cooperating.

Before he could find out why she was late, someone called her name. He glanced up to see Penelope Lear bending over a large cardboard box. "Amy, come look at the shepherds' costumes Bethany made. They're so cute."

"Be right there."

Before she could move, Renee Haversham came rushing toward her, trailing an electrical cord. “Amy, one of the microphones shorted out. What are we going to do?”

While she was talking to Renee, Joleen Jones appeared. Joleen was one of the newcomers, her overdone makeup and big hair a dead giveaway that Alaska was not her native land. She was a silly thing, jumping on every man in sight. Reed had an urge to run every time they met.

“Amy, Greg has the flu. Can I have his solo part? I’ve been practicing. Listen. ‘Fear not, for behold,’” Joleen’s high-pitched, annoying voice rose as she dramatically threw one arm high into the air. “‘I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.’”

“Wonderful, Joleen. Really. But let’s just pray that Greg will recover by then. We have more than three weeks.”

Joleen looked a little crestfallen, but didn’t argue.

In a matter of seconds, Amy was surrounded by people, all asking questions or announcing problems for her to solve.

“Amy, who’s doing the programs?”

“Check with Nadine on those. She agreed to type them up.”

“I asked her already. She has conjunctivitis. Can’t use the computer.”

“I’ll take care of them. Don’t worry.”

“Amy, the silver glitter is on back order.”

“I’ll talk to Harry. Maybe he can get it somewhere else.”

Reed watched in wonder as Amy fielded each concern with equal aplomb, all the while working her way down the aisle, away from him and toward the front, where yet another army of pageant participants waited.

He’d thought she needed protection from the treasure thieves, but now he wondered if she couldn’t use a bodyguard here at church. Even with her antlike energy, the woman had to get tired.

A small, sturdy body slammed into his lower leg. Small arms twined around his kneecap. He glanced down into the serious gray eyes of Amy’s older son.

“Chief Reed, are you going to be in the pageant? Mama said you’d make a great Joseph.”

Why would she say a weird thing like that? The only time he’d been in a Christmas program, he’d been ten years old and the director had cast him as an angel, complete with halo. The only reason he’d done it was the bag of candy waiting when the program ended. Well, candy and Granny Crisp. That was the last time he could remember attending church. After that, his father dragged him off to the Aleutians and a rough fisherman’s way of life. Granny Crisp said he needed to get his spiritual house in order, but—well, churches made him uncomfortable. Like now, when a small boy with Ben’s cleft chin was clinging to his leg like a barnacle. He never knew what to say to kids, so he simply rested one hand on the boy’s hair. Had his own hair, now coarse and springy, ever been that fine?

“Chief Reed?”

“What?” Reed said absently as he scanned the room for Amy. The tiny redhead stood on the dais, arms gesturing, trying to direct the group into their places. She looked like a red ant trying to control a herd of sheep. A really pretty red ant.

“Where’s Cy?”

“In the truck.”

“Why?”

Reed glanced down. “His feet are wet.”

“Yours, too,” the boy said, looking pointedly at Reed’s glistening boots.

Strike one. Try again. “No dogs in church.”

Dexter’s gray eyes blinked, then widened, his voice aghast. “Doesn’t Jesus like dogs?”

“Sure He does.” I guess. I mean, how would I know?

“Then why won’t He let Cy come in the church?”

Reed cast around for an answer that would satisfy the inquisitive child and keep himself out of hot water with Amy. If he told Dexter that Jesus didn't like dogs, she'd skin him alive. Besides, he knew very little about Jesus's likes and dislikes. Other than sin. He knew Jesus was nice to people and didn't approve of sin. Dexter adored both Cy and Jesus. No use causing conflict. "Loud music hurts his ears."

"Jesus's ears?"

Holding back a grin, Reed said, "Cy's. A dog's ears are very sensitive."

"Oh. Can I pet Cy after practice?"

"Sure. Anytime."

Apparently satisfied, Dexter loosened his grip on Reed's thigh and meandered away toward his younger brother, who'd taken up with Casey Donner. Casey, ever the rough-and-tumble tomboy, had scooped up the smallest James child and was toting him around on her back. Reed could rest easy as long as they were with Casey. She'd wrestle a charging moose for one of those boys.

"Come on up front and sit down, Chief Truscott." Mrs. Michaels was back, smiling her serene, toothy smile. "The choir will get started in a minute. Amy's put together a lovely program this year."

Feeling as out of place as a walrus, Reed nodded politely and moved toward the front. He could keep a better eye on Amy this way. Instead of slipping into one of the pews, he leaned against the wall and crossed his arms.

Ethan Eckles, a talented musician who taught school and worked as a part-time guide for Amy, struck a chord on the piano, and the noise in the room ceased.

The quiet was short-lived.

Chapter Four

Amy was acutely aware of Reed Truscott staring at her from across the room. She could practically feel his dark eyes lasering through the back of her Christmas-green cable knit. He didn't fool her one bit. He'd never so much as darkened the doors of this church, and now, there he was, looking as dangerous and rugged as the Chilkoot, filling up the room with his protective presence. When was he going to get the message that she could take care of herself? She disliked being someone's responsibility—especially his.

Her conscience pinched. Sorry, Lord, she thought. I'm glad he's here, no matter the reason. Forgive me for being so prickly.

It was true. Being around Reed disturbed her. Regardless of her protestations to the contrary, she had the insane urge to be close to him. All that terse, macho protectiveness was beginning to feel...nice.

But if she let him know, he'd start up with his ridiculous, condescending proposal again, reminding her that he didn't love her, but that he'd promised Ben.

"Mommy?" Sammy's little voice broke through her thoughts. He and the other children not in the program were supposed to be in the children's room, playing games. "Can I stay up here by you?"

Amy sighed. Ever since the break-in, Sammy had not wanted to be out of her sight. He snuggled tight to her at night and clung during the day. He was sucking his thumb too much again, as well.

"Chief Reed is here," she said, knowing instinctively that this would reassure him.

Her son's face brightened. "He is? Where?"

Aware that Reed was watching with his sharp, hawk eyes, she slowly pivoted, turning Sammy with her. She pointed. "Over there. By the wall." Staring a hole through my back.

"Can I go stand by him?"

She wanted to be the one to give her son confidence, but so far she'd failed. "You can stay up here with me. We're safe, Sammy. The chief is here and so am I."

She didn't like using Reed this way, but she'd do whatever helped her son get over the recent trauma. And she really was glad to see Reed in church, even if he wasn't here for the right reasons. Being here at all was a start. She and Ben had invited him often, had witnessed their faith to him, and while he was never outright rude, Reed remained quietly resistant, always using his job as an excuse. For once, his job had brought him to God's house.

Dragging the black, flop-eared, stuffed Puppy that had seen too many washings, Sammy trudged to the front pew and curled up, his small, booted feet poking off the edge. Maybe he'd go to sleep.

Satisfied, Amy turned back to the mingling, chattering group assembling in the choir area. Ethan Eckles shuffled pages of sheet music on the piano. Ethan, an elementary school teacher, also worked as a part-time tour guide with her company. Some folks were surprised by the rugged Alaskan's musical prowess, but Amy wasn't. There was an artistic side to the man she'd come to know, behind the quiet, brown eyes and chiseled jaw.

"Ethan, are you ready to get started with choir practice?" As director of the Christmas pageant, Amy organized every single detail, but Ethan directed the choir and played the piano.

"Delilah's not here yet. Neither is Harry."

Delilah Carrington—though she couldn't carry a tune in a fishing boat—was normally the first one to arrive and the last one to leave. Since giving her heart to the Lord a few weeks ago, Delilah was an enthusiastic member of the pageant, singing, decorating and even buying props with her own money. For her to be late was odd. Harry Peterson, on the other hand, was never on time. The powerful bass singer would eventually jog in, grumbling about something or someone holding him up at the General Store.

Lately, he was even grumpier, and Amy suspected Joleen Jones was the reason, although Harry had done his best to drive away the overeager Southern belle. Amy kept hoping both of them would get a double dose of the Christmas spirit.

"I hope everything is okay," Amy said. "But we need all the practice we can get to pull this off. We'll have to start without them."

Joleen, bleached platinum hair fluffed like cotton candy and vermillion mouth talking a mile a minute, had already taken her place next to Neville Weeks in the choir. At the mention of Harry's name, she'd gone silent, one beringed hand pressed against her throat. Amy felt sorry for the woman. Why she adored Harry Peterson was a mystery, but she did. After she'd chased—and alienated—nearly every man in town, the grumpy, pot-bellied proprietor of the town's general store had won her heart. And broken it.

Ethan took over, quietly and patiently instructing the choir as if they were a bunch of fidgety elementary students, and the off-key, endearing sounds of Christmas began. Amy had maneuvered the microphones so that the best voices were near the speakers and the worst were in the back, staggering them according to height and voice.

She made a mental note to check with Pastor Michaels about the choir robes. The old burgundy robes would do fine, if the church could come up with the money to have them cleaned and pressed and to replace the worn, white stoles with new forest-green ones.

Satisfied that Ethan had the music under control, she headed for the stairs up to the balcony, where the teenagers and several of the men, led by Gage Parker, were setting up lighting. She glanced back to see Sammy trailing her, dragging Puppy.

Inadvertently, her gaze went to Reed. Sure enough, he was watching. A warm flush slid up the back her neck. Reed pushed off the wall as if to follow her, too. She held up an index finger to stop him. She would not be stalked by the town's police officer, not even for her own good—especially for her own good.

Reed's jaw tightened as he squinted her way. After a silent battle of wills, his chest rose and fell in a huff. He recrossed his arms and leaned back into his place on the wall, though his eyes remained fixed on hers.

Amy hovered on the stairs, holding Sammy's hand while the sound of "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear" swelled around her, the familiar old hymn filling the church and her spirit. Lighted Christmas wreaths ringed the sanctuary walls. One was positioned directly above Reed and set his dark skin aglow. His brown-black hair was mussed from the wind and the ends glistened damply. He'd unsnapped his dark blue service jacket and it hung open to reveal the lean officer's shirt, complete with patches and badge and unidentifiable service pins. Reed Truscott was a handsome man in a rugged kind of way.

Amy's stomach fluttered. She tried to blame the reaction on the bulge of what could only be a gun at Reed's side. A weapon in church didn't seem right.

One thing for sure, she needn't worry about the thieves if he was around. Reed would take care of her and the rest of Treasure Creek. It was, as he constantly reminded her, his duty.

"Amy?"

Relieved at the distraction, Amy turned toward the female voice coming from above.

A troubled face, surrounded by bouncy red ringlets, looked down at her from the top of the stairs.

"Delilah! I didn't know you were here. Why aren't you rehearsing with the choir?"

In Ugg boots, snug jeans and a sheepskin vest, Delilah was fashion personified, though not nearly as high fashion as she'd once been. She and the other women who'd come to Treasure Creek were quickly learning that high fashion and Alaskan winters didn't jive all that well.

The petite young woman shrugged. "I don't really feel like singing tonight."

Though she usually put on a happy face, Delilah was a new Christian, and she still struggled with feelings of self-worth. Though they were close in age and very similar in size and looks, Amy felt eons older than Delilah, and had taken it upon herself to mentor and encourage her new friend. She trotted up the stairs. "Want to talk about it?"

Delilah gazed around at the chaos of people discussing, stringing lights and speakers, and setting up props, all of them clamoring for Amy's input. "Do you have time?"

Amy made a face. "We'll make time. Come on. Let's grab a cup of hot chocolate." To the working masses, she called, "Be back in a bit. You guys know what to do."

"Sure, Amy," someone hollered. "We've got you covered."

The notion warmed her heart. This little town pulled together. They did have her covered.

She and Delilah maneuvered the stairs again, this time heading down. As they reached the side door and were exiting the sanctuary, Amy glanced back to see Nate talking to Reed. Good. He didn't notice her. It would be embarrassing to have the town police chief follow her around the church like a bodyguard.

Concerned about what could be troubling Delilah, she put Reed out of her mind and headed through the exit and down the long hallway toward the fellowship hall, which did double duty as an all-purpose room. Sammy and his faithful Puppy trailed along, holding her hand. She stopped at the children's church and urged him to go inside. The noise and activity of half a dozen playing, laughing children drew him in, and before she closed the door, Amy saw the nursery worker lift Sammy onto her lap and open a book. Sammy loved stories. He would be okay for a while.

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