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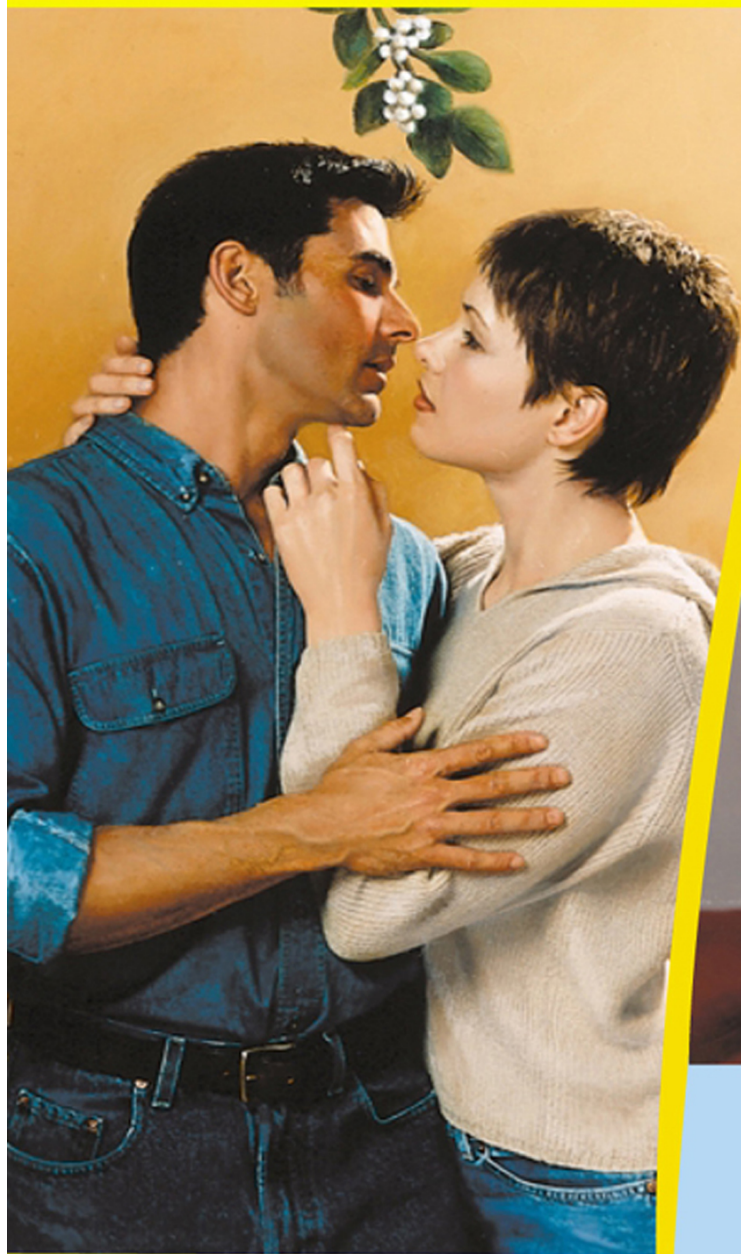
# Duets™

2 ROMANTIC  
COMEDIES

Mistletoe & Mayhem

CARA SUMMERS

November



Santa's Sexy Secret

LORI WILDE

Lori Wilde

**Mistletoe & Mayhem: Mistletoe  
& Mayhem / Santa's Sexy Secret**

«HarperCollins»

## **Wilde L.**

Mistletoe & Mayhem: Mistletoe & Mayhem / Santa's Sexy Secret /  
L. Wilde — «HarperCollins»,

Mistletoe & Mayhem All she wants for Christmas... Librarian Jodie Freemont's New Year's resolution is to get a life! Plain, predictable Jodie is going to turn into a daring, free-spirited femme fatale. And she gets her chance when rugged bounty hunter Shane Sullivan comes to town. Shane's got a reputation for always getting his man. But he doesn't stand a chance when Jodie decides to catch hers—under the mistletoe! Santa's Sexy Secret There are a few surprises under that suit... Working undercover as a jolly department-store Santa is no holiday for Detective Sam Stevenson! He's supposed to be investigating a large-scale theft ring, but instead he's spending more time checking out his gorgeous assistant elf, Edie Preston. The cute little pixie is one giant-size distraction. And thanks to a little mistletoe, Santa Sam is suddenly hearing wedding bells instead of jingle bells!

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### Mistletoe & Mayhem

Cara Summers

## A little bit of mistletoe sure goes a long way!

Shane fought to control his breathing. He looked at Jodie, expecting to find her embarrassed, angry even. Instead in her eyes was pure, unadulterated glee. Obviously noticing his confusion, Jodie let out a delighted chuckle.

“Aren’t you upset about what that kid saw? The two of us necking like...” Shane’s throat dried up at the thought of how far he would have liked to have taken the interlude. “Do you realize he thinks we’re—”

“Lovers.” Nodding, Jodie burst into a fresh wave of giggles. “Don’t you see? I’ve been trying so hard to change my image in this town. I’m tired of being poor, predictable Jodie. And now they’ll think that you and I, that we... Oh, I wish I’d thought fast enough to introduce you as the gardener.”

“The gardener? Why would you want a gardener at this time of year?”

“So I could be the Lady Chatterley of Castleton, New York,” she quipped. “After all, if people are going to talk, we might as well give them something to talk about...”

Dear Reader,

When my editor asked me if I wanted to set my romantic comedy in the holiday season, I jumped at the chance. After all, Christmas has got to be the most perfect time of year to fall in love.

The only problem was that my hero and heroine wouldn’t cooperate. Jodie and Shane simply didn’t have time to fall in love, let alone time to think about Christmas. They were much too busy trying to catch Jodie’s embezzling ex-fiancé, who’d just escaped from jail. Only, they kept getting in each other’s way.... And this led to a whole lot of mayhem...and many, many moments under the mistletoe!

I hope you have as much fun watching Shane and Jodie fall in love as I did bringing them together.

Merry Christmas!

Cara Summers

P.S. I’d love to hear what you think. You can write to me at: P.O. Box 327, Dewitt, NY 13214.

To Heather Smith Hanlon, my new daughter-in-law. I always wanted a daughter, and I’m so lucky to finally have one as nice as you. Welcome to the family.

# 1

“I WANT TO BUY A GUN.”

Jodie Freemont barely kept herself from wincing at the blunt way she'd blurted out her request. But the moment she'd actually seen the gun lying in the display case, the little speech she'd been working on all morning had flown right out of her mind.

Glancing around, she saw that everyone in Hank Jefferson's sporting goods store was staring at her, including the tall, handsome stranger testing a fishing pole. And Alicia Finnerty, Castleton's number one gossip, had stopped chattering to him in mid sentence.

In the sudden silence the music pouring out of the radio behind the counter seemed to grow louder. “All I want for Christmas is...”

“That gun.” Jodie quickly pointed to the smallest pistol in the case before she could change her mind. “Could I hold it?”

“I can't sell you a gun.” As if to emphasize his point, Hank moved forward and planted his hands, palms down, on the glass-topped counter.

Jodie peered between Hank's thick fingers, trying to keep the gun she'd chosen in view. Visualize Your Goal. In her mind, she pictured yesterday's motto of the day, one of many that her landlady Sophie Rutherford had been magnetizing to her refrigerator door over the past two months. She'd had plenty of time to practice her visualization skills last night while she'd listened to a prowler walk stealthily across the attic floor.

For just a second, the memory flashed through her—the creak of a board, the tension curling cold and tight in her stomach, the icy shivers shooting through her veins while she waited for the next sound...and the next.

Picturing a gun in her hand had helped her to keep the fear at bay.

But the one she'd imagined had seemed smaller, less lethal-looking than the one in the display case. How would it feel in her hand, she wondered? If she could lift it, would she actually be able to point it at someone and shoot it?

Raising her eyes to Hank's, she said, “If you're worried that I can't afford it, I have cash.”

Hank leaned closer, pitching his voice low. “You've got every reason to be feeling a little low, losing your fiancé and your house all in the space of a few months. But what you need is a new young man, not a gun. Billy Rutherford isn't the only fish in the sea.” Moving around the counter, Hank took Jodie's arm, patting it gently as he steered her up the aisle. “See that man at the cash register, the one with the fishing pole. He's new in town.” Pausing, Hank winked at her. “And the Mistletoe Ball is less than a week away. Let me introduce you to—”

Jodie stopped short. “I didn't come here for an introduction.” Or a date! She barely kept herself from shouting the words. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the man with the fishing pole smile. He'd heard her whole life story and now he was laughing at her.

Next to him Alicia Finnerty had her mouth open like a guppy, absorbing the whole scene.

“My mother told me not to have anything to do with strangers,” Jodie said and immediately bit her tongue. She sounded like a prude. When the stranger's grin widened, anger mixed with her embarrassment.

“That was good advice when you were young,” Hank said, still keeping his voice low, “but you're a grown woman now, and you don't want to spend all your life pining away for a man who walked away.”

Like your mother did. Hank didn't say the words out loud, but Jodie could hear them hanging in the air before she said, “I won't. I'm not. What I need right now is a gun.”

“Well, I'm not going to sell you one.”

“I can buy one somewhere else.”

“I reckon you can, but whatever you might think right now, suicide is not the answer.”

“Suicide? I don’t want that gun to...You can’t think that I...” Jodie stopped because the concerned, pitying look on Hank’s face revealed that was exactly what he was thinking. And one quick glance toward the front of the store told her that he wasn’t the only one thinking it. The stranger wasn’t grinning anymore. And Alicia Finnerty could hardly contain herself. Any minute now she would make a break for the door so she could pull out her cell phone and start blabbing the news.

“It’s the holidays,” Hank said. “Lot’s of people get depressed around Christmas. What you need is something to look forward to—like a date for the Mistletoe Ball.”

“Hank, I want that gun because last night there was a prowler in the attic.”

“Did you call the sheriff?”

“I tried, but the phone wasn’t working. Even if it had been, the Rutherford sisters and I are alone in that house, and we’re two miles from town. All we had to defend ourselves with was fireplace pokers.”

“Well, you go on over and tell the sheriff right now,” Hank said. “Let him handle it.”

Jodie opened her mouth and then shut it. She could try to explain to Hank that she and the Rutherford sisters might be dead in their beds before the sheriff or one of his men could even get to the house, but she wasn’t going to change his mind. He was not going to sell her a gun. And if she read Alicia Finnerty’s expression right, by tonight everyone in Castleton would know that poor Jodie Freemont was thinking of committing suicide.

“Fine,” she said. “I’ll just take some strong rope. Give me some of the stuff that they string sails up with.”

As Hank’s eyes narrowed, she hurried on. “I’m going to use it for...hauling a Christmas tree to the house.” It was a lie. If lightning was going to strike her, she might as well make it a good one. “Sophie and Irene are putting up a second tree in the dining room so we’re going to dig up a fresh one and replant it later.”

“How much do you need?” Hank asked.

Pulling a piece of paper out of her pocket, she glanced down at it. “Thirty yards.”

As Hank ambled off to the back of the store, Alicia Finnerty cleared her throat. “That’s a lot of rope.”

Turning to find the older woman at her elbow, Jodie couldn’t resist saying, “The better to hang myself with, my dear.”

“Oh, my. Oh, my. Oh, my.” Her hand at her throat, Alicia Finnerty backed toward the door, pushed against it, and bolted out onto the sidewalk.

“She thinks you really intend to do it.”

It was the stranger who’d spoken, and when Jodie turned, she found herself looking into the darkest pair of eyes she’d ever seen. Black smoke, she thought. The kind that blinded you. Though her gaze never left his, she was aware of dark hair falling below the collar of his blue work shirt, strong cheekbones, a square jaw, and lines etched around his mouth. Tall, dark and tough, not pretty. This wasn’t a man you’d want to run into in a dark alley. Or an attic. She felt something curl in her stomach. Not the cold ball of fear she’d experienced last night when she was listening to those footsteps. No, this was something different, something warm...no, hot.

Then she watched, fascinated, as his lips curved in a smile and his eyes lightened to gray. This time he wasn’t laughing at her, but with her, and the warmth inside of her grew. Quite suddenly, she felt as if she’d known him for a long time.

But she hadn’t. Just as she hadn’t really known Billy. Taking a step back, she said, “Maybe I do intend to do it.”

“No.” The man shook his head. “I don’t think so. You’re not the type.”

“Not the type for what?” Hank asked, bagging the coil of rope and placing it on the counter.

“Nothing,” Jodie said, grabbing the package.

“Where’d Alicia go?” Hank asked.

“She—” Jodie and the stranger spoke the word together. When she glanced at him, he was smiling again.

“Ms. Finnerty had a pressing engagement,” he said.

Hank grinned at them. “With her cell phone, I’ll bet. I take it you two have introduced yourselves.”

“No.”

Once again they spoke in unison. This time, Jodie kept her eyes on Hank and said, “I’ll have to take a rain check on that introduction.” She backed toward the door. “My lunch hour is nearly over. I’ve barely got time to meet Sophie and Irene before they head off to their meeting.”

“You going to pay for that rope?” Hank asked.

“Oh.” She could feel the heat rising in her cheeks as she said, “Just put it on the Rutherford House account.” To the stranger, she managed a nod. “Another time. ’Bye.”

She was halfway down the block before she remembered to breathe. The last thing she needed was to be introduced to another intriguing stranger. Especially one who made her feel hot one minute and icy cold the next. Strangers were dangerous, especially tall, attractive ones. Billy had taught her that.

SHANE SULLIVAN STEPPED out of the sporting goods store just as Jodie Freemont paused at the corner to wait for the traffic light. She would be getting her rain check sooner than she expected—in about fifteen minutes to be exact. That was when he’d agreed to meet Sophie and Irene Rutherford at Albert’s Café.

It was just by chance that he’d run into Ms. Freemont in the sporting goods store. But then Shane believed in chance. It had always served him well in the past.

This time, too, he thought. It had given him the opportunity to assess Jodie Freemont before they were formally introduced. He made it his business to get to know anyone who might stand in his way. And right now, Jodie Freemont might be the biggest obstacle to his goal.

He’d come to Castleton, New York, because he had a hunch that she might know more about the five million dollars her ex-fiancé had embezzled than she’d told the police.

Narrowing his eyes, Shane studied Jodie as she stepped up on the curb and walked quickly and purposefully toward Albert’s.

Now that he’d met her, he could see that the picture in her file didn’t do her justice. It hadn’t captured her smile or the light that came to her eyes when she laughed. Her hair was different, too. In the picture, it had fallen halfway down her back. Now, cropped short and framing her face, it made her look exactly like the homeless waif everyone in town thought her to be.

Shane frowned. Why was he so sure she wasn’t just what she appeared to be? And why was he wondering again, just as he had back there in the store, exactly how she would feel pressed close against him?

His frown deepened. The only thing he should be wondering about was whether or not she was mixed up with her embezzling ex-fiancé, Billy Rutherford. In the six months since his arrest, the man had steadfastly maintained his innocence, refusing to reveal the location of the money. And not one cent had been found.

A quick gust of wind set bells jingling overhead, and Shane let his gaze sweep the street, decorated in picture-book fashion for the Christmas holidays.

The money was here. Shane could feel the familiar tingling in his fingers. Billy would make a break for it soon. Castleton was the perfect hiding place, and Jodie Freemont made the perfect cover. Who would suspect her of hiding five million dollars for the man who’d swindled her out of her home?

He did. He shifted his gaze back to Jodie as she ducked into Albert’s Café. Or he had until he’d met her. Shrugging off the thought, he started down the street. This wasn’t the time to start second-guessing his hunches. His job was to recover the five million, and he had just enough time to store

his new fishing pole in his car before he joined the Rutherford sisters. Then he'd get his long-awaited introduction to Jodie Freemont.

"DID YOU GET the gun, dear?"

"No. Hank Jefferson flat out refused to sell me one," Jodie announced as she joined the Rutherford sisters at their regular table in the window of Albert's Café.

"It's for the best," Irene, the younger of the two sisters said as she patted the peach-colored curls that framed her face. "Guns make me nervous."

"Everything makes you nervous," Sophie declared. "And Hank Jefferson's an idiot." In her early seventies, Sophie Rutherford still dressed with military precision and wore her iron-gray hair pulled back and twisted into a neat bun. Sophie reminded Jodie of a tank, and she had a personality to match.

"It's your constitutional right to bear arms," Sophie added. "You could sue him."

"Hank would probably persuade the jury that he'd saved my life," Jodie replied.

Irene shivered. "Firearms are dangerous. An accident could happen."

"I don't think Hank was worried about an accident," Jodie remarked dryly. "He thought I wanted the gun to shoot myself."

Irene stared at her. "Why ever would you do that?"

"Because of Billy," Jodie said.

"What does he think you are? Some poor Ophelia pining away for her Hamlet?" Sophie demanded.

"He wanted to introduce me to a perfect stranger," Jodie said. "I think he was going to ask the guy to take me to the Mistletoe Ball."

"Well, Hank's got it all wrong. Billy's coming back to you, dear. He didn't desert you by choice," Irene said. "When the police came to the house, he tried to resist arrest. That shows how much he really cared for—"

Sophie set her teacup down with such force that it rattled every piece of crockery on the table. "When are you going to stop defending that good-for-nothing nephew of ours? It's thanks to him that Jodie lost her house, and we have to turn ours into a bed-and-breakfast!"

Irene clapped her hands over her ears. "I'm not going to listen to anything bad about Billy. He's innocent until proven guilty."

Jodie took one look at the expression on Sophie's face and hastened to intervene. "How are the preparations for the Mistletoe Ball going?"

Immediately a smile lit up Irene's face. "It's going to be the best one ever. Having it in Slocum Hall instead of the library gives us so much more room for dancing. It was Sophie's idea."

"You're the one who thought of having the caterers dress up as Dickens characters this year. People are going to remember that longer than they remember the extra dancing room, my dear."

Breathing a silent sigh of relief, Jodie leaned back in her chair as the two women continued to talk about the ball. For as long as she could remember, the Rutherford sisters had cochaired the Mistletoe Ball, an annual fund-raiser for the Castleton College Library. It was scheduled for the Friday before Christmas, and practically everyone in town would be going.

"Hank Jefferson could be right about one thing," Sophie said, turning suddenly to Jodie. "You really should have a date for the ball."

"Absolutely not," Jodie said. "No sympathy dates for me, thank you. Besides, attending the Mistletoe Ball is part of my job. I have to stand at my boss's side and make sure he knows the names of all the important contributors."

"It's time that Angus Campbell resigned from that job if he can't keep track of the contributors," Sophie said. "And you shouldn't let him intimidate you. Did you forget your motto of the day?"

"No," Jodie said. How could she, when Sophie tore them off a calendar and stuck them on the refrigerator door each day? According to the publishers of the calendar, if she incorporated them into her daily life, she was going to be a new person in just 365 days.

Privately, Jodie had her doubts about how effective a bunch of mottos was going to be in transforming her. The expression of pity she'd seen earlier on Hank Jefferson's face testified to the fact that they hadn't done much good so far. In the eyes of the residents of Castleton, she was still the same "poor Jodie" who'd allowed Billy Rutherford III to turn her into a complete patsy.

"Jodie!" Nadine Carter hurried toward them, a teapot in her hand. The pretty blonde had been Jodie's student assistant until she'd decided to quit college six months ago and start waitressing at Albert's. So far Jodie had been unsuccessful at getting her to go back to school.

"I've got this new herbal tea I want you to try. It's supposed to be great for pulling you out of depression."

"I'm not depressed," Jodie said, but she knew as she met Nadine's eyes that she had about as much chance of convincing her of that as she'd had of getting Hank Jefferson to sell her a gun.

"Just try it," Nadine urged. "I hear you're feeling a little down today."

Jodie stared down at the teapot Nadine had placed in front of her. It had bright-yellow daisies dancing all over it, mocking her. Alicia Finnerty had been busy, she thought. By this evening, everyone in town would know.

Suddenly, she'd had it. She glared down at the dancing daisies. "Take it away. I'm through with herbal tea. I'll have a...a cappuccino."

Nadine stared at her in exactly the same way Hank had when she'd asked to hold one of the guns in his display case. "But you...you don't drink caffeine."

"Well, today I'm just going to go for it," Jodie said, lifting the teapot and placing it firmly back in Nadine's hands.

Nadine opened her mouth, shut it. Finally she said, "I don't know—"

"On second thought, make that a double-strength cappuccino," Jodie said.

Sophie waited until the waitress had walked out of earshot before she reached over to pat Jodie's hand. "Atta girl. You did remember today's motto."

"Go for It," Jodie recited. "And I'm throwing over my herbal tea habit. Whoop-de-do," she muttered sarcastically.

"You tried to buy a hand gun, too. And Hank Jefferson had no right not to sell it to you. Did you tell him about the prowler?" Sophie asked.

"He told me to go tell the sheriff, and he patted me on the arm." Jodie frowned. People were always patting her—on the head, on the arm, on her back. Somehow she brought that out in people. She hadn't liked it at eleven and she didn't like it any better at twenty-six. "I don't think he believed me. He almost refused to sell me the rope." She gestured toward the package she'd carried into the café. "I'm sure he's worried that I might use it to hang myself."

Both women reached for her hands.

"You wouldn't," Irene said.

"You couldn't," Sophie said.

As Jodie looked into the eyes of the two older women, she smiled for the first time since she'd left Hank Jefferson's sporting goods store. "Of course not," she said.

She'd known the Rutherford sisters ever since she was a little girl. Born into a once affluent family of New York city bankers, they'd never married. And when the family had fallen on hard times, they'd moved into one of the Rutherford family's summer homes on Castleton Lake. Both women served on the board of trustees at the college, and they'd convinced the dean of the college to hire her as assistant librarian once she'd graduated.

Irene cleared her throat. "What are you going to do with the rope? If you don't mind my asking."

"Not at all," Jodie said. "It's Plan B. Sort of. Remember last Monday's motto—There's More Than One Way to Skin a Cat?"

Sophie shot a triumphant glance at her sister before she turned to Jodie. "Those mottoes are starting to work. They're becoming part of you."

“I guess,” Jodie said. The truth was that while she’d been working all morning at the library and trying to visualize the gun in her mind, she’d begun to have second thoughts about whether or not she’d have the nerve to actually use it. Pulling a paper out of her pocket, she spread it out on the table. “While I was helping one of the students do some research work on the Internet this morning, I came across this.”

Irene frowned thoughtfully. “What is it?”

“A snare trap,” Jodie replied. At the bemused expressions on the sisters’ faces, she continued. “It’s some kind of guerilla warfare thingamajig that they use in the jungles. Clyde Heffner, the student who downloaded it for me, is coming over this evening to help me rig this up in the attic. The next time that prowler starts poking around up there, he’ll find himself hanging by his feet from the ceiling.”

Leaning closer, the two sisters studied the diagram.

Sophie turned it upside down. “It looks very complicated.”

“Do you think it will work?” Irene asked.

“They work out in the woods. Clyde uses them to trap game.”

“I hope no one ends up hanging from their necks,” Irene fretted.

“I say we go for it!” Sophie said. “I, for one, do not want to end up murdered in my bed.”

“Well, I don’t think we’ll have to worry about that anymore,” Irene replied as she began to refill her teacup. “And Jodie won’t have to build that thingamajig, either, now that Mr.—Ouch!” Wincing, she broke off and shot her sister an apologetic look.

Jodie glanced from Irene to Sophie. “Why won’t we need it?”

They stared back at her uncomfortably for a moment.

“We...that is...how about some lemon?” Irene asked, offering a plate.

“I’m not having tea,” Jodie said. “Why don’t we need my snare trap?”

“We were going to tell you this evening as a sort of surprise.” Pausing, Sophie cleared her throat. “Irene and I have also come up with a Plan B.”

“It’s not nearly as complicated,” Irene said.

Jodie pocketed the diagram and leaned back in her chair. “You had your committee meeting for the Mistletoe Ball today. And then you were supposed to be at the newspaper office placing an ad for a handyman. What else did you do?”

Irene beamed a smile at her. “We’ve taken in a boarder.”

“But you’ve already got one—me,” Jodie said.

“You’re not a boarder. You’re like family,” Irene said. “And this is different. Mr. Sullivan’s a carpenter and an electrician. When we got to the newspaper office, he was in line ahead of us, placing an ad to get work as a handyman. We got to talking, and we ended up hiring him. The best part is he needs a place to stay, and he agreed to accept room and board as part of his wages.”

“It was fate,” Sophie said. “We decided to go for it.”

“You’re inviting a perfect stranger to live under the same roof with you? Don’t you realize how dangerous that is?” Jodie asked.

“He won’t be living under the same roof,” Sophie explained. “We offered him the apartment over the garage.”

Irene coughed delicately, then leaned forward and spoke in a low tone. “We explained to him that there was only one bathroom, in the house, and that until we add on another...well, there might be certain...lack of privacy issues. He said the garage would be fine with him.”

“But he’ll still be living on the property with you—with us—and we don’t know anything about this man. He could be a serial killer!” Jodie said.

“I have references.”

The voice. Jodie was sure she recognized it. What were the chances of two different strangers in town speaking in the same low, gravelly tone? Absolutely none, she decided as she turned and found herself looking into the laughing eyes of the man from Hank Jefferson’s store.

“Jodie, this is Shane Sullivan, our new handyman,” Irene said.

“I’ve been looking forward to this introduction, ma’am.”

Shane? Oddly enough the name suited him. He looked like a lone cowboy, and he probably talked to his horses in just that tone, Jodie thought. Except this was Castleton, New York, not some fictional Western town she’d read about in seventh grade. “Your name is Shane?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Pull up a chair,” Sophie said. “We were just telling Jodie about you.”

“See,” Irene said as Shane snagged a chair and straddled it. “He doesn’t look like a serial killer.”

“Ted Bundy didn’t look like one, either,” Jodie said.

“Right you are,” Shane said. “Everyone who knew him described him as charming.”

“Except for the women he killed,” Jodie pointed out.

Shane grinned at her as he pulled an envelope out of his pocket. “Right you are again. I can’t blame you for being cautious. But these are the references I mentioned.”

Jodie glanced at Irene and Sophie and read the determination in their eyes. It was going to be two against one, and it was their house. Reluctantly, she took the envelope from him just as Nadine arrived at the table.

“Your cappuccino will be right up, Jodie. Albert said to tell you he’s having a little trouble foaming the milk. And what can I get for you?” Fluttering her hands, Nadine aimed the question and her smile at Shane.

“A cappuccino sounds great. I haven’t indulged in one since I left California.”

“Ooh my, California. I’ve always wanted to go there. I’ll have to tell Albert we’ve got a connoisseur out here waiting to taste his cappuccino,” Nadine said before she hurried away.

“There’s only one letter in here,” Jodie said as she unfolded it.

“I can get more,” Shane replied easily.

Frowning, Jodie skimmed the paper. “The Kathy Dillon who signed it, is she the same Kathy who’s married to Sheriff Dillon?”

Shane nodded. “She’s a cousin. We haven’t quite pinned down whether it’s two or three times removed.”

“Well, then there’s no problem,” Irene said, patting her curls. “If Kathy Dillon can vouch for Shane, we won’t need those other references, will we, dear?”

Jodie stifled a sigh as Irene began to explain to Shane their plans for the house. She would call Kathy, but she knew the Rutherford sisters had won the battle. Battle? Why was she thinking of it in those terms. She glanced at Shane Sullivan again, wondering what it was about him that had made her feel so...what? Hot and cold, all at the same time? She couldn’t be...no, she really couldn’t be attracted to him. That was just not possible. Lightning could not possibly strike one person twice, at least not in the same year.

She was just suspicious of him. That’s what it was. Because he just didn’t look like a handyman—unless it was the kind of “handyman” a mafia boss might hire as a bodyguard.

“Is there some reason you’re staring at me?” Shane asked softly.

Jodie glanced quickly at Irene and Sophie, but they were heatedly debating the question of how many guest rooms they were eventually going to have.

“I wasn’t staring,” she said, leaning a little closer to him and keeping her voice low.

“It felt like staring to me,” Shane said.

“Who are you really?”

“Shane Sullivan. We were just introduced, weren’t we?”

“No one is really named Shane.”

“What was that, dear?” Irene asked.

“Nothing,” Jodie said, fixing a smile on her face as she turned her attention back to the sisters.

“Isn’t it time for you to get back to the library, dear?” Irene said. “Mr. Sullivan will be all settled in by the time you get home from work.”

Jodie glanced at her watch. She was due back at the college library in five minutes. Nadine arrived just as she rose and picked up her package.

“I brought your cappuccino to go,” Nadine said, handing her the lidded paper cup. “I know you’re never late.” Then she turned to present a foaming cup to Shane. “I hope it’s the way they make it in California.”

As Jodie made her way through Albert’s, she could hear Nadine’s laughter blend with that of the Rutherford sisters. So Shane Sullivan was a comedian as well as a . . . what? Whatever he was, she was sure he wasn’t a handyman. In the archway to the next room, she turned back. He was facing Irene and Sophie, and they were leaning forward, their attention riveted on him.

A strong sense of déjà vu moved through her and fear settled cold and hard in her stomach. Less than six months ago, she’d seen Irene and Sophie framed in the same window with their nephew Billy. When she’d come into the café, they’d waved to her to join them. That evening, they’d asked her to be their guest at the hotel for dinner. The rest had been history—one she didn’t care to repeat. Nor was she about to stand by and allow the Rutherford sisters to be taken in by another smooth-talking charmer.

A quick glance at her watch told her that she could either be on time for work, or she could stop by the sheriff’s office and ask him about his wife’s two-or-three-times-removed cousin. Once out on the street, she took the lid off her cup of cappuccino, inhaled the cinnamon, and took a long swallow. It might only be a baby step, but she was changing. Perhaps those foolish mottoes were working, after all. Either that or she was learning from her mistakes. Whatever it was, she was going to get to the truth about Shane Sullivan. Turning, she headed down the street toward the municipal building. No one could really be named Shane.

## 2

THE DOOR WITH Sheriff Dillon's name on it stood open. Jodie paused, noting that the desk in the outer office was empty. That meant that his deputy, Mike Buckley, was either at lunch or working on a case.

"C'mon in. I'm here." The voice came from the adjacent room and Jodie headed toward it. Mark Dillon, who'd been sheriff for as long as she could remember, was indeed in—deep in a book, as far as she could tell. His back was to her, his feet propped on a nearby window ledge. The moment she entered the room, he dog-eared his paperback with a grunt, swung his feet down and swiveled to face her. A smile spread slowly across his face as he waved her into a chair.

Sheriff Dillon hadn't changed much from the first time she'd met him, except that his waist was a little thicker and his hair had started to thin. His smile was certainly the same, as was the shrewdness in his eyes. The kids at the college often underestimated him when they had the misfortune to cross his path, but he had a reputation for fairness among the students.

"I was going to stop by the library to talk to you." His gaze dropped to his watch, then met hers. "Shouldn't you be there right now?"

Good old predictable Jodie. The thought had her lifting her chin. "I'm going to be late. I doubt that the world will end."

"No, I guess it won't. I hear you had a prowler last night."

It occurred to her that she hadn't thought about the prowler once on her walk over. All she'd been thinking about was Shane Sullivan.

"And instead of reporting it," Sheriff Dillon continued as he flipped his notebook open, "you decided to ask Hank Jefferson to sell you a gun."

"Yes, I did."

Mark Dillon sighed and leaned back in his chair. "Buying a gun? That doesn't sound like you, Jodie."

"Well, maybe I'm tired of being like me! Do you have any idea what it was like to wake up and know that someone was in the house, walking around in the attic? I tried to call you and the phone wouldn't work. Irene left the extension in the kitchen off the hook. She swears not, but—"

"What time did this happen?" Dillon asked, pulling his notebook closer.

"Shortly after midnight. I hadn't been asleep for long."

"And you heard something that woke you up?"

Jodie frowned. "No. Sophie said she heard a muffled crash. But I must have slept through that."

Dillon nodded. "And then what?"

"I waited and listened. Then I heard floorboards creak in the attic. I was tracking the steps across the floor when Sophie and Irene opened my door. They were armed with fireplace pokers, and Sophie insisted we go up there. I couldn't talk her out of it. I shouted up the stairs that we were armed, and luckily, by the time we got up there, he was out the window and halfway down that old elm tree."

"Did you get a good look at him or her?" Dillon asked.

Jodie thought for a minute. "I'd say it was a him. He was tall and slender. We could see him run off toward the road."

"Was he carrying anything?"

Jodie shook her head. "He had to use both hands getting down that tree."

Dillon set his pencil down. "Don't you have a dog out there? What was he doing during all this?"

"Lazarus?" The dog was a stray she'd found nearly dead by the side of the road. "I don't know if he was ever much of a watchdog, but since Doc Cheney brought him back from the dead, nothing interrupts his beauty sleep—which is why I need a gun."

Dillon closed his notebook. “A gun isn’t the answer. You don’t know how to use one, so the chances are pretty good that a prowler could overpower you, take the gun away, and after that...” He met her eyes directly as he let the sentence trail off. “On the other hand, I can’t do much besides send young Buckley out there to drive by every so often. Are any of those rooms in good enough shape yet to rent to a boarder?”

Jodie looked at him. “Funny you should suggest that. We’ve got a boarder, and that’s what I came to talk to you about. I want to know all about Shane Sullivan.”

“Shane? You’ve met him already?”

“Yes. Irene and Sophie introduced him to me after they’d already hired him on as a handyman and rented him the apartment over the garage. What do you know about him?”

“He’s a distant cousin of Kathy’s. He gave us a call a few days ago, said he was in the area. Seems he’s quit his corporate job, and he’s looking for a place to settle down. Kathy’s convinced him to give upstate New York a try.”

“So he came here at Christmas? Doesn’t he have a home or a family to spend the holidays with?”

“No,” Dillon said. “Evidently his job has been keeping him on the move. He’s never had a chance to settle down.”

“What kind of job?” Jodie asked.

“Some sort of consulting business. Took him all over the place.”

“Including California. He’s got Nadine Carter dreaming of beaches and movie stars and a new way to get out of Castleton.”

“I’m sure Shane can take care of himself,” Dillon said.

“I’m more worried about Nadine. And I’m curious as to why Mr. Sullivan has all of a sudden discovered this deep-rooted desire to become a handyman.”

“Kathy thinks it’s some kind of midlife crisis. You know, come to think of it, this arrangement could be the answer to your problems. Ours, too. We don’t really have room for him at the house with Kelly and David both home for the holidays. Shane must have realized that. And with a man living out there at Rutherford House, a prowler would have to think twice.”

Jodie met Dillon’s eyes squarely. “Pardon me, but the Rutherford sisters had a man living in their house six months ago, and thanks to him they lost their life savings!”

“I can vouch for the fact that Shane won’t be conning them out of any more of their money.”

“I’m not worried about their money. They don’t have any left. The problem is that they’re... he’s...” Pausing, Jodie searched for the right words. “It’s just that they seem to be every bit as charmed by him as they were by Billy, and I don’t want them taken in and...hurt again.”

“I see.” Dillon studied her for a moment. “As far as I know, there’s precious little anyone can do to protect people from being hurt. But if you want, I’ll speak to Shane, tell him to keep his distance.”

Jodie sat still, thinking. What had she expected him to do? From his point of view, having Shane move into the apartment over the garage must seem like the perfect solution. But it wasn’t. She was sure of it, as sure as...

“Has Billy tried to contact you?”

Jodie stared at the sheriff, surprised at the abrupt change of topic.

“Billy? No, I haven’t heard from him since he...since they took him back to New York for the arraignment.”

Dillon’s eyes shifted over her head to the doorway. “Shane, come on in. We were just talking about you.”

“I don’t want to interrupt.”

Jodie turned to see Shane filling the doorway to the office. He seemed larger than he had in the restaurant. Or perhaps it was just that the room seemed smaller because he was in it.

“Sit down. You might as well hear this since you’ll be moving into the Rutherford House.” Dillon paused until Shane had lowered himself into a chair. “Their nephew, who’s been charged with

embezzlement, may pay them a visit. I got a call this morning from the NYPD. It seems that Billy has jumped bail. They wanted us to know in case he shows up here.”

Jodie concentrated very hard on keeping her expression neutral as thoughts swirled through her mind. Billy had jumped bail? Would he really come back to Castleton?

“When did this happen?” Shane asked.

“The private security firm hired by one of the banks claims they lost him sometime yesterday afternoon. They’re not sure where he’s headed. Seems he used a credit card to buy a plane ticket to Florida and a train ticket to Chicago. They’re still not sure which he took.”

“The Chicago train would bring him this way,” Jodie said.

Dillon nodded. “My deputy is checking at the Syracuse station.”

“Why would he come back here?” she asked.

“It’s almost Christmas, and Irene and Sophie are the only two relatives he has,” Dillon said. “And you and he were engaged.”

Jodie felt her hands tighten into fists. “Not anymore.”

Dillon cleared his throat. “There’s a third reason why Billy may show up here. The five million dollars he embezzled has never shown up. They traced it to a series of banks, and it was all withdrawn in cash before they were able to arrest him. There’s a chance, a slim one, that he hid it while he was here last summer.”

“Why would he do that?” Jodie asked.

“He’s familiar with the area, and he had over a month to consider the possibilities. What I’m thinking is that he might need some help getting to it, and you or Sophie or Irene might feel sorry for him. I don’t want you to do anything foolish like aid or abet a criminal. If Billy does try to contact you, I want you to let me know.”

Jodie looked from Dillon to Shane. “And in the meantime, Mr. Sullivan is supposed to spy on us and report back to you if we do anything suspicious?”

“Now, Jodie, that’s not what I—” The shrill ringing of the phone interrupted Dillon. Reaching for it, he punched a button. “Yes, Mindy Lou.... Calm down, I can’t hear you.... What? No, no, I don’t think you should call the fire department.”

“There’s a fire at the library?” Jodie asked. Mindy Lou had been her student assistant ever since Nadine had left.

Dillon shook his head. “No, Mindy Lou, you’ve called the right person. The fire department is made up of volunteers. I get paid to handle emergencies just like this one. And Jodie’s perfectly all right. She’s sitting in front of me right now. No, she doesn’t look depressed to me at all.” Pausing, he turned to Jodie. “Is that a rope you’ve got in your package?”

As Jodie nodded, she felt two bright spots of color stain her cheek. “For hauling a Christmas tree,” she explained.

Dillon’s eyes narrowed. “I drove past the house the other day, and I’m sure I saw one all lit up in the window.”

“We’re putting another one up in the dining room,” she said. If she told the lie often enough, she was going to start believing it herself.

As Dillon nodded and continued trying to calm Mindy Lou down, Jodie turned to meet Shane’s eyes. They were filled with laughter, as she’d known they would be. But it wasn’t the cold kind that you saw when someone was laughing at you. Instead, it was warm, just as it had been in Hank Jefferson’s store, and it made her feel that he was inviting her to share in a private joke. For a moment, the two of them could have been alone in the room, and she was suddenly aware of how close they were sitting, close enough that she could reach out and touch him if she wanted to. And she did want to. More than that, she wanted him to touch her. The realization started a churning heat deep in her center.

Quickly she broke off eye contact with Shane, turning her attention back to the sheriff and forcing herself to listen to what he was saying.

“No, I’m sure she’s not going to hang herself.”

When Sheriff Dillon winked at her, she managed a smile. Every muscle in her face felt stiff.

“I can guarantee that she’ll be fine,” Dillon said. “She’ll be there shortly.... I don’t have any idea how a rumor like that got started.”

Jodie heard Shane swallow a chuckle, but she didn’t look at him. Instead, she rose the moment that Dillon hung up the phone. “I’d better get back. I’m never late.”

“You’ll remember what I said,” Dillon said as she reached the door.

“Right. If Billy shows his face, you’ll be the first to know.” Jodie wanted in the worst way to run as she left the office. Only the thought that Shane Sullivan might look out the door and see her allowed her to keep her pace steady. And it wasn’t the first time he’d made her want to run away. Why? Frowning, she stepped out onto the sidewalk and started up the street. She certainly wasn’t afraid of him. But every time she was with him, he...stirred her up. In her whole life, she’d never before looked at a man and imagined him touching her. Nor had she ever before felt that kind of bubbling heat spreading outward, downward. Pressing a hand to her stomach, she glanced sideways and caught her reflection in a store window.

She didn’t look any different than she had that morning. She was wearing her hair the same way. Running her hand through it, she watched it settle right back into place. Since she’d cut it off, it had developed a mind of its own. The winter coat was the same one she’d worn for the past five winters. So why did she feel so—

A warning bell sounded in the back of her mind. Billy Rutherford had made her feel different, too.

Billy had been all smoothness and polish. When she’d been with him, she’d felt special, noticed. Like Cinderella must have felt at the ball when Prince Charming had chosen her out of all the other women. Tightening her hands into fists, she jammed them in her pockets. She wasn’t going to be that foolish again.

Not that Shane Sullivan was anything like Billy. Oh, he had a certain kind of charm all right—a surprising glint of humor in his eyes that hinted at...shared secrets?

Jodie’s frown deepened as she turned and hurried toward the corner, quickening her pace even more once she rounded it. Whatever it was about Shane Sullivan, she had a hunch he’d never make a woman feel like she was Cinderella. No, he’d make a woman feel like...

Suddenly an image filled her mind. She and Shane, wrapped around each other, with very few clothes on...and...and they weren’t even in a bed! Jodie felt an arrow of heat move through her, melting her insides. For a moment, she couldn’t feel her legs or her feet. She wasn’t sure she could take another step.

“Jodie! Jodie, are you all right?”

“I’m fine, Mindy Lou.” Saying the words helped, but her voice sounded funny. Breathless. She cleared her throat. “Really, I’m fine.”

“You look funny. Maybe you should take the afternoon off,” Mindy Lou said as she raced down the library stairs.

“No,” Jodie said.

“I’ll fix you some tea...” Mindy Lou began.

“No,” Jodie said again as she managed the first few steps. “I’m having a cappuccino.”

“But...you never drink coffee,” Mindy Lou said.

“I’m changing.”

“AREN’T YOU GOING to say I told you so?” Dillon asked as Shane rose to close the door behind Jodie. “Rutherford bolted, just as you thought he would. And now he seems to be back in Castleton.”

“You think he was the prowler at Rutherford House last night?” Shane asked.

“His aunts have a prowler the same night that their nephew jumps bail. He’s my top suspect.”

“The question is, did he get what he came for?”

Quickly, Dillon filled Shane in on everything Jodie had told him. “She says the man wasn’t carrying anything. He needed both hands to climb down the tree.”

“So they ran him off with fireplace pokers,” Shane said with a grin. “He’s lucky she didn’t have a gun.”

“Well, let’s hope his luck has run out. I’d still like to know how you figured he’d show up here.”

“When you’ve been hunting men for as long as I have, you get to know how they think. Castleton’s a summer place he used to visit as a child. After a twenty-year absence, he suddenly pays a month-long visit to his aunts just before the sky falls on his head. It’s a pretty big clue.”

“This sure puts a hole in your theory that Jodie Freemont is helping him out.”

“How do you figure that?”

“He wouldn’t have to break in if she was.”

“Maybe not.” Shane glanced out the window just as Jodie came into view. When he found himself wanting to smile, he quickly stifled the urge. The truth was he hadn’t quite made up his mind about Jodie Freemont. She was...different than he’d expected. She had imagination and an unexpected sense of humor. And then there was that passion that simmered just beneath the surface. He’d caught glimpses of it twice now in her eyes.

He watched her pause to look in a store window, then suddenly turn and hurry to the corner. Perhaps it was all that cool reserve laced with the promise of heat. It was the kind of contrast that would draw a man. The thought of it tempting a piece of scum like Billy Rutherford made him frown.

“You’re wrong about Jodie helping him hide the money,” Dillon said.

Shane turned his attention back to the sheriff. “I’m not so sure. She’s smart enough to be putting on an act.”

Dillon smiled. “Oh, she’s smart all right, smart enough to come here to check you out. She doesn’t buy your cover. She’s curious as to why you’re wandering around without a home to go to for Christmas. And she wants to know why a corporate executive would want to try his hand at carpentry. I told her it’s a midlife crisis. Is it?”

“That’s what we agreed you’d say.”

“I’m asking for myself, now. You own a big investigative firm, and Billy Rutherford is small potatoes compared to some of the men you’ve hunted. Why not send one of your operatives?”

Shane studied the sheriff for a minute. Beneath the laid-back attitude there was a persistence and a shrewdness he admired. He decided to go with the truth. “I’ve been out of the field for a while, and I was feeling restless.” Empty was the word he’d come up with in the wee hours of the morning to describe the mix of emotions he’d been experiencing lately. But it was much less disturbing to define them as simple restlessness. “Don’t you ever miss it? Being in the field, I mean?”

Dillon shrugged. “In a town like this there’s not much to miss. Anything exciting happens, I’m right in the thick of it.”

The phone rang, and Dillon grinned. “And when my deputy is out, I get to double as my own receptionist during lunch hour. Never a dull moment.”

While Dillon handled the call, Shane glanced out the window again, but Jodie had disappeared. Whether she was cooperating with Rutherford or not, he had a gut feeling that Ms. Freemont was the key to finding both the money and the man. His plan was to get close to her, and his job was going to be a lot more interesting and pleasurable than he’d first thought.

“One more thing,” Dillon said as he hung up his phone. “I’ve known Jodie Freemont since she was a little girl. I promised her I’d tell you to keep your distance.”

Shane’s brows rose. “Does she think I have designs on her?”

“She’s more concerned about Sophie and Irene—being taken in by a smooth-talking charmer was the way she put it. But I don’t want her hurt again, especially by someone who’ll be leaving town once he gets his man. Am I making myself clear?”

“As crystal,” Shane said as he rose and walked to the door.

AT FIVE O’CLOCK on the dot, Jodie started her car. Two things were driving her as she shot it out of the parking lot: escaping from Mindy Lou’s overbearing concern and building her snare trap in the attic. Clyde Heffner, the student who had downloaded the diagram, was going to drop by and help her string it up around eight-thirty, not a minute too soon.

It wasn’t until late in the afternoon, when her boss Angus Campbell had been droning on about the contributors who would be attending the Mistletoe Ball, that she’d realized the significance of what Sheriff Dillon had told her. If Billy had come back to town, he could have been the prowler in the attic last night. And if he came back tonight, she wanted to have the trap all set! Catching Billy and turning him over to the sheriff would change her image in Castleton once and for all.

When she had to stop for the light at the corner, she turned the jazz music station she favored up full blast. Her car, a five-year-old red hatchback, was her one luxury. True, it wasn’t the convertible she’d always dreamed of owning, but...

She lost her train of thought the moment she spotted Alicia Finnerty stepping off the curb with a group of women. Wasn’t that just her luck? It would be too much to hope that the woman wouldn’t recognize her car. Way too much, she thought, as Alicia glanced at her significantly, then turned to chatter to her companions.

One by one, the other women looked her way with varying expressions of concern and curiosity. Jodie was tempted to roll down her window, grab the rope lying on her passenger seat and wave it at them. Instead, she forced herself to smile as the light changed and she eased her car around the corner. Her impulsiveness had already gotten her into enough hot water today. And it hadn’t helped her one bit. It had only contributed to everyone’s notion that she was exactly like her mother, a woman who would never recover from the loss of a man.

No, if she wanted to change her image in the town, she was going to have to do something that destroyed the idea once and for all that she was the type of woman who would spend her whole life pining over a man who couldn’t be tied down.

The moment she reached the village limits, she floored the gas pedal and watched the speedometer climb to fifty-five. When she automatically eased the pressure, she suddenly frowned. Why in the world did she always follow all of the rules?

Go For It! The moment the motto popped into her mind, she watched as the needle climbed to five, then six, finally seven miles over the speed limit. Not enough to get a ticket. Maybe she’d go for that tomorrow.

Tonight, she had bigger plans: catching Billy Rutherford. What had yesterday’s motto been? Visualize Your Goal. Even as she smiled at the thought, she decided to give it a whirl. It couldn’t hurt, could it?

In her mind, she pictured herself on the front page of the Castleton Bulletin, delivering Billy Rutherford to Sheriff Dillon.

Yes! She nodded her head in satisfaction. That one photo would truly be worth a thousand words. It would change her image in one fell swoop. With a jazz rendition of “Jingle Bells” pouring out of the radio, Jodie kept the picture clear in her mind until Rutherford House came into view.

The moment she turned into the driveway, she stopped thinking about anything but the car that was parked in front of the garage.

It was in her space, but that’s not why she skidded to a stop behind Sophie’s station wagon and jumped out of her car. It was a red convertible, the kind she dreamed of owning one day. Circling to the driver’s side, she peered inside. A two-seater with leather seats. Exactly what she wanted. Quickly she backed up to get a better view. Without any difficulty at all, she pictured herself behind the wheel, driving down the main street of town, her hair ruffled by the wind.

Perfect.

SHANE WATCHED Jodie from the shade at the side of the garage. She hadn't seen him yet, hadn't even glanced his way. It was the car that had held her attention since she'd arrived. He couldn't prevent a smile as he watched her circle it. He'd reacted much the same way the first time he'd seen it.

It suddenly occurred to him that the feeling he'd had more than once since he'd met her was one of... He searched for a word. Kinship? Recognition?

He found the thought both surprising and a little alarming. He had nothing in common with a smalltown librarian. And he didn't want to have anything in common with her. A woman like that had home and hearth written all over her. She wasn't his type at all. He'd long ago decided that he wasn't the type of man who'd ever settle down.

Plus, she was his key to finding Rutherford and the money. Even if she wasn't Billy's accomplice, and he was beginning to believe that Dillon was right about that, she might still be the one person Billy might feel he could trust and turn to.

He'd seen evidence of her fierce loyalty to the Rutherford sisters, and it might very well extend to their nephew. He couldn't fault that. In fact he admired it. Loyalty was rare these days. And it would draw a man back.

He watched her as she ran her hands over the hood of his car, slowly, hesitantly. Her fingers were short but slender, the nails tapered and unpolished. Her palms would be soft, and he couldn't help but wonder if she would have that same hesitancy the first time she touched a man. And how that might change when she was aroused, when that latent passion broke free...

With a frown, Shane reined in his thoughts. Clearly, Jodie Freemont was a distraction. But he didn't intend to let her interfere with his job.

If she was Billy's accomplice, she'd know where the money was. If not, she could be his key to finding it. In both instances, he had to get close to her, win her trust.

So you'll use her just as Billy did?

The thought left a bitter taste in his mouth he quietly stepped out of the shade.

"I think you're breaking one of the commandments," he said with a smile when he reached her.

Startled, Jodie snatched her hand from the hood of the car and whirled to find Shane at her side. "What? I wasn't going to steal it. I was just touching it."

"I was talking about the tenth commandment. 'Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods.'"

"I wasn't...I was..." Pausing, she sighed. "I definitely was. You know, I've never understood that commandment. What's wrong with coveting as long as that's where it ends?"

"But usually it doesn't end that way. Coveting is a lot like lust. It doesn't go away. It just builds and builds until the temptation to reach out and take becomes so strong, you just can't resist anymore. Go ahead."

Jodie found that while she'd been looking into his eyes, listening to his words, her throat had gone dry as dust. He was talking in theory, not about anything, and certainly not anyone, specific. But his eyes had grown so dark that the image of herself that she could see in them suddenly seemed swallowed up. And his tone of voice had been so intimate, so inviting that she wanted in the worst way to reach out and touch him the same way she'd felt compelled to touch the car moments ago. Was this the way a moth was lured into a flame?

"Go ahead and touch," Shane said.

Jodie blinked. Could he read her mind? No. No, he was talking about the car. Reaching out, she ran her hand over the shiny surface of the hood again. It felt hard and satiny smooth, but different somehow. Was she imagining that it felt warmer, as if it had been heated by the thin, wintery sun? Suddenly, the image filled her mind of what it would be like to touch Shane. Visualize Your Goal. The motto moved through her thoughts, mocking her as the heat moved up her arm like little spools of ribbon unwinding slowly. Her fingers felt singed when she finally found the strength to snatch them back.

"You want to give it a try?"

Jodie moistened her lips. “What?”

“You want to take it out for a spin?”

“Me?”

“Sure.” Reaching into his pocket, he dangled the keys in front of her.

“I can’t,” she said backing a step away. “I don’t know how to drive a shift. That’s what it is, isn’t it?”

“I could give you a lesson,” Shane offered.

Immediately, she pictured the two of them riding in the car, and the image was much more potent than the one she’d pictured earlier. This time he was touching her, sitting close, his hand over hers on the gear shift.

She shouldn’t. She couldn’t. She needed some distance until she figured out how to handle the way she was feeling. There was something she had to do...if she could just think of what it was...

“Come on,” Shane said.

“I can’t. I have some work to do before dinner.” Hurrying to her car, she lifted out the package of rope. When she turned, he was right beside her. She took a quick step backward. “And I...have to get the mail. I always stop at the mailbox when I turn in the driveway, but I got distracted.”

“I’ll walk with you.”

Jodie took a deep breath as she started down the driveway. If he even brushed accidentally against her...No. It wasn’t going to happen. She concentrated on putting one foot carefully in front of the other on the hard-packed snow. By the time she reached the mailbox and emptied it, her breathing and her thought patterns were very nearly back to normal. Still, she avoided looking at him by sorting through the pile of Christmas cards, advertisements, bills...The moment she saw the handwriting, the letter slipped through her fingers. Shane was quicker than she was, and he grabbed it just before it hit the snow.

“It’s addressed to you, and there’s no stamp,” he said. “It must have been hand delivered.”

“It’s probably from a student. They never have any money.” Taking it from his outstretched hand, she tucked it quickly in her pocket and started back up the driveway. “Have a nice evening.”

Shane waited until she disappeared into the house before he headed back to his car. She was as easy to read as a first-grade primer. That letter wasn’t from a student. She hadn’t even been able to look him in the eye when she said it. He was willing to bet his car that Billy Rutherford had contacted his ex-fiancée.

What he wasn’t so sure of was whether she’d call Dillon or decide to help out her former lover.

### 3

THE SMELL assaulted her as soon as she opened the front door and stepped into the foyer. It was the same unidentifiable scent that filled the house every time that Irene cooked. Lazarus lay in a heap at the bottom of the stairs. He twitched his tail once in greeting, but otherwise gave no sign of life. Jodie could do nothing but sympathize. Dogs had a keen sense of smell, and no doubt he knew that he'd be going hungry tonight.

"I lost the coin toss," Sophie said in a lowered tone as she appeared in the archway to the dining room.

"What happened to your lucky streak?" Jodie asked.

Sophie shrugged. "It was bound to run out. What we need is a two-headed coin."

"What we need is to tell Irene she can't cook."

Sophie frowned. "She's having enough trouble trying to accept that Billy stole all our savings. I hate to disillusion her any more."

Setting down the mail and the package of rope, Jodie took the older woman's hands in hers. "I know. But when you open the bed-and-breakfast for business..."

Sophie sighed. "We'll sit down and have a talk with her after the Mistletoe Ball next Friday. She'll be basking in the glory of having brought it off, and that will cushion the blow."

Jodie squeezed Sophie's hands. "I wish I'd had a sister like you when I was growing up."

"Well, you've got me now," Sophie replied. "Why don't you ask Shane if he can get hold of a two-headed coin? He seems like an enterprising young man to me."

"You've known him less than a day, and you're on a first-name basis with the handyman?"

"Mr. Sullivan sounds a little formal when he's going to be joining us for meals."

The thought of Shane Sullivan sitting down to one of Irene's culinary creations had Jodie's lips curving. She doubted he'd be taking many of his meals with them in the future. Then wrinkling her nose, she asked, "What could possibly smell that bad?"

"She's calling it meat loaf."

Lazarus moaned.

Jodie knelt and ran a sympathetic hand over him, then when he turned, began to scratch his stomach. He'd been nearly dead the night she'd found him lying along the road, and Doc Cheney, the town vet, hadn't been sure he'd make it.

"What does that dog have to complain about?" Sophie asked. "If he doesn't like the meat loaf, he can eat his canned dog food. We're stuck." She glanced down at the pile of correspondence. "Anything interesting in the mail."

"No," Jodie said as Sophie began to sort through it. Thank heavens she'd stuffed the letter in her pocket. "Just some circulars."

"Oh, you're home," Irene said as she breezed into the foyer. Flour streaked her hair and seemed to hover in a little cloud around her. "You just have time to change before dinner."

"Change what?" Jodie asked.

"Your clothes. Shane is joining us for dinner."

"We have to dress up for the handyman?" Jodie asked.

Irene shooed her toward the stairs. "He's a guest, too. And he's worked very hard all afternoon. Haven't you noticed all the mistletoe he's hung?"

Jodie glanced up to see that mistletoe indeed now hung from the chandelier, as well as from every archway and door that led off from the foyer.

"We put it in every room," Irene explained. "There was quite a bit we didn't use for the ball, and we didn't want it to go to waste. What do you think?"

"Very...Christmassy," Jodie managed to reply.

Irene beamed a smile at her. “After you change, I could use your help in the kitchen. You could let me know what you think of my new gravy recipe.”

“Actually, I was planning on starting on my snare trap,” Jodie quickly improvised. “In the attic. Remember?” Grabbing the rope, she hopped over Lazarus and started up the stairs.

Once in her room, Jodie locked the door, set the rope down on her bed, then pulled the letter out of her pocket. It was Billy’s handwriting all right. She hadn’t been wrong about that. Staring at it, she sank down on the foot of her bed.

She hadn’t lied to the sheriff. Billy hadn’t tried to contact her after his arrest. But he’d given Irene a note for her shortly before the police had arrived at the house to take him away. In it, he’d asked her to believe in him, to believe in his love for her, and he’d promised she’d get her money back.

Even now, she could remember how much she’d wanted to believe him, how she’d clung for two months to her fantasy that he would keep his word. She’d checked the mailbox each day hoping for a letter until the day the bank had foreclosed on her house.

What did he possibly think he could say now? Tearing open the envelope, she unfolded the letter.

My dearest Jodie,

I haven’t written to you before because I didn’t want to put you in danger. But I’ll have your money for you soon. Please don’t tell anyone about this note. My life could depend on it. Yours, too.

I never lied to you about my feelings for you.

I’ll be in touch.

Billy

Slowly, she lowered the note to her lap. Damn Billy Rutherford. What she wanted to do was rip his words into shreds. But she would keep the note because it would inspire her more than one of Sophie’s calendar slogans ever could. She wasn’t going to be that big a fool again. Ever. She glanced at the note again.

“My life could depend on it. Yours, too.”

A ripple of fear moved through her. It was probably a lie. She doubted that Billy could tell the difference between the truth and a lie anymore.

Carefully folding the paper, she slipped it back into the envelope. It was only then that she recalled what Shane had noticed. It didn’t have a stamp. Had Billy delivered it himself?

Rising, she began to pace back and forth. It meant that Billy was definitely back in Castleton. It must have been him in the attic, and he hadn’t gotten what he was after. “I’ll have your money for you soon.” That meant he had to come back.

She was reaching for the phone next to her bed when she snatched her hand back. If she told the sheriff now, she could picture exactly what would happen. He’d have his distant cousin Shane watching her like a hawk, and she might miss the one chance she had of catching Billy by herself. She couldn’t allow that to happen. Turning, she began to pace again. Catching Billy would allow her to kill two birds with one stone. She could change her image in the town forever, and she could get the money back that Billy had stolen from his aunts. They needed it. Because if they couldn’t make their bed-and-breakfast work, they could lose Rutherford House.

Pausing, she sank back down on the foot of her bed. The money was probably in the attic. Otherwise, why go there? So she’d set the trap. In her mind, she pictured Billy swinging back and forth from the rope she was going to string up in the attic. Once he was in it, she’d make him cough up the money and then she’d call the sheriff.

“CLYDE, I can’t thank you enough,” Jodie said as she followed him out onto the porch. “I never could have figured out how to weight it properly.”

“No problem, ma’am.”

And it hadn’t been. Jodie drew her coat more closely around her as she watched the skinny young man climb into his battered pickup truck and back down the driveway. In less than an hour, he’d

adapted a trap designed for use in woods or jungles to something that would operate very efficiently in an attic. Clyde was a talented young man. What he needed was someone to give him a push into an engineering school; that just might get his mind off joining one of the militia groups he was always researching on the Internet. Tomorrow, she'd see his advisor at the college. And later in the week, she was going to have a talk with Nadine Carter and see if she could convince her to come back to school.

And tonight? Drawing in a breath of the crisp, cold air, she glanced up at the sky, polka-dotted with stars. Then crossing her fingers for luck, she wished on the biggest one. Please, let her catch Billy Rutherford III in her trap tonight.

But someone else might catch him first.

With a frown, she sank down on the top step and glared at the garage. In the moonlight, she could see that the space beside Sophie's car was still empty. The red convertible had disappeared shortly before Clyde had arrived.

Jodie resented the idea that, just because there was now a man about the house, he would be the one to nab Billy. It struck her how much she really wanted to be the one to turn Billy over to the authorities. How much she didn't want Shane to beat her to it.

Her eyes widened at the thought. Where had it come from? She'd never before thought of herself as the type of woman who had to compete with a man. And she wasn't. There were plenty of reasons why she wanted to be the one to turn Billy Rutherford over to the police—and they had nothing to do with Shane Sullivan. In fact, she was going to put him out of her mind.

Just then a car pulled into the driveway and the headlights pinned her. Shane. She could just make out the red convertible in the moonlight. The urge to get up and run was almost overpowering, but she couldn't bear the idea of him getting that look of amusement in his eyes at her expense. It wasn't until he parked the car that she noticed the top was down and Lazarus was sitting in the passenger seat.

Lazarus, the dog who could barely get himself out of a prone position except to eat? And who in the world rode around with the top down in the middle of winter? She was still staring as the man and the dog started toward her.

"How did you bribe him to go with you?" she asked when Lazarus plopped his head into her lap.

"He followed me to the car," Shane said.

"You never follow me to my car," she said, leaning closer to scratch the dog behind his ears. "And I pay your vet bills."

"Evidently, he prefers convertibles. There's no accounting for taste."

Jodie glanced up at him. "It's a taste for French fries that lured him into your car. I can smell them on his breath."

Shane grinned at her. "What can I say? We were hungry."

Her eyes narrowed. "How can you be? You ate two slices of Irene's meat loaf. I saw you."

"It's nice to know I'm not losing my touch."

Jodie's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"You only think you saw me eat two slices."

She studied him for a moment, intrigued. "What did you do with them? I know you didn't feed them to Lazarus. He draws the line at Irene's cooking."

"A little sleight of hand," Shane explained. "I worked my way through college as a weekend party magician."

"You did not!" Jodie said.

He raised a hand. "Scout's honor."

"You weren't a Boy Scout, either."

His smile widened. "No, but I really was a party magician." Before she could move, he reached behind her ear and when he withdrew his hand, it was holding a French fry.

"How did you—" The scent of it had her mouth watering.

“Here,” he offered.

She hesitated for only a minute. “Thanks,” she said as she popped it into her mouth, then chewed slowly. Even cool and slightly soggy, it tasted wonderful.

“More?” he asked bringing a paper bag out from behind his back. “Lazarus indicated you preferred cheeseburgers.”

She had reached for the bag before she could stop herself. But she didn’t open it. “Dogs don’t talk, and magicians don’t really make things disappear. Where did you put the meat loaf?”

“Where you put yours—in the plant stand.”

“You saw me?”

“Magicians are always looking for new tricks. Sophie ditched hers under her jacket.”

Jodie couldn’t prevent a laugh. Then tilting her head to one side, she studied the man standing in front of her. Though the moonlight was bright, it left his face shadowed, mysterious-looking. In another age, he could have been a powerful magician. A wizard, perhaps. Fascination warred with caution. She really didn’t know anything about Shane Sullivan, she reminded herself.

Then she recalled the look on Irene’s face when he’d taken that second slice of meat loaf, and in spite of her resolve, she felt something inside of her soften.

Just then her stomach growled.

“I think you better eat that cheeseburger,” he said.

“Irene and Sophie were still up when I came out here. I don’t want—”

“No, don’t turn around,” he cautioned. “They’re watching us right now through the window.”

“They...Do you think they saw the cheeseburger?”

“No. I think they’re more interested in whether or not the mistletoe you’re sitting under will work.”

She glanced up, then back at Shane.

“It had to happen sooner or later. They pretty much had me booby-trap the whole house today.”

Jodie felt the heat flood her face. “You think they want you...they want us to...”

“I think they feel guilty about introducing you to their nephew, but they’re not willing to give up on matchmaking altogether.”

The moment his hand closed around hers and drew her to her feet, something began to tighten in her center. Her gaze dropped to his mouth. He was going to kiss her. The heat in her cheeks suddenly burned through the rest of her body.

“So why don’t you show me how to get down to the lake? Hank Jefferson says the ice fishing is very good, and I have a flashlight in the car.”

He released her hand and turned away, but it was several seconds before she could make her feet follow after him. He’d had no intention of kissing her, yet for a moment, she’d wanted more than anything for him to do just that. She had to get a grip on herself. She had to...stop looking at him. Shifting her gaze to the car, she said, “You put the top down.”

“It’s one of the unwritten rules when you own a convertible,” Shane said, extracting a flashlight from the trunk.

“But no one puts their top down in the middle of winter.”

“Not true. Santa always has the top down on his sleigh.”

Jodie laughed as she turned and led the way around the side of the house. “Okay. I guess I never thought of it that way.”

Falling into step beside her, Shane said, “Lazarus isn’t coming with us.”

“He doesn’t believe in exercise.”

A few seconds later, Shane pointed his flashlight down a path that wound its way through the trees, and for a while they walked in silence.

“The Rutherford sisters are really into celebrating Christmas,” Shane said as the trees pressed closer, blocking out the moonlight.

“Tell me about it.”

“You’re not quite as enthused, I take it?”

She shrugged. “Not the way most people seem to be.”

“Rough childhood?”

“No. Nothing like that. I just always used to wish for one thing—that my father would be home on Christmas morning.”

“Was he?” Shane asked, taking her arm as the path narrowed.

“Usually not. He’d always send a really wonderful gift and a note saying how much he missed us. But it wasn’t the same.”

“No.”

Jodie glanced at him, but she couldn’t tell anything from his expression. “I must sound ungrateful. Sheriff Dillon said that you don’t have any family to spend Christmas with.”

“That puts us in the same boat this year. And it has to be especially rough for you—losing your house.”

“Actually, the hardest thing about it was facing the fact that I’d been so stupid about believing Billy.” She paused and glanced at Shane again. “I’m not sure how to explain it. That house meant everything to my mother. She needed the security. But to my father it was a prison. He could never stand to be in it for very long.”

“He felt the lure of the open road,” Shane said.

“Exactly. And I would have done almost anything to go with him.”

“Yes.”

She could hear the understanding in his voice. It prompted her to go on. “My mother would never agree. She said I couldn’t until I finished school. Then he went off one day and didn’t come back. When we got the news of his death, she never left the house again. She simply pined away until the day she died. Having the bank take the house over gave me a chance to get away from those memories. The day I moved out, I felt...”

“Free?” Shane asked.

“Yes.” They had stepped out of the woods, and the snow-covered ground stretched in front of them to the edge of the lake. “Does that sound crazy?”

“No.” Shane shook his head. “It’s part of what your father felt every time he went off to seek adventure.”

“You sound like you know what it feels like.”

“In a manner of speaking. But I’m still curious as to why you’re living with Irene and Sophie. Why didn’t you just rent an apartment?”

“I figure I owe them.”

Shane turned to her. “Why?”

“It’s my fault they lost their life savings.”

“You blame yourself because they trusted their nephew?”

“They only trusted him because I did. Before I mortgaged my house, they’d refused to give him any money. Paying them rent each month and helping them open their bed-and-breakfast is the least I can do.”

Shane said nothing as they walked toward an old log that had fallen along the edge of the lake. When they reached it, he switched off the flashlight and sat down. “You better eat that cheeseburger before it gets any colder.”

Joining him on the log, she fished it out of the bag and unwrapped it. It was still warm, and she could smell just a hint of onion. Her mouth was open when she paused.

“What’s wrong?” Shane asked.

“I think I’m forgetting to Beware of Greeks Bearing Gifts,” Jodie said. “There’s got to be a catch to this.”

“It’s not poisoned. I promise.”

She shot him a look. “Neither is the bait you’ll use when you go ice fishing. But you won’t be putting it on the line just because you think the fish are hungry. You lured me out here with food to pump me for information, didn’t you? And so far, I’ve cooperated fully.”

Shane threw back his head and laughed. The sound was rich and full. Jodie smiled as she bit into the cheeseburger.

“Why is it that you’re so suspicious of me?” he asked.

“Because you’re not what you seem to be.” The French fries were salty and tasted of grease. Wonderful.

“No one is what they seem to be,” Shane said.

“Alicia Finnerty is,” Jodie pointed out around another bite of cheeseburger. “And Sophie and Irene are. And Sheriff Dillon... Well, maybe he’s not a good example.”

“He’s a good example of what I’m saying,” Shane said. “And as far as Ms. Finnerty and Sophie and Irene go, I’ll bet they have a side of themselves that they don’t present to the world. Some secrets they’re hiding. So do you, I’ll bet.”

Jodie thought of the letter from Billy that she was still carrying in her pocket and glanced at Shane. When he’d caught it and handed it to her, he’d noticed that it didn’t have a stamp. Did he suspect she’d heard from Billy?

“Tell you what. If you’ll tell me one of your secrets, I’ll tell you one of mine,” he said.

His eyes were dark and mysterious in the moonlight. It was even easier now to picture him as a wizard. She thought briefly of Merlin offering knowledge to Arthur. Of the snake in the garden offering much the same thing to Eve. She tucked the cheeseburger back into the bag. “I’ve already told you several.”

Shane nodded. “Fair enough. It’s your turn to ask,” Shane said. “Ask me anything at all.”

A breeze moved the branches overhead, shifting the shadows, and she could see the challenge in his eyes. The words were out before she could prevent them. “Is your name really Shane?”

“Yes,” he said, shifting his gaze to the lakeshore.

“Were your parents big fans of the book?”

“They never said.”

There was a flatness to his tone she’d never heard before, but when he turned to her, he was smiling. “It was a tough name to grow into. It cost me several black eyes in grade school. Until I learned that it’s hard for people to mock you if you turn the tables and laugh at yourself first.”

“Some people never learn that lesson,” Jodie said.

“They get a lot of black eyes. What about you? Is Jodie your given name or a nickname?”

Jodie wrinkled her nose. “It’s my given name. My dad’s name was Joe. Mom was Dee. But I never got in a fight over it.”

“It sounds like your parents loved you very much.”

When she looked into his eyes this time, she saw a bleakness that hadn’t been there before. Then suddenly it changed to something else, something she couldn’t put a name to. But it made her very aware of how close they were, so close that she could feel his breath on her skin. Her gaze dropped to his mouth. His lips no longer curved in a smile. All she had to do was lean forward, just a little, and she could know what they would feel like pressed against hers. Not soft. No, his mouth would be hard. And his taste as dark and mysterious as his scent. Her eyes widened at the drift of her thoughts. She couldn’t possibly be thinking of kissing Shane Sullivan. But she was. She most definitely was. And the moment she shifted her glance to his eyes, she knew that he was thinking of kissing her, too.

And he was going to do it. He moved slowly to lay his hand along the side of her face. She had plenty of time to pull back, and in spite of the firmness of his hand, he might have let her. But she didn’t move.

And then his lips brushed against hers, so gently that she barely felt them before they withdrew. The second time they lingered longer, but the pressure was still soft, so soft she felt herself sinking into it. The breath she'd been holding slipped out on a sigh as he slowly traced her lips with his tongue. She felt her arms go lax, her eyelids drift shut, as the pleasure seeped through her.

It wasn't at all the kind of kiss she'd expected from Shane Sullivan. It was exactly the kind of kiss she'd always dreamed about.

"Mmm," she murmured when he withdrew a second time. She had to have—

"More?" He whispered the question, and she felt his breath against her lips before his mouth at last returned to hers. A tremor moved through her, followed by a wave of heat that burned through her body right down to her toes. His lips continued to mark their magic as he coaxed hers apart with his teeth and his tongue.

This wasn't anything like her dreams. They'd never been this vivid, and the sensations had never been this intense. Each nip of his teeth on her bottom lip had her head spinning. Each quick flick of his tongue made her tremble. She felt as if she were burning up with a fever, inside and out.

His hand lay along the side of her face as his mouth moved on hers. He touched her nowhere else, and yet she wanted him to. She wanted his hands on her breasts, and even more, she wanted him to touch the heat that had settled at her very center and threatened to explode. Her fingers closed into fists as the greed built within her.

When he drew back, she stayed where she was. Not because she wanted to. More than anything, she wanted to throw her arms around him, drag his mouth back to hers so that she could reach for... whatever had seemed just out of her reach. But the messages from her brain didn't seem to be getting to her body.

"Well, well..." he said.

She blinked and then stared at him. Well, well! That's all he had to say? A joke from her childhood drifted through her mind as the anger brought strength to her body. Well, well—the story of two holes in the ground. With all her heart, she wished there were one nearby she could push him into. Her heart was still hammering, her breathing was still ragged, and he looked completely unmoved. At least he wasn't laughing. If he dared, she would make do with the lake and shove him into that.

"Why did you do that?" she asked.

"It was a mistake," Shane said.

She stared at him, appalled that she could feel tears begin to fill her eyes. She was not going to cry. She hadn't cried in a long time. Even Billy hadn't made her do that.

The thought gave her the strength to pull herself together. "Don't make it again," she said as she rose. Then she turned and moved toward the path.

The moment she did, Shane wanted to curse—her or himself, he wasn't sure which. And he wasn't sure why. All he was certain of was that it had been a mistake to bring her down here to the lake. In the moonlight, her skin looked as pale and delicate as the finest silk. He'd been wanting to touch it since he'd pulled that French fry from behind her ear.

But a moment ago, he'd wanted to do more than touch her, more than kiss her. For one frightening moment, his mind had drained of everything but her. He'd forgotten everything else, including his plan in bringing her down to the lake.

To find out about that damn letter.

Not only hadn't he gotten her to talk about it, but after what had just happened, his prospects didn't look good.

What in the world was she doing to him? Shane Sullivan always got his man. He'd never allowed a woman, any woman, to distract him before. Never.

If he wanted to catch Billy Rutherford, he was definitely going to have to find a way to handle Jodie Freemont.

But a woman had never driven him so wild with a kiss before.

It was something he thought about a long time before he followed her back to the house.

## 4

JODIE OPENED her eyes and sat straight up in bed. She must have dozed off. The illuminated face of the clock on her nightstand told her that it was 1:50 a.m. That meant she'd slept for twenty minutes.

What had awakened her? For a moment, she sat perfectly still and listened.

Silence, except for the scrape of a branch against her window. Out on the highway, the sound of a car grew steadily louder, then faded. A board creaked.

Every muscle in her body tightened. Where had the sound come from? Not overhead. Was someone climbing the stairs? Fear tightened her throat as seconds ticked by on her bedside clock. Finally reminding herself to breathe, she inched her way back against the headboard. She was overreacting. Old houses were always creaking. Or maybe it was a case of wishful thinking.

Jodie glanced up at the ceiling. More than anything, she wanted to catch Billy Rutherford in her snare trap. In her mind, she pictured him taking one step and another and another—then the rope whipping around his feet, jerking them out from under him and up until he was swinging back and forth—

Another board creaked. This time it was louder and she was sure it came from overhead. Excitement mixed with panic as she wrapped her arms tightly around her knees and watched her clock. The second hand swept the face slowly. One minute... a minute and a half... two minutes.

She glanced up at the ceiling. Surely the trap would make some noise when it was triggered. Or Billy would certainly make some sound as the rope ripped his feet out from under him—a gasp, a shout, a curse?

Wouldn't there be some sound as he swung back and forth?

As if on cue, she heard a creak. Then silence. The second hand on her clock made another sweep.

Suddenly, she recalled Irene's comment. I hope no one ends up hanging by their necks.

Jodie felt her heart jump to her throat and stick. What if she'd killed somebody? Billy?

She had to know. Slipping off the side of the bed, she raced to the door. Another creak overhead stopped her dead in her tracks, and a completely different scenario filled her mind: Billy edging his way across the attic as close to the eaves as he could get. He would only trigger the trap if he actually walked directly across the attic floor.

Whirling, Jodie hurried to the fireplace and carefully lifted the poker from its stand. Then she frowned. What in the world was she going to do with it? She wasn't going to hit Billy Rutherford any more than she would have shot him if Hank Jefferson had sold her that gun. He might bleed. Even as she shuddered, the floor creaked again.

Straightening her shoulders, Jodie tightened her grip on the poker and whipped it in a wide circle. The great thing about a poker was that you could actually poke people with it—or at least threaten to. In her mind, she pictured Captain Hook. She would just make Billy walk across the floor to the spot where the rope would snap him up.

For a moment, Jodie stood still, visualizing her plan. Then shouldering the poker like a rifle, she walked to the door. Someone was up in the attic, and she was going to get him.

The moment she stepped into the hallway, the silence seemed to deepen. She waited for a moment, listening hard. The sound of a passing car couldn't penetrate this far into the house.

Overhead, there was silence too. Holding her breath, she edged her way down the hallway. When she reached the door to the attic stairs, it stood wide open. Once more, her heart jumped to her throat, fluttering there like a bird. She clearly remembered closing the door before she'd gone to bed. Could Billy have climbed in through the window and avoided her trap, then snuck down the stairs? Slowly, she turned. Was he even now lurking somewhere in the shadows?

This time the creak sounded like a shot. Letting out the breath she was holding, she whirled back to the stairs. He was still in the attic. Keeping to the very edge of the steps, she climbed them one by one.

The darkness only lessened a little as she approached the top. The moonlight that managed to push its way through the grime on the windows made little headway into the gloom. Pausing on the top step, she counted to ten as she listened.

Nothing. She stepped carefully onto the attic floor, and suddenly a hand clamped over her mouth, and an arm banded around her waist, immobilizing her.

As panic streamed through her, she ordered herself to think. Billy? She had to let him know it was her. But the moment she tried to move, she felt herself gripped even more tightly against a hard, male body. Mixed with the fear was a sudden awareness of how strong those arms were, how callused those fingers. Not Billy's soft hands, she thought. And not Billy's scent. Suddenly the memory of what had happened earlier at the lake flooded through her. She recalled Shane's hand resting along the side of her face, Shane's mouth pressed lightly but firmly against hers until she couldn't think of anything, anyone but...It was Shane!

"The window." The words were barely a breath in her ear.

Narrowing her eyes, she peered through the gloom. Something seemed to be blocking what little light she'd noticed before. Wood scraped against wood as the window slid upward, and she could just make out a silhouette as it climbed into the room.

"Stay."

Shane released her so quickly she nearly dropped the poker. Because the shadow at the window was the only one she could make out, Jodie kept her eyes on it. A board moaned under the eaves. The shadow froze. Holding her breath, she counted to ten while the silence stretched. The moment the next board creaked, the shadow whirled toward it and suddenly there were two silhouettes locked together. The silence shattered as they pitched to the floor.

There was the sickening sound of a fist pounding into flesh and a series of grunts as the two figures rolled. A chair toppled and something rattled across the floor. Then the two figures rose again, blocking the light. She had to do something to help. Keeping as close to the eaves as she could, she edged her way toward the window. Glass shattered as they toppled a lamp. Poker raised, Jodie moved closer.

She dodged to the right when they rolled toward her. First one was on top, then the other. Which one was the intruder? Even as she hesitated, they rolled again, this time in the direction of the circle of rope.

The snare trap. Should she call a warning? Before she could open her mouth, a figure rose and staggered toward the window.

It had to be Billy. Shane wouldn't be trying to get away. In the time it took her to decide, the man had swung both legs over the sill and was gone. Jodie raced toward him.

Suddenly, there was a zinging sound, as if the string on a guitar had snapped. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the other man suddenly pitch to the floor.

"What the—" Shane ended the thought in a grunt as he shot feetfirst toward the ceiling.

It occurred to her that it was just as she'd visualized it, then she threw herself at the other man who was halfway out the window.

"Stop." She grabbed at his arm as he reached for a tree limb. A shove sent her reeling into the eaves. As she scrambled to her feet, she saw Shane begin to swing forward, but the man was out of his reach when the rope pulled him back. She made it to the window in time to grab a foot. A mistake, she thought as it kicked her to the floor.

The rafters creaked ominously as she once more lunged toward the window. Leaning out, she saw the man, climbing along the limb of the maple tree. She threw one leg over the sill and leaned

forward, reaching. A few more inches and...teetering, she stretched more and grabbed air just as a pair of hands clamped around her waist and jerked her back into the attic.

"Let me go. I can—"

"What? Break your neck?"

"I won't." She twisted one way, then another, but the hands gripping her were like a steel vise.

"You damn near toppled out that window."

"I almost had him. I can still..." Desperate, she tried to pry Shane's fingers loose. He relaxed his hold just enough to turn her around so she faced him. Jodie found that, even though he was hanging upside down, she was looking almost directly into his eyes. "Will you please let me go? He's getting away."

"Thanks to you. I'd have had him in handcuffs right now if you hadn't interrupted."

"I didn't interrupt. You interfered. If you hadn't, he'd have been swinging from his feet now instead of you."

"Let's postpone the debate until you get me down from this thing."

She tried backing away. His grip on her tightened. "I'll come back just as soon—"

"Forget it. Until you cut me loose, we're Siamese twins."

They might as well have been. They were so close, Jodie could feel his breath on her cheek and see the glint of anger in his eyes. But it wasn't fear that arrowed down her spine as her gaze moved to his mouth. All she could do was think—if he kissed her now, his lips wouldn't be soft and gentle as they had been down at the lake. And they wouldn't be patient. They would be demanding, hot and potent.

She felt his hands grow tighter, felt her own desire curl tight within her. But she wasn't going to kiss Shane Sullivan again. She couldn't. It wasn't possible to kiss a man while he was hanging upside down. Was it?

Perhaps, if he angled his head just right, and she angled hers...

Light flooded the attic. Footsteps thundered up the stairs.

"Jodie, are you all right?" Sophie led the way. Both she and Irene held their pokers at the ready as they crested the top of the attic steps.

"Good girl. Caught our prowler, I see," Sophie said, but she stopped short when she caught a glimpse of Shane. "You're not our prowler." She glanced at Jodie. "Let's get him down. Did Clyde show you how to unspring this thing or should I go back downstairs and get a knife?"

"There's a lever," Jodie said and decided to ignore the fact that Shane didn't release her as she walked toward it. The distrust between them was obviously mutual, and that suited her just fine.

"Brace yourself," she said as she threw the release lever. His grunt as he landed on the floor gave her some satisfaction. But the grin he shot her as the two ladies rushed to fuss over him cut it short. Sophie held one of his arms, Irene the other, as Shane rose to his feet.

"Are you all right?" Irene asked. "I knew that thingamajig wasn't going to work right."

"It worked fine," Jodie said. "If Shane hadn't interfered, I'd have caught our prowler."

"There was a prowler then," Sophie said. "I knew I saw someone climbing down that old maple tree in the backyard."

"That's how he got in, too," Shane said. "When I saw him start up, I used the key you ladies gave me. I thought I'd have a better chance of getting him if I came up here."

"Good thinking," Sophie said.

"Except that it cost us our prowler," Jodie pointed out.

Shane shrugged. "I would have had him if you hadn't interrupted."

Jodie strode forward until they were standing toe-to-toe. "I didn't interrupt. You interfered."

"Instead of arguing, the two of you ought to team up. That way you won't get in each other's way," Sophie said. "Right now, I think we'd better go downstairs and inform Sheriff Dillon we've had another break-in."

“And I’ll make some of my famous hot chocolate. It’s just the thing to calm everyone’s nerves,” Irene said, leading the way down the stairs.

“One taste and you’ll wish we left you hanging,” Jodie predicted in a low tone as she slipped past Shane and caught up with the two older women.

SHANE LEANED BACK in his chair and let the conversation hum around him. Across the length of the kitchen table, Dillon was jotting down information in his notebook. But no matter how cleverly or persistently the sheriff asked the question, no one was willing to say that the prowler in the attic had definitely been Billy Rutherford.

When it came right down to it, Shane wasn’t certain himself. Thanks to the darkness and the fact that he’d been occupied dodging fists, he hadn’t gotten a good look at the man’s face.

Shane shifted his gaze to Jodie. Had she gotten a better look? She said not, and she could be telling the truth. In his mind, he could still picture her stretching out that window, still feel the fear that had twisted in his gut when he’d grabbed her and found that she was already more than halfway out, teetering. If he’d been a second later... Quickly, he pushed the image out of his mind and reminded himself that she’d had the full benefit of the moonlight while she was at the window. He studied her in the harsh, overhead glow of the kitchen light. Could anyone look that innocent and still be a liar? Part of him wanted to say yes. But there was another part of him... His gaze dropped to her mouth. It was soft, unpainted. She was sitting three feet away from him and he could almost taste her. Desire crept through him, leaving a dull ache in its wake.

He wanted her, and it was interfering with his judgment. The only thing he should be thinking about was whether or not Jodie had gotten a good look at the intruder. And if she had, was she lying to protect Billy Rutherford?

Deliberately, Shane shifted his gaze to Dillon. His best guess was that the sheriff wasn’t sure about that, either. Otherwise the man would have beat a hasty retreat the moment he’d sampled Irene’s special hot chocolate.

It was “special” all right. Her secret recipe had all the flavor of warmed-up mud. Lazarus had taken one sniff of the sample she’d poured into his dish and all but loped out of the room. Shane glanced down at his own full mug. In a minute he’d have to take another drink. His excuse that it was too hot was wearing thin. There wasn’t a plant in sight, and there was no way to tip it up his sleeve since he was wearing a sweater.

When his gaze collided with Jodie’s, he saw the amusement as well as the challenge. She raised her mug in a mock salute.

He reached for his, gripping the handle carefully as he lifted it. Then suddenly, he winced and the mug slipped through his fingers, spilling its contents as it rolled to the edge of the table and dropped to the floor. In the time it took him to grip his shoulder with his free hand, he read the expressions of everyone in the room. Jodie’s was a mixture of admiration and envy, Dillon’s was one of surprise, but the ladies’ eyes were filled with worry and concern. He rubbed his shoulder, wincing again. “Sorry. I must have landed harder than I thought.”

“Don’t worry about a thing,” Irene said as she hurried over with a cloth.

“I’ll get you another in just a moment.”

“Don’t bother. I’ll just help Jodie finish hers.”

Dillon’s eyebrows shot up. “Do you want a lift to the emergency room?”

Keeping his expression pained, Shane shook his head. “My shoulder seemed fine before. It must be stiffening up.”

“Got just the thing,” Sophie said, rising and moving toward the pantry.

“I’d better file this report,” Dillon said, nodding to Irene and Jodie. “I’ll send a patrol car by every hour or so. And if any of you hear from Billy, I want you to call me.”

“It wasn’t Billy,” Irene said as she escorted Dillon out of the room. “Even as a little boy, he didn’t like to climb trees.”

"I've got something that will take care of that shoulder," Sophie said as she reentered from the pantry. "It works wonders for sore muscles and joints. Take off your sweater." Then turning to Jodie, she said, "You're going to give the lad a massage."

"Me?" Jodie asked. "I can't. I don't know anything about—"

Sophie snorted. "It isn't brain surgery we're talking about. It's a massage, and I can't do it because of the arthritis in my hands. C'mon, I'll talk you through it."

Jodie turned to Shane, and discovered there'd be no help from him. He just sat there, grinning from ear to ear. But the challenge in his eyes had her stepping up beside Sophie.

"There," Sophie said as she poured a dollop of oil into Jodie's palms. "Now, rub them together. There, that's good. Now, place your hands on his shoulders."

Jodie moved around behind Shane's chair. It was just a massage, she told herself. It wasn't... well, it wasn't a whole lot of other things. It wasn't as though she were kissing him again. Or feeling his body pressed close. As the warmth started to spread through her, she quickly pushed the other things she'd been thinking about doing with Shane Sullivan out of her mind. She could do this. People gave massages to other people all of the time. For some people, it was a job.

"Now, press down," Sophie said. "And release. That's right. Press and release. I told you, you could do it. It's as simple as breathing."

Right, Jodie thought. Except that it wasn't so easy to breathe anymore. The air around her seemed to have thickened slightly. Think of something else, she told herself. Think of the grin on his face. She drew in a deep breath and let it out.

"Now, move your hands closer to his neck," Sophie said.

She did as she was told and tried to block the sensations that had begun to move through her. Closing her mind to everything else, she focused on moving her hands over Shane in the rhythm Sophie was dictating. She'd never before realized how sensitive her fingers were. Incredible. They were absorbing everything—the prickly hairs on the back of his neck, the pulse beating at his throat.

"Press, release. Press, release."

Sophie's voice came from a distance, but it didn't matter because her hands seemed to have developed a will of their own. They were moving in a circular motion back to his shoulders, pressing and releasing, pressing and releasing. The feel of his skin beneath her hands was mesmerizing. The air seemed to be filled with the sound of her own breathing, her own heartbeat quickening. Beneath the musky scent of the oil, she could smell something much more intriguing, something dark and male.

Her palms recorded each separate sensation—the smooth, slick warmth of his skin, the taut muscles beneath that gave when she pressed. A feeling of power moved through her, and suddenly there were other places she wanted to touch. She stroked her hands down his spine, then moved them slowly up again. There was such heat here. It moved from his skin to hers and then spread until it burned deep in her center. She wanted to do more than touch him. She wanted to lean forward and press her mouth to the back of his neck. To taste him. To have him turn and...

His skin was only inches away from her lips when she paused. What was she thinking? Drawing back a little, she tore her eyes off Shane and glanced around the kitchen. It was empty. How long had she—

"Don't stop."

It took her a second to realize that he'd spoken, that it wasn't just the voice in her head.

"I can't. We can't." Before she could lift her hands from him, he snagged her wrist and turned to face her. The moment she looked into his eyes, they trapped her as swiftly, as surely, as his hand had. In them she could see exactly what she was feeling, and all she would have to do was lean forward. It wouldn't take much effort, because she felt as if she were caught by some kind of magnetic force that was pulling her slowly and inexorably toward him. And in another moment, everything she'd been imagining since the first time she met him would become reality.

Since the first time she met him... It was that thought that gave her the strength to pull herself free. She didn't know Shane Sullivan, not well enough to...She took three quick steps backward before she smacked into the refrigerator door.

"You—you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to fix myself a drink, something to get rid of the taste of that hot chocolate." If she could just keep talking...No, talking was not going to do it. She had to stop looking at him or the magnetic pull was going to get hold of her again. Turning, she found herself face-to-face with the latest motto of the day: Follow Your Passion.

Your passion is catching Billy, she reminded herself as she pulled the refrigerator open, not making love to Shane Sullivan on the kitchen table. She saw nothing but the bottle of milk that Irene had used to make the hot chocolate. Just the memory of it had her shutting the door and reaching for the overhead cupboard. "I think Sophie...yes, here it is, Sophie's cure for a head cold—a twenty-year-old, single-malt Scotch." Without glancing at Shane, she hurried on. "Care to join me?"

"Why not?"

"According to Sophie, it's good for what ails you," she said as she quickly filled two glasses, picked them up and turned. For a moment, just looking at him was enough to have her nerves knotting again. He was still naked from the waist up. He was still beautiful. And she wanted him even more than she had before.

She needed a drink. Holding the two glasses of Scotch in front of her like a shield, she moved forward. "What shall we drink to?" she asked as she set a tumbler in front of him.

"A pleasant day for the funeral," Shane said.

Jodie blinked. "What?"

"Even twenty-year-old Scotch can be lethal if you're going to knock down eight ounces."

Jodie stared at the glass she'd filled to the brim as Shane took it from her and carried it along with his own to the counter. After carefully tipping most of the liquid back into the bottle, he gave her back her glass and lifted his own. "Why don't we drink to the fantasy I was having a few moments ago?"

Jodie took a quick sip of her Scotch. Steadied by the heat that burned the back of her throat, she said, "It's going to remain a fantasy."

"I don't think so."

What she saw in Shane's eyes made her throat go dry as dust again. It wasn't the easy humor she was coming to expect. No, it was more like a threat—or a promise. She took another sip of scotch. "We can't... We don't even know each other."

His smile bloomed slowly. "It's not necessary to know someone all that well to—"

Jodie raised a hand to stop him. "It's necessary for me."

His grin widened. "Okay, ask me anything you want to know."

There was a part of her that knew it was a trap. But another part of her just couldn't resist. There was more to Shane Sullivan than he was letting on. "You'll tell me the whole truth and nothing but the truth?"

"So help me, ma'am." He turned his chair around and straddled it. "Shoot."

For the first time in her life, Jodie thought she might have. If only she'd had a gun handy. Not the kind that Hank Jefferson had refused to sell her. Not a real gun. But if she'd had a water pistol handy, she would have taken aim and unloaded it just to wipe the self-confident grin off his face.

Setting her glass on the table, she sat down and said, "You're not really some distant cousin of Katie Dillon's, are you?"

Shane shrugged. "Well, in the sense that all of us are kin, I must be related in some way."

"Bull. You want to know what I think? I think you're a bounty hunter who's come here to track Billy Rutherford down."

For a moment, Shane didn't say anything. He didn't even move. Dillon was right. She was smart. The admiration he felt for her mixed with the annoyance he felt for himself. He'd been careless. And

the reason for it was sitting right across the table from him. Instead of keeping his mind on getting his man, he'd been entertaining thoughts of... Ruthlessly, he pushed his fantasies aside.

"I'm right, aren't I?" Jodie asked.

"What tipped you off?"

"In the attic, you mentioned handcuffs. I don't think they're standard equipment for burnt-out corporate executives."

He recalled exactly when the words had slipped out, but he'd been hoping she wouldn't notice. He rarely let his cover slip, but he supposed swinging from the rafters by his feet was some excuse.

"Why are you a bounty hunter?" Jodie asked.

"The usual reasons, I suppose. It pays well and I'm good at it. Why are you a librarian?"

"Inertia. I loved college, and applying for the job at the library allowed me to stay right on campus." She met his eyes squarely. "That makes me like my mother. Afraid to try anything new."

"You must enjoy it," Shane said.

She shrugged. "Parts of it. I love books and I love to research things and discover the answers, the secrets."

"It sounds a lot like bounty hunting."

"Except that I spend most of my time in front of a computer screen, and lately..." Suddenly her eyes narrowed. "Hey, I'm supposed to be asking the questions, not answering them."

"I've got a proposition for you. Why don't we team up and track down Billy Rutherford together?" The surprised look on her face summed up his own feelings exactly. Where in the world had that question come from? He always worked alone.

"No."

That one word should have flooded him with relief, not disappointment. And certainly not annoyance "Why not? Think about it. It makes perfect sense. Especially if we don't want to stage another Keystone Cops scene like the one we played out in the attic."

"I can't," Jodie said. "I want to catch Billy to prove something—that I'm not like my mother. How am I going to do that if I team up with a big-time bounty hunter?"

"I can see to it that you get all the credit."

"But if you're the one who really catches Billy, I'd know it. And if I'm going to change how everyone thinks of me, I think I have to convince myself first. So my answer is no."

Shane watched in silence as she rose and turned away. He let her get to the door before he said, "One more thing..."

She turned.

"Something very important you ought to know about me—I never take no for an answer. I'm going to persuade you to change your mind."

## 5

“ALL I CAN SAY is that Albert wouldn’t have to spend any money advertising his specials if he could just hire that man to sit in the window drinking cappuccinos every day.” Having made this pronouncement from the doorway, Mindy Lou breezed into Jodie’s office and settled herself comfortably in one of the chairs.

Shane, Jodie thought, but she asked the question just the same. “Which man?”

“Your handyman, of course,” Mindy Lou stated with a beaming smile. “The man who convinced you to change from herbal tea to cappuccinos is also changing the drinking habits of most of the female population of Castleton.”

“He didn’t convince—” Jodie began, but Mindy Lou was on a roll.

“Nadine claims that cappuccino sales at Albert’s have tripled since he came to town. And he doesn’t have a date for the Mistletoe Ball yet.” Mindy Lou leaned closer. “Nadine asked him if he was going, and she’s very depressed because he didn’t take the hint and ask her.”

“I’m going to have to do something about that,” Jodie said, jotting a reminder down on her desk calendar.

“Are you going to ask him to the ball?”

Glancing up, Jodie blinked at the expression of astonishment on her assistant’s face. “No. Of course not. What I meant was that I’m going to have a talk with Nadine and try to convince her to come back to school. Throwing herself at every good-looking man who comes into Albert’s is not her only ticket out of Castleton.” Then setting her pencil down, she said, “Why shouldn’t I ask him? Not that I’m going to, because I’m not.”

“You could certainly ask him,” Mindy Lou said. “It’s just that you never have a date for the ball.”

“Because attending is part of my job. Angus depends on me to help him keep the names of the contributors straight. The money that’s raised through the Mistletoe Ball keeps this library running.” Why in the world was she defending the fact that she was dateless? Why did she sound like... poor Jodie?

Mindy Lou smiled. “If you did go with Mr. Sullivan, it would certainly distract Alicia Finnerty from her suicide watch.”

“Please.” Jodie dropped her head in her hands. “Don’t tempt me. I’d do almost anything to get her out of my hair. I know she means well, but lately she’s everywhere I go.”

“She’s probably trying to catch a glimpse of Billy Rutherford. Because of the reward and all.”

“Reward?” Jodie asked.

“It’s all over town that an insurance company is offering to pay \$250,000 to anyone who can recover the money. And everyone in town is betting that Billy will contact you or one of his aunts.”

“Great.” With a sigh, Jodie leaned back in her chair. No wonder Billy hadn’t made any move to contact her. If he did, someone was bound to spot him. And it wasn’t just Alicia Finnerty keeping her under surveillance. She’d been running into Mike Buckley, Sheriff Dillon’s deputy, everywhere she turned, too. In the past two days, the only person she hadn’t seen much of was Shane Sullivan.

“They’ll catch him, you know,” Mindy Lou assured her in a comforting tone. “Sheriff Dillon is meeting with your handyman right now.”

“Dillon’s meeting with Shane?”

“They were at Albert’s when I stopped in to get you a cappuccino. I’m betting Billy Rutherford will be arrested and back in jail before you know it.”

That was precisely what Jodie was beginning to fear. Picking up her notebook, Jodie rose. “Can you cover for me? I have a research project to finish.”

“Sure thing,” Mindy Lou said. “It’s your break time anyway.” Reaching into the paper bag she was carrying, she pulled out a foam cup. “Here you go. Enjoy.”

Managing a smile, Jodie took it as she left the room. But the moment she had escaped into a stairwell, she frowned down at the cup in her hand. How was she supposed to enjoy it? If she didn't do something soon, Shane Sullivan was going to get credit for everything—from changing her beverage of choice to capturing Billy Rutherford.

Oh, he'd promised that he'd persuade her to change her mind and join forces with him, she thought as she climbed the stairs to the second floor. But in the past two days, he hadn't come anywhere near her except at dinner. He'd been too busy, she supposed. Even though she'd had trouble believing he'd been a burned-out corporate executive, she'd seen with her own eyes that he was pretty competent with a hammer and a paintbrush. Sophie and Irene were excited that one of the second-floor bedrooms was ready for guests.

Pushing through the door to the stacks, Jodie headed down one of the narrow aisles. From the time she was a little girl, she'd loved to go to the library. It was an escape, a place where she could relax and straighten out her thoughts. Pausing, she ran her hand along the spines of several volumes until she found one bound in leather. Opening it, she breathed in. Old books had a special scent that never failed to trigger the feeling of peace she'd always found in them as a child. Drawing in another breath, she leaned against the shelves.

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