



Western Romance®

A MONTANA
CHRISTMAS
REUNION

ROZ DENNY FOX

Roz Denny Fox
A Montana Christmas Reunion

Аннотация

HOLIDAY HOMECOMING This isn't the first time Jewell Hyatt let Saxon Conrad go. When they were teens, she broke up with him so that he could pursue his country music career. Now, pregnant after their unexpected reunion, Jewell must prepare herself to let Saxon go again. Her heart may object, but she refuses to hold him back. Music never completed Saxon the way Jewell did...and still does. He's ready to settle down, and a baby on the way makes his decision that much easier. The only hard part will be convincing Jewell to give him a chance. All of Saxon's dreams have come true, except the most important one—a future with the woman he loves.

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“Saxon, what in heaven's name are you doing?”

Saxon, shirtless, was splitting wood. His back muscles bunched each time he swung the ax, and his skin glistened with sweat. It shocked her to see him doing physical labor. He'd never wanted to help around the ranch. But shock wasn't all. Desire gnawed at her enough to have her clutching her stomach.

Pausing, he spun, saw her and grinned. “I'm cutting wood. What does it look like I'm doing?”

“Why?” Jewell waved a hand aimlessly, more to cool her face than anything.

“The temperature's gonna dip, and it might rain. I figured I'd fill the shed near the house with wood. I left you a message earlier.”

“I had a doctor's appointment.”

“You did? How did that go?” Burying the blade in the stump, he reached for a T-shirt and rubbed it down his chest.

Jewell’s eyes tracked the path of the soft fabric before she blurted, “I’m pregnant. Eight weeks.”

Dear Reader,

This is the third and final book in the Snowy Owl Ranchers series. Jewell Hyatt, the local veterinarian, was born and raised in the small Montana community. She and Saxon Conrad met when his parents died and he came to live with his bachelor uncle next door. Uncle and nephew had a long-rocky relationship. Jewell, who always had a crush on Saxon, took his part. She facilitated his interest in writing, singing and performing country music. The crush blossomed into love. But there came a time near the end of college when Saxon’s need to go to Nashville and make his mark in the industry conflicted with Jewell’s dream of living forever in her hometown. Of being a vet and saving a refuge for the snowy owls.

Saxon and Jewell split up. They meet again when they’re older and more entrenched in their chosen fields. Fate and friends take a hand in bringing this couple together a third time. But is it enough even in the Christmas season of miracles to allow them to settle their differences and make a life together?

I welcome hearing from readers via mail at 7739 E. Broadway Blvd #101, Tucson, AZ 85710-3941, email at rdfox@cox.net or via my website, korynna.com/rozfox.

Sincerely,

Roz Denny Fox

A Montana Christmas Reunion
Roz Denny Fox



www.millsandboon.co.uk

ROZ DENNY FOX's first book was published by Harlequin in 1990. She writes for several Harlequin lines and her books are published worldwide in a number of languages. Roz's warm home-and-family-focused love stories have been nominated for various industry awards, including the Romance Writers of America's RITA® Award, the Holt Medallion, the Golden Quill and others. Roz has been a member of the Romance Writers of America since 1987 and is currently a member of Tucson's Saguaro Romance Writers, where she has received the Barbara Award for outstanding chapter service. In 2013 Roz received her fifty-book pin from Harlequin. Readers can contact her through Facebook or at rdfox@cox.net, or visit her website at korynna.com/rozfox.

I'd like to dedicate this story to the National Wildlife Federation. An article in one of their magazines sparked my interest in snowy owls that generally live in the frozen tundra.

But due to changing weather and an evaporating food source, they're migrating to Canada and the lower forty-eight. I don't know if they nest in Montana, but as some are being followed in Michigan, my story-owls settled in cold, snowy northeastern Montana.

I'd also like to dedicate this book to Johanna Raisanen, editor, who inherited this project late in the process. My heartfelt gratitude for all of her help.

[Contents](#)

[Cover](#)

[Back Cover Text](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Dear Reader](#)

[Title Page](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Extract](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter One](#)

Jewell Hyatt considered herself fearless. But as she emerged from the airplane at Reagan National, for the first time ever setting foot east of the Missouri River, she was overwhelmed by the crush of people. She reminded herself she'd come to Washington, DC, to convince members of the Natural Resources Committee to authorize a refuge for snowy owls. Focusing, she merged with a stream of travelers rushing to the baggage area.

Her good friend Tawana Whitefeather was supposed to come, too, but she had ended up needing emergency gallbladder surgery. Because it'd taken months to secure the meeting, Jewell had to come alone. She was the owls' biggest advocate—starting at age ten when she'd found a chick with a broken leg who'd blown off course and she'd nursed it back to health.

Oh, boy! If she thought traffic inside the airport was chaotic, driving her rental car in a virtual rabbit warren of whizzing vehicles gave her heartburn.

It was with profound relief that she arrived in one piece at the hotel's parking garage—thanks to her GPS.

After collecting her bag, Jewell checked in.

In her room at last, she toed off her shoes and flopped down on the bed, grateful she had a whole night to unwind before

the meeting. While it was the most important part of her trip, the meeting wasn't her only mission. A client had asked her to make a side trip to Maryland to check a stallion and possibly ship sperm home. And fortunately, or unfortunately, depending on her wavering point of view, her closest neighbor had also begged her to hand-deliver a letter to his nephew, who was headlining a nearby country-western concert.

Leland Conrad's request had come as a shock. Given how long he and his nephew had been estranged, Jewell wouldn't have thought he had any idea of Saxon's performance schedule. Saxon had lost both of his parents in a car accident at age twelve. He'd been sent to live with his bachelor uncle, for whom he'd always seemed a burden. And he'd been Jewell's first love.

As memories crowded in, she surged to her feet to go hang a few items in the closet. If only Leland had let her women's group buy his forest to use as an owl refuge, this entire trip would've been unnecessary.

She sank down again, rubbing her temples. Knowing she was a scant few miles from where Saxon Conrad was due to perform made her head ache. But those counting on her to secure a refuge would expect her to be at the top of her game tomorrow instead of mooning over a lost love.

Not lost. She had broken up with Saxon. It shouldn't still affect her. But it did. Maybe seeing him onstage in all his trappings would let her purge him from her soul.

* * *

IN THE MORNING Jewell collected her notes and checked to be sure she had the credentials the committee had sent her to gain entry into the government building. Her contact recommended taking a cab, so she did.

Once she gave the driver the address, Jewell brought up the weather. "It's awfully cloudy. Is it supposed to rain?"

The cabbie glanced at her. "Are you not tracking Althea's progress?"

"Who?"

He laughed. "Our first named Atlantic storm of the season. It's anybody's guess where she'll come ashore, or if she'll be a hurricane. June's early, but lately our weather's been screwy."

"A hurricane?" Feeling like a parrot, Jewell ducked down for a better look at the murky sky. "I was planning to drive to Maryland this afternoon. Should I worry?"

"Listen to advisories." He pulled up to a guarded gate, indicating this was where she should get out.

Rattled by the storm news, Jewell was almost too discombobulated to dig out her phone to take a photo of the Capitol to show her friends in Montana.

A guard checked her pass and handed her off to an intern, who set Jewell at ease as they traversed corridors. Once inside the meeting room, she was surprised that instead of everyone being seated around one table, she sat alone facing three men and three women. They were elevated, making her feel a bit on trial. But one woman smiled and, following introductions, invited Jewell

to state her case.

“As I explained in emails, our ranch community was renamed for the snowy owls that migrated to our area. Everyone loves them. Local Native Americans adopted them as a talisman. The man who owns the timber I told you about has his property listed to sell. We worry a buyer may log off the trees, leaving our snowies homeless.”

“We expected a tribal representative,” said a bespectacled man.

Jewell quickly explained Tawana’s absence.

“Sorry,” one of the men said. “But you seem to be the owl caretaker.”

“Yes, I band chicks and keep a tally. Our owl numbers aren’t huge, and of course, the tundra is their normal habitat. I worry about decline.”

Members discussed possible reasons, such as mining, logging, changing weather and food depletion, all of which Jewell knew. Then a representative who kept glancing at his watch said, “There’s a waterfowl preserve near you. Just relocate the owls.”

“They settled of their own accord in abandoned eagles’ nests or atop boulders. The lake isn’t close. Like I said, the owner of the land where they live wants to sell. If you’d purchase that portion as a refuge, my friends and I will gladly maintain it.”

The members glanced awkwardly at one another. The chairwoman closed her notebook. “I’m sorry, Dr. Hyatt. We thought your group had land. We post privately owned parcels or

work with wildlife defenders who buy areas that we then make federal reserves.”

“We have some funds. Far from enough to buy Conrad’s ranch. And he’s not inclined to divide his property for us. We hoped your leverage...” She didn’t finish as all the members shook their heads.

“It’s too bad he won’t work with you,” a man said. Others rose and began leaving. The chairwoman waited. “I’ll have one of our wildlife biologists inspect your nesting site when he’s out west. We’re aware snowies are migrating and adapting. In fact, we’re following a group in Michigan. I’ll email you a list of birder groups to contact.” With that she opened the door and called the intern to escort Jewell out.

Numb with disappointment, Jewell trudged out. Why hadn’t the person she’d emailed with told her this? It would’ve saved money and time spent on this useless trip.

Out on the street she caught a cab. Frankly, she was so disheartened she wanted to catch the next flight home. But she’d promised Mark Watson she’d check the stallion. And while more than ever she’d prefer to skip Saxon’s concert, it was probably not the time to let Leland down.

Not until after she changed into clothes suitable to visit the horse farm did Jewell remember her first cab driver’s warning about the weather. It was one o’clock. The sky looked the same. She took a moment to phone Tawana to share the bad news and see how her friend was doing.

“I hope I’ll be released from the hospital tomorrow. Gosh, Jewell, I can hear how upset you are. When you return, let’s call the Artsy Ladies together and figure out a next step. Hey, I saw on TV that DC may get socked by a hurricane. Are you in danger?”

“It’s not certain where or when the storm will land. Don’t worry.”

“Okay, be careful.”

Jewell said goodbye and turned on the TV as she donned her boots. A local station showed three places the storm might make landfall. But they said Althea had slowed and it’d probably be midnight before she came ashore.

Jewell snagged her jean jacket, then hurried to the parking garage to reclaim her rental. She hadn’t driven far before she fervently wished for the wide-open spaces of home. However, once she reached Maryland, the countryside became awash with fields of lush grass and white rail fences, and she relaxed.

But even with a GPS, she somehow got off on a wrong freeway and ended up in West Virginia. She had to stop and phone the owner of the horse farm. Thankfully, he provided her better directions.

As it turned out, the owner and his wife were delightful. They had beautiful horses. Jewell had completed ordering the sperm sent to Mark when the owner mentioned the hurricane.

“Montana gets a lot of wind and snow, but I’ve never been close to a hurricane.”

The owner’s wife checked the weather on her cell phone and

told Jewell the storm was spinning offshore. The couple assured her she'd have ample time to drive back to DC.

Jewell didn't volunteer that she was making a side trip about an hour away. Perhaps the storm warnings were telling her she should skip Saxon's concert. But Leland had paid for her ticket.

Stopped at a crossroad, Jewell studied the blustery sky. She didn't know how much of the pewter color was due to the late hour and how much to an impending storm. She snapped on the radio. A woman said the hurricane had stalled. A man interrupted to say it had gathered strength. Nothing in their banter sounded so dire to Jewell that it would hurt her to swing by the town hosting the concert. If reports worsened, she could run in and give Leland's letter to someone associated with Saxon and hurry back to her hotel.

After meandering for another hour through horse country, Jewell spotted the rustic theater advertising Saxon's concert on its marquee.

Not detecting any change in the weather, she paid to park in a lot a block away but didn't immediately get out. Her stomach churned at the prospect of seeing Saxon. Probably it was good that she'd skipped lunch.

Even now she had trouble understanding how she and Saxon had gone from best friends to lovers to virtual strangers. She'd followed his career for a while, until she began to see him paired with a pretty blonde singer. Only then did she date. She had even briefly been engaged to the son of a local rancher. But there was

no spark, so she'd returned his ring.

Gripping the steering wheel, she hung on tight. From the time Saxon arrived in Snowy Owl Crossing, they'd been inseparable. She was his shoulder to lean on. He and his uncle constantly clashed. She always took Saxon's side. And he had spent every minute he could at her home. It was where he developed a love of music. Her dad had owned a guitar. Saxon spotted it and spent hours teaching himself to play, often missing chores his uncle gave him.

Jewell had always had a crush on Saxon. She'd been the one to first convince him to play and sing for friends. Later she found him gigs at county fairs and rodeos—anything to keep him in her sphere and give him a break from Leland's nagging him to knuckle down on the ranch.

Looking back with more clarity than she'd had when they'd split, Jewell realized it shouldn't have shocked her to learn near college graduation that nothing on earth could entice Saxon to return to his uncle's. Not even her.

Maybe if she hadn't been so single-minded, so deep in her own studies and plans for the future, she'd have anticipated how it'd end when he left agriculture and switched to a music track.

The awful truth didn't register until he announced that he was going to Nashville. He assumed she'd go along to support him. He even said once he signed with a label, she could enroll in vet school in Tennessee. But Nashville wasn't Snowy Owl Crossing, and Tennessee wasn't Montana. Looking back, she saw it was

obvious their love hadn't been strong enough.

Rain began striking her windshield. Jewell released her death grip on the steering wheel and found a tissue to blot her tears.

Assuming she wouldn't get close enough to Saxon to hand him Leland's letter, she figured she could ask someone on his staff to deliver it. She'd come this far. And a sick man back home counted on her. At least, Doreen Mercer, who owned the café and kept tabs on Leland, claimed he wasn't well.

Dashing to the theater, Jewell dug out her ticket. She was maneuvered into a line of noisy people filtered between two sets of velvet ropes.

Making sure the letter hadn't fallen out of her purse, she peered around two women directly in front of her and her breath stuck in her throat. Saxon stood up ahead cordoned off by the left rope. He appeared to be greeting concertgoers, thanking them for coming and handing out T-shirts bearing his likeness.

Panic gripped Jewell. She should flee before she made a spectacle of herself and fainted or threw up. But she was hemmed in by the boisterous crowd. The line inched forward. Everyone wanted to speak to Saxon. Most wanted his autograph.

Jewell forced herself to think. This could be her chance to hand over Leland's letter, duck under the rope and escape. Except her feet wouldn't move, and she pawed in her purse and couldn't find the letter. Nor could she take her eyes off Saxon. He looked the same yet different. He'd shot up to six feet early in his teens, but he used to be runner thin. Now he had filled out nicely in his

chest and shoulders. While his dark hair had always had a slight curl, tonight it looked wonderfully mussed. Probably styled.

Admittedly, she'd viewed him online a few times. But, wow, he was way more potent in person. So darned good-looking it played havoc with her vow to see him in the trappings of his trade and once and for all...flush him from her system.

The woman behind Jewell nudged her to close the gap between herself and the folks in front of her, who had reached Saxon. Paralyzed, she let herself be shoved.

Because she hadn't located the letter, she bent her head to find it and quickly scoot past Saxon to where helpers ushered ticket holders into the theater. The letter stubbornly evaded her search. Suddenly she had no time left. Should she rush by, let someone seat her and ask an usher to deliver the letter?

"Jewell? Jewell Hyatt, my God!"

Hearing her name breathed out quietly but reverently had her lifting her head. Her gaze locked with Saxon's silvery-gray eyes. First disbelief spread over his handsome face; then something akin to joy made heat flood her belly. "Hello, Saxon." Her greeting sounded high and strained but was all she could manage.

"What are you doing here?" He ignored staffers who were trying to move Jewell and those behind her through the line faster.

"I...ah...came on business. Uh...Leland asked me to bring you a letter." She bent and fumbled again inside her purse in earnest.

"Leland? Who cares?" Saxon said gruffly.

Jewell glanced up in time to see a hefty man to Saxon's right poke him and mutter, "Boss, we need to move folks along. Some are still stuck out in the rain."

Nodding, Saxon raised a hand and signaled a man standing at the end of the velvet ropes. "Donovan! Hey, Donovan!"

That man rushed up.

Saxon indicated Jewell. "She's an old friend. Seat her in VIP."

Even though Jewell had the letter half out by then, the man in the dark blue Western-style suit propelled her briskly into the hall. She almost dropped her purse and the T-shirt Saxon had given her before he recognized her and set up a fuss she didn't want or need.

"Really, this isn't necessary," she said when they ended up standing by the first row, which was within spitting distance of the stage.

"Saxon wants you here." Leaning over, the man unhooked a gold rope, then pressed her into the first of six empty plush seats. He adeptly reattached the rope, straightened and stood at the end of the row with feet apart and hands tucked behind his back like a military guard.

Jewell sensed eyes boring into her back. She felt on display because this short set of seats was separated from the longer row behind by eight or ten feet of empty space. This was too much. She felt imprisoned, and why? She yanked out Leland's letter, zipped her purse and started to ask her apparent jailer to deliver it before insisting she had to leave. But as she rose from her seat,

a younger guy pulled Donovan aside and began gesturing and whispering. Then he departed through a side door to the left of the stage.

Waving the letter, Jewell attracted Donovan's attention. "I came here primarily to give Saxon a letter from his uncle. I'm from Saxon's hometown. Frankly, I don't know why his uncle didn't mail this. Maybe Saxon travels too much," she offered lamely.

"Keep it. I have orders to take you backstage after the performance. Lance just said it may be a short concert due to the hurricane landing sooner than expected."

"Heavens, then I really need to give you this and go. I have to drive back to my hotel in DC." She managed to unhook the gold rope but dropped the letter. She bent to retrieve it, but Donovan scooped it up and tucked it in his suit-coat pocket as the lights dimmed and blinked twice and a disembodied voice from above asked everyone to take their seats. "The concert begins in two minutes."

Stepping over the rope, Donovan scooted Jewell into the adjacent seat, and after growling, "Stay," which reminded her of how one would address a dog, he plopped his big body into the seat she'd just vacated.

A hush fell over the theater. Overhead lights went lower still, this time to a muted golden glow. All at once blinding spotlights in multiple colors pinged around a stage where a small band now appeared holding various instruments.

Jewell didn't want to feel eager, but it was the only way to describe the flutter of anticipation that clutched her. And when Saxon bounded onto the stage with guitar in hand, she was transported back to watching him emerge in similar fashion to perform so many times in the past. She'd loved him then. Now she was starstruck. He exuded a commanding presence as he stepped to the front of the stage, smiled and clipped the leather strap of an acoustic guitar around his neck. The audience went wild.

After he'd strummed a few chords, his gray eyes found Jewell. His smile softened momentarily but then hardened. In that first moment, the love she'd so desperately tried to stamp out flooded back, filling her with a desire to return to the past where their connection had been simple and natural and—she'd assumed—forever.

Chapter Two

Someone slid a stool onstage. Saxon half sat on it and then began to play and sing. Jewell, who used to believe he had a good voice, sat mesmerized. His voice had deepened and mellowed. If he still wrote the songs he sang, as he'd done back when she was his primary cheerleader, his lyrics now were decidedly more emotional.

It'd been a long time since she'd seen him perform in person. Never since he'd become famous. After the first time she'd heard him on the radio, she had blocked the pain by telling herself she was too busy to listen to music anyway. Because her work

required short jaunts between ranches, it wasn't worth turning on her pickup radio. But if she were being totally honest—country music had always been her favorite, and frankly, she'd been afraid if she heard Saxon singing any of his early tunes, she'd start blubbing.

She was near to weeping now.

She began to wonder about this song that dealt with loneliness and suppressed love, or lost love. Had she ripped apart Saxon's heart? After all, she'd been the one to break things off—to surgically end their relationship.

At twenty-one, she never thought he would have ever expected her to realign her life to follow him. Everyone who knew her knew being a vet in Snowy Owl Crossing was what she'd planned and prepared to do from the time she was old enough to dream.

Now, listening to Saxon's voice grow thick on a chorus about broken promises, Jewell trembled under his almost icy scrutiny. It was patently obvious that he had zeroed in on her. Was he taunting her? It seemed not to matter how tense his jaw was—his voice remained seductive. She was carried back to college days when he'd sung her parts of new songs, and it had frequently ended with their making love.

Uncomfortable, she shifted in her seat. But noting a hush fall over the crowd, she turned slightly to glance behind her. A row of women stared openly at her with envy, because as Saxon began his next number, it couldn't be more evident that he sang the love song to her.

All at once a photographer who'd been taking pictures of Saxon and his band suddenly knelt and snapped off a battery of her. Blinded, Jewell jerked aside. And she worried about where those photos might appear and what they might reveal on her face—the rapture, the love she hadn't been able to completely abolish.

Listening as he crooned her name, she felt her nervousness increase tenfold. Partway into the second verse, she thought, Phew! There was no way the people in the audience could know that the jewel he mentioned—like a vibrant diamond he longed for—was her. Only she was aware how many times in the past he'd kissed her and jokingly called her his million-dollar gem. At least, she used to assume it was a joke because they'd laughed together.

More uneasy, she flipped up her jacket collar to hide her burning face. Why was Saxon doing this? He hadn't held her in years. He hadn't called or tried to contact her. And she was quite sure he hadn't been a monk since they'd parted.

Relief washed over her when the song ended—enough for her to actually relax as Saxon announced that he would sing his latest hit next.

Concertgoers clapped and shouted. Some whistled catcalls. But Saxon had barely run a thumb over his guitar's strings when the man who'd first introduced him burst onstage through the back curtains. Grabbing the microphone, he said, "I'm sorry to tell you all, but the hurricane has reportedly made landfall,

bringing bands of heavy rain. We need to cancel the rest of the show. As we told each of you at the outset, Saxon and his band appreciate how so many of you ventured out given the unsettled predictions for Althea. Unfortunately, we hear many streets are flooding, which has taken officials by surprise. I spoke with local authorities, who suggest you go home if you live nearby or seek accommodations in this city for tonight. Local motels will offer discounts if you show them your concert ticket stub. Everyone, please take care. And we're sorry. Staff will give each of you a free CD at the door."

Behind her, Jewell heard gasps and the sound of feet retreating up the aisles. She stood, intending to follow. Donovan leaped up to talk to another man. Suddenly he glanced around and beckoned her.

"Please remember to give Saxon the letter. Tell him I enjoyed the show but I have to go."

The man blocked her exit. "Saxon is waiting for you backstage."

"You don't understand. I need to see about a room, because it sounded as if I'd be foolish to try and drive back to my hotel in DC until this storm passes."

"Watching the stampede of folks out of here, you'd be wise to let someone on Saxon's team secure accommodations for you." Then without waiting for her to agree or object, he clasped her upper arm and all but dragged her through a set of black velvet curtains near the stage. Saxon's band had already cleared out with

their instruments.

He stood in a hallway gesturing and talking to a couple of those same band members. Donovan whisked her along, barely letting her boots touch the floor. He didn't stop until her shoulder jostled Saxon's upper arm. "One lady friend delivered as ordered," the man announced.

It didn't surprise her to hear Saxon huff out an exasperated-sounding, "She's an old friend, not some item I ordered off a menu." As if to make a point, he swept her up and swung her around until excitement built inside Jewell like it had when they used to ride the Tilt-A-Whirl at the county fair. Then he unceremoniously plopped her down and went on talking to a young man holding a guitar.

Her stomach had yet to settle when Saxon again skewered Donovan with a glance. "Speaking of menu, I'm starved. Ask Carson to see if he can scare up a decent meal for two and deliver it to my bus before this town drops its shutters?"

"I can't stay, Saxon. I need to call around and find a room," Jewell said.

Her comment had Saxon frowning down at her.

The last band members moved on out a back door. When it opened, Jewell felt a damp wind whisk along the hall. Courtesy of an outside light above that same door, she noticed rain flying in circles. "The weather is definitely worse. I wonder how far away hotels or motels are."

Donovan acknowledged Saxon's request for food. Then he,

too, rushed out, calling loudly to the absent Carson. Suddenly she and Saxon were the only ones left in a theater where the few lights still burning began going dark one at a time.

His arm tightened around her waist. “Damn, it’s really you! Believe it or not, you come to mind so often I first thought I imagined you standing in line. I’m sorry I didn’t have a minute before the show to do more than have Donovan find you a seat. This is only the second time we’ve had to shorten a show due to weather. However, our booking agent is responsible for battening down the hatches, so to speak. Come, we’ll have a drink, wait for the food and catch up in my bus. It’s parked out back.”

Anchoring Jewell more firmly to his side, he moved them along the almost dark hall to shove open a door that seemed to stick. Once they emerged, driving rain and a battering wind jammed Jewell’s protest down her throat. “Seriously, Saxon. I’m not kidding about needing to locate a room.”

Hunching his larger body around her, Saxon made a hard left turn and plowed on through fat raindrops striking them from all sides.

As the wind robbed her ability to speak, Jewell was unable to object when Saxon keyed some numbers into a pad near the front of a big, dark bus, then opened a door where steps magically appeared. She blinked water from her eyelashes after he rushed them in out of what was definitely deteriorating weather.

Saxon flipped switches until light fell from a series of wall sconces. That gave Jewell time to gather her jumbled senses

enough to examine the interior of a vehicle that for all the world looked like a luxury apartment.

He dashed off, leaving her standing behind plush driver and passenger seats. She dripped on real tile that served as a foyer to a living room outfitted with thick beige-colored carpet. Saxon reappeared with two towels, one of which he offered her.

She set her handbag and the now-soaked free T-shirt on a side table and blotted her face and hair with the terrycloth towel. The hem of her shirt not covered by her jacket was also soaked. The hand towels wouldn't do much to dry either of them.

"Saxon, I would love to have time to share a meal, but considering the number of people at the theater who'll be stuck in town, I really need to find accommodations. My hotel is in the heart of DC. I intended to return there after your show, but now that's out of the question." Wadding the towel, she clutched it nervously in front of her.

"Are you afraid of me?" Saxon abruptly asked.

"What? No!"

"It looks like it from the way you're holding that towel like a shield."

Jewell scowled at the object and quickly relaxed her arms. "Here." She tried to pass the towel back. "Donovan said you'd have an assistant find someplace for me to spend the night. Is there someone who'll do that?"

A sharp rap at the door kept Saxon from taking the towel or responding. Before he reached the door, it flew open. A man

dressed in a clear slicker gestured to Saxon by holding up two square takeout boxes. “I hope you guys like lasagna. The only restaurant open was an Italian place. Even they were closing up. And Donovan said your friend needed a room. I’m sorry, Sax, but two of us phoned around and couldn’t find even an empty broom closet.”

Saxon handed Jewell his wet towel so he could accept the boxes from the poor dripping fellow. “Uh, thanks, Carson. Were you able to buy enough to feed you guys and the band?”

“Yeah, the restaurant owner was happy to have me take all remaining pizzas off his hands. If this is all you need, boss, I’d like to get back before the others demolish it.”

“By all means. And double thanks for braving the weather.”

The response was muffled as the other man shut the door with a loud bang that made Jewell jump.

Facing Jewell again, Saxon shrugged. “You heard him. Maybe the storm will pass quickly. I’m sure you heard me say earlier that I’m starved. Unless you’re full up, follow me to the table and I’ll serve this while it’s hot. My kitchen and dining table are in the center of the coach.”

The aroma from the food wafted up, causing Jewell’s stomach to growl loudly.

Saxon smiled for the first time since they were left alone together. “That sounds as if you’re plenty hungry, too.”

“Embarrassing but true. I went to examine a stallion Mark Watson wants to mate with his new mare. I got lost and missed

lunch. Where shall I put these towels? They're too wet to set on any of your nice wood furniture." Looking around, she noted the cozy living room and its big-screen TV.

"The kitchen counters are granite. Drop the towels there. If you want, you can wash up at the sink while I grab plates and utensils. So you came across country to check on a horse for Watson? Remember Rafe Laughlin? He came to one of my shows a few years ago. He said you were engaged. Was it to Watson?"

"Mark is older and happily married. I made this trip to speak to the Natural Resources Committee about buying a portion of Leland's land as a snowy owl refuge." Trailing in his wake, Jewell laid the towels on the countertop. "Wow, this is fancy. I had no idea buses could be so swanky." She swept a hand around to take in stainless-steel appliances that included a dishwasher and wine fridge. She noticed it only because after setting out plates, napkins and silverware, Saxon got out a bottle of wine. Holding it out for her to see the label, he pulled the cork. "Do you still prefer chardonnay regardless of what type of food is served?"

Jewell saw it was a brand they sometimes used to buy as a treat after acing their college tests. Almost as quickly, she recalled if they indulged too much, their evenings usually ended in a sleepover. Back then not a lot of sleeping went on. "I...still do prefer chardonnay. But only one glass with dinner. Hopefully, I'll get to drive back to DC later."

"Doubtful from the sound of that wind." He set aside the

cork and poured wine into two glasses. “Let’s sit and fill our plates. Then you can catch me up on what’s happening in the lives of the old home crowd.” Pausing, he studied her. “I still can’t believe you’re here. If you only knew how many times I spotted someone with hair the color of yours in the crowd and my heart... Well, suffice to say, until tonight I was always wrong and disappointed.”

Having no idea how to respond, Jewell dipped her head and slid into a chair across the table from him. Opening her food carton, she sniffed the pungent garlic scent. “This looks and smells fantastic. Can we eat first and talk after I appease my empty stomach?”

Chuckling, Saxon scooped lasagna onto his plate, along with asparagus and two slices of toasted garlic bread. “I can’t say I’m sorry the only restaurant open was Italian. Remember that little hole-in-the-wall place near campus that served the world’s best spaghetti and meatballs? I recall it every time I eat Italian food.”

Jewell smiled and felt the knot in her stomach ease. “Rossiano’s. Good food and cheap. I wonder if it’s still there. I have to admit I rarely get out of Snowy Owl Crossing these days.”

“Yet here you are.” Saxon picked up his wineglass and took a drink. Setting it down, he said, “You mentioned asking a committee to buy some of Uncle Leland’s land. Is he selling out? If so, I suppose he wants a fortune.”

“His Realtor advised him not to break up the ranch, which includes the area where owls nest.” After blotting red sauce off

her lips, Jewell set her napkin back on her lap. “My meeting with the federal committee didn’t go as I’d hoped.” Between bites, she launched into an explanation of the efforts already put forth by the Artsy Ladies. “One member of the national committee said maybe we can partner with a birder group to buy the land.”

“Who are the Artsy Ladies?”

Jewell named them. “We all make and sell crafts. We hope the money will one day buy land for a snowy owl refuge.”

“Okay, I know most everyone. I’m drawing a blank on Myra Maxwell.”

“Until this past spring she was Myra Odell. Remember she only spent summers with her grandparents? Her grandmother passed and Myra moved to Snowy Owl Crossing to run the ranch the last three years. Then her grandfather died.”

“Now I can place her. I’m sorry to hear about the Odells. You say Myra married someone named Maxwell? That name doesn’t ring any bells.”

“It’s quite a story. Myra’s dad gave the ranch to Zeke Maxwell, an ex-military guy who saved her brother’s life. Myra and Zeke fell in love and married. They run the Flying Owl now. Zeke has a twin, Seth. Before I left home, I sensed he and Lila Jenkins will be the next in our group to walk down the aisle.”

“Lila? Did she and Keith divorce?” Saxon paused in eating and frowned. “Rafe didn’t mention anyone but you when we talked. He travels a lot selling farm equipment. Sometime after college he left Montana for Tulsa.”

“You really are behind times.” She glossed over the horrific mine accident in which Keith and other miners died.

“Gosh, I’m sorry to hear it. I remember they got married right out of high school. And didn’t they have a son about the time we graduated from college?”

“Yes. Rory is nine. He’s nuts about playing baseball, something Seth Maxwell’s been helping with. Actually, another of Zeke’s groomsmen, a guy who lost a leg in Afghanistan, kinda fell for Tawana. We expect he’ll move back when he’s done with rehab at the VA. They all fit well into the community.” She ate a few bites to let Saxon absorb all she’d said.

“In my mind things in Snowy Owl Crossing remain as they were when I left. Obviously not.”

“You could’ve caught up if you’d bothered to touch base with anyone,” Jewell said pointedly.

He idly broke apart a slice of garlic bread. “I had a tough time believing we were through, Jewell. You were my rock. The constant in my life.”

“Your only living relative is still in town, Saxon. Leland is aging,” she chided softly. “He looks poorly but doesn’t complain. At least, not to me. What did he have to say in the letter I brought?”

“You didn’t give me a letter.”

“Donovan took it. I planned to leave when the show ended. Your uncle didn’t share what he wrote, but he was anxious enough to bribe me to hand-deliver it. He paid for my ticket to

your show.” She finished off her wine.

Filling their glasses again, Saxon paused, his eyebrows diving together. “Donovan will give me the letter next time I see him. But I don’t want to talk about my uncle. You, of all people, know he’s why I had to leave Snowy Owl Crossing.”

Jewell moved her plate so she could set her elbows on the table. “I know he seemed detached and hard on you as a kid. People can change, Saxon,” she said, propping her chin on folded hands. “It’s not healthy to hold a grudge so long.”

“You haven’t held one against me?”

“What? No. Do you not know how shocked I was to learn we had such conflicting goals? I assumed we would...” She lowered her eyes. “Plainly, back then we were both naive. I’ve often wondered how you’re doing,” she murmured, picking up her wine.

“Yeah. You probably hoped I’d fail and have to return to Montana.” He took a long drink from his glass.

“What a horrible thing to say. With your talent, I knew you’d succeed.”

“I almost didn’t. My first five years in Nashville were a hand-to-mouth struggle to get anyone to hear a demo. All I wanted was to live up to your expectations. I owe you so much but have no idea how to repay you.”

“I don’t want to be repaid for anything, Saxon. I wanted us both to have our careers. I’m sorry we lost touch.”

“Really? I phoned your mom during one of my lowest periods.

You were off at veterinary school in Washington State.”

“You talked to Mom? She never told me.”

“Yes, well, she never came right out and said it was best I forget you, but it was implied. And once I got my head screwed on straight enough to admit you deserved to be the hometown vet, I focused all my energy on making my music work. I stuck it out even when I lived in a dive of an apartment and couldn’t afford to feed myself.”

Jewell bit her lip. “I’m sorry. I didn’t have any idea your life was so hard.” She indicated the room with a wave of one hand. “I’d say things have picked up.”

“I suppose I should thank you for dumping me. Had you gone with me to Nashville, there’s no way I could’ve made a go of my music and paid for you to attend vet school like I promised.”

She took a drink, then swirled the wine. “I’d like to say I was smart enough to see that. Closer to the truth, I was crushed when you made clear you could never live in Snowy Owl Crossing. Not even for me.” She finished the wine and set down her empty glass.

“If it means anything, I never got you out of my system. I hung on to the fact that your mother said you were happy.” Leaning forward, Saxon took her hands, which forced her to stare straight into his somber gray eyes.

As if stuck in a dream, she squeezed his warm hands. But eventually she pulled hers free. “That’s bullshit, Saxon. Remote as we are, we have cell towers. Once when I was surfing the web,

I ran across photos of you with a cute little blonde singer. There was speculation that you two planned to marry.”

“Marry? I’ve dated, but never got engaged like you apparently did. But I can’t think... Ah, you must mean Toni French. We had the same agent and recording label for a while. They splash all that hype around because fans love what they believe is access into recording artists’ private lives. Toni and I were never romantically involved. In fact, she moved to a different label. Are you saying you cared?”

Jewell shrugged. “I figured you’d gotten married and maybe even divorced like so many performers.”

“Did you?”

“Did I what?” She thought she’d missed something because his forehead was furrowed again.

“You aren’t wearing a wedding ring, but Rafe said he heard you were engaged. Have you married and divorced? If so, to anyone I know?”

That last part of his query sounded testy enough for Jewell to slowly shake her head, just feeling sad. “My engagement was brief. Now I’m too busy to date. But it’s pointless for us to travel this path, Saxon. I’ll help you clear the table and then try to find a place to stay. Or if the storm’s abated, I’ll return to my hotel.” The last had barely left her lips when wind rocked the bus and they could hear bands of rain striking the metal siding.

Saxon got up to peer out a window. He dropped the curtain and dug a cell phone out of his pocket. “It’s too dark to see much.

But the wind is definitely tossing stuff around.” He pushed a few buttons on his phone. “Althea’s now listed as a strong tropical storm packing heavy rain and high winds. No way will I let you drive anywhere in these conditions. You can sleep here.”

Jewell’s heart did a little flip as she recalled how even when they were kids, Saxon had looked out for her safety and well-being. “How long before it’ll be over?”

He scrolled more. “Wee hours of the morning.”

She watched him return his stare to her, and she unconsciously licked her lips as their history kept playing over and over in her head. Trying to shake off the memories, she found her voice. “I trust this luxury conveyance has two bedrooms.”

“Nope. One bed almost fills the only bedroom. It could sleep four. I have any number of oversize T-shirts I can lend you. We’ll have to pretend it’s old times.”

As Jewell mulled over his offer to share a bed, he added, “How many times did we study so late we made do crammed together in one narrow dorm bed?”

“That was a long time ago.”

“For me those years melted away the minute I laid eyes on you. Can you honestly say seeing me hasn’t triggered some wistful feelings in you?”

She gave a slow shake of her head. “The music...” Her voice cracked and she stood. “When did you write songs for me, Saxon?”

He grew serious again. “I’ve written a few with you in mind.”

Brushing her bangs aside with the backs of his fingers, he curved one hand around the side of her neck. Bending, he kissed her. Softly at first, but he continued kissing her with more fervor until both her hands slid up and down his chest and finally she clamped her hands over his shoulders.

The coach swayed in the wind, but the air Jewell breathed felt hot and sultry. Yes, she remembered loving him, loving his kisses. She might have been a girl back then, but she'd loved him like a woman. The good times they'd had tumbled over and over in fond memories that ran together in a blur. It didn't take long for the old excitement to flutter in her belly and she wanted him with every fiber of her being.

He picked her up as if even in boots, jeans and a jacket she were feather light. Some small slice of her brain said she should object to being carried down a dim hall into a dark room. Then he sat with her on his lap, and their kisses went on until Jewell thought she'd go mad unless she touched his skin and he touched hers. She made the first move, ripping open the snaps down the front of his Western-style shirt.

“Whoa, whoa!” Saxon pulled back. He sucked in a breath. “Let's have some light and lose enough clothes to get comfortable.”

Jewell blinked even though the bedside lamp he snapped on was little more than an amber glow. His hands had always been strong but seemed more so now as he removed her boots and set them beneath a bedside chair.

Because her bones were limp as cooked noodles, and because she drowned in his crooked smile, she had nothing to say when her damp jacket and wrinkled shirt landed on the chair. Suffused in heat, she still shivered when Saxon strung soft kisses from below her ear down her torso, stopping at the V of her bra. Dazedly, she ran her hands over the sculpted muscles of his back.

“I hate like the devil to interrupt what we’ve got going, but I need to make a quick check in the bathroom to see if my agent stocked, uh...protection.”

Rising, he placed a finger over Jewell’s trembling lips. “Before you get all huffy and ask why Sid would do that? Agents just do. They assume all performers meet and fall into bed with groupies. Some do. I don’t. But agents and managers are charged with making sure the label doesn’t get sued. No matter how many times I’ve said I only want Tylenol, soap and aftershave, Sid puts a packet or two in my medicine cabinet. Be right back.” And he disappeared.

In the respite Jewell tried to clear her head. What flashed there like a neon sign was a niggling thought that spending a night making love with Saxon probably wasn’t smart. But even as she sat alone, she burned with desire for him. Wants and needs she hadn’t felt in a long time clouded her vision and made mush of her brain. Really, he was the only one who’d ever made her feel this way.

Saxon returned and handed her a crumpled foil packet and a T-shirt. “Maybe Sid finally got my message. I found one

condom.” He sat at her side and caressed her cheek. “You’re still wearing way too many clothes.” He knelt to slowly peel away her jeans.

Jewell saw all he wore on his lean, tanned body was a pair of navy briefs. She could have admired the view longer, but he sank down beside her and tipped up her face, and she again grew weak from his kisses.

Beyond, in the tail of the coach, the wind whistled. Feeling pulled into the vortex of the storm, Jewell wedged a space. “Give me a minute in the bathroom, please.”

“By all means. Lights or no lights tonight?”

“I haven’t changed that much,” she said.

He studied her without blinking. “Darkness it is, even if I want to see every beautiful inch of you.”

She scurried into the opulent bathroom. Her heart slammed erratically in her chest as she stood for a moment clutching the T-shirt that smelled of the woodsy, smoky sandalwood scent that still always had her looking around for Saxon in the café or at a rodeo. Quickly she slipped on his large T-shirt, but wondered if she was being foolish. The pull of not knowing left her jittery, but eager.

Only a faint light from the living room sconces that Saxon had left on guided her into his open arms. How often over the years had she awakened from a dream to a vivid memory of this man’s delicious exploration of her body? Too many times to count, but she’d never admit that to him.

Soon he drove her to a fevered pitch, let her sink and drove her up again until she shattered around him. Jewell curled into him and whispered against his muscular chest, “You haven’t lost your touch.”

His pleasure at her comment was reflected in how snugly he wrapped her in his arms. “You complete me, Jewell. You always have. The music used to be enough, but lately I’ve wanted...more.”

What did he mean? Was he ready to put down roots in Snowy Owl Crossing? Molding her cheek to his toasty skin, she yawned. “Uh-um,” she murmured sleepily.

“Monday I have a four-day gig in Nashville, then head into a month-long tour across the South and Southwest. We end in LA for a benefit where a host of recording stars are raising money to fight against world hunger. Come with me.”

“Wha...hat?” She lifted her head slightly.

“I mean it. I make good money now. And you’re an experienced veterinarian who can hang her shingle anywhere. If you’d prefer, we can give living together a try before doing anything permanent. How does that sound?”

“Like I’m fuzzy headed from too much wine.” Unable to sort out his comments, she yawned bigger and tightened her arm across his chest.

His chuckle was a low rumble in her ear. She nodded when he proposed they sleep on it and talk again in the morning.

Saxon fell asleep almost immediately. But in spite of how

tired Jewell was, she lay listening to him breathe, timing the sound to wind that eventually stopped buffeting the coach. She battled still loving him against a sick feeling that while he hadn't discounted her career like before, he ignored her love for Snowy Owl Crossing. Ignored that she had a life and fulfilling career there. Really, nothing had changed except they were older. He no longer struggled to make ends meet, and she should be happy to tag along.

Very close to crying yet not wanting to wake him, she slid out of bed. Wishing badly that things could be different but knowing it wasn't possible, she silently gathered her clothes and tiptoed down the hall to dress under the soft living room lighting. She looked around for something on which to scribble him a note. A few business cards sat on the coffee table. Holding one under a scone, she saw it belonged to Saxon's agent, Sid Andrews. She stuck one in her purse for Leland. She'd have to trust Donovan would give Saxon his uncle's letter. But from the way Saxon balked at discussing his uncle, that'd probably be the end of it.

She turned over another card and wrote, "It's roundup time at home. And I'm scheduled as the vet for the July Fourth rodeo. Sorry." She scribbled a J. Really, what else could she say? Surely he'd see it was the storm, the wine and memories that got to them. Casting a last look around his chosen home, she slipped out into a predawn that smelled of recent rain.

She ran through the parking lot, and it wasn't until she reached her rental car that she breathed again.

Sniffling away tears, she listened to the disembodied voice from the GPS. It crossed her mind how much better her life would be if she could stop crying over Saxon Conrad.

Chapter Three

Saxon woke up feeling more rested than he had in longer than he could remember. Rested and smiling—a huge deal for someone who wasn't a morning person. He stretched and suddenly remembered why he was happy. Jewell had come back into his life.

Rolling over, he reached for her, but his arm swept cool, empty space.

Assuming she was in the kitchen, he swung out of bed. And dang it all, when he'd drifted off to sleep after their fantastic hour of lovemaking, his plan had been to fix her breakfast.

It wasn't pitch-black in the bedroom. Enough light filtered through the window blinds that he was able to see the chair where Jewell had stacked her clothes was empty.

Thoughts of the storm that had caused the cancellation of his show and that was responsible for Jewell spending the night flooded back into his foggy morning brain. His feet tangled in his undershorts, which had ended up on the floor. For propriety's sake, he donned them and even stopped to grab his jeans from the hook on the back of his bathroom door. If he didn't have a guest, he'd as likely tramp off buck naked to make coffee.

Unless Jewell had totally changed, she was someone who needed caffeine prior to saying good morning.

He came out of the bathroom and sniffed the air. No coffee smell. And the bus seemed too still. Panic gripped him as he sped down the hall. Had he dreamed the whole encounter with Jewell? It wouldn't be the first time. But never before had holding her, kissing her, loving her seemed so real.

The kitchen was empty. He snapped on the light. Last night had been real. The remains of two dinners were proof.

Stifling a yawn, he noticed a faint light shone from the living room. Maybe Jewell had gone there to keep from waking him.

All wall sconces burned, but the room was empty. From there he could see out through the wide bus windshield. What was visible of the sky was streaked with lavender and pink, a sign the storm had passed. His bus sat behind one used by his band. It would shock him to see any sign of life there this early.

He clutched a railing that separated the bus driver from his living area. He'd had the wall that came with the bus removed because he and the band often jammed on the road or planned concerts. Ducking, he ran his gaze along the street that went behind the theater. The asphalt gleamed with wet puddles, but nothing moved for as far as he could see in any direction.

Jewell had gone. She'd left without a word. Last night he'd invited her to travel with him—again. She'd slunk away in the night like a thief—one who'd made off with his heart. He'd spent years trying to forget her. Last night she'd shown up and suddenly he was back where he'd started—when he'd loved her with every fiber of his being.

He stumbled to the couch, dropped down and buried his head in his hands.

Hours later he remained there when someone rapped on his door. Because Donovan had the code, he waltzed right in. "Hey, what's up?" He climbed the two steps. "Rough night? You look like hell." He swiveled his big body around. "Where's your lady friend? Should I pipe down? Is she still asleep?"

Saxon dragged his hands down his face and felt the prickle of whiskers. "She left."

"It's just as well. I'm surprised she joined you. She almost bolted before the concert started and again when it got canceled." He extracted a folded envelope from the inside pocket of his suit coat. "Who is she? Last night she asked me to give you this. My impression was it's the only reason your lady came to the show. I forgot her name. I hate to keep calling her your lady friend."

"Jewell. Her name is Jewell Hyatt. Dr. Jewell Hyatt. She's a veterinarian from my hometown." Saxon took the envelope. His name was typed on the front.

"Hell's bells! Tell me she's not the Jewell you write all those lovesick songs for but never sing in a show until last night?" The big man clasped his hands between his knees as he leaned forward and stared at Saxon. "Of course she's one and the same. By the way, the guy who ran the sound booth said that song was the biggest hit with your audience. It sent his meter past the hot-damn zone."

"Yeah, well, don't schedule it on the tour. It's personal."

“You’ve always been stingy with info about your past.” He gestured toward the envelope Saxon clutched. “The lady said the letter was from your uncle. How come you never mentioned any family? I’m in the dark even though I’ve had your back for five years.” Donovan slapped him on the back. “So what’s in the letter?”

Saxon’s lip curled as he dug a finger under the flap and ripped open the envelope. Taking out the single sheet of paper, he scanned the few lines that only requested him to come to the ranch so they could talk. Crushing it into a ball, he dropped it on the couch. “My past is better left buried.” Rising, he rubbed his bare chest. “I see the storm’s over. I’ll grab a shower and coffee. You roust the band. Tell ’em we’re off to Nashville for the CMA Music Festival. Plan a lunch stop in West Virginia. After we eat, I’ll join the band and we can choose which numbers to do on the tour. I thought we’d mix it up for each venue.”

“Smart. Keep it fresh and you all perform better. Oh, I got word from the benefit promoter in LA. They want two songs. You’ll be live. Something jazzy to start. Get the audience revved up. Follow that with a tearjerker so people open their wallets and shell out for the charity.”

“Okay. Whatever they want.” Saxon sidestepped Donovan and padded barefoot down the hall. “Let yourself out,” he called over his shoulder.

“You’d do well to sing the love song you did last night no matter how private it is. The one where it’s obvious you got your

heart broke.”

“No! And that’s final.” Saxon slammed the bathroom door so hard it rocked the bus. Stiff armed, he leaned on the sink, gritting his teeth, telling himself grown men didn’t cry. It wasn’t until he heard the outer door at the front of the bus bang shut that he was able to emerge from his funk to shower.

He felt somewhat refreshed after donning clean clothes. Going into his bedroom, he decided to strip his bed and put the sheets and pillowcases in to wash. He couldn’t bear to sleep there again where Jewell’s signature shampoo had left a flowery scent.

After remaking the bed with fresh linens, he cleaned the kitchen of all signs that he’d hosted a guest last night. But as he started loading the dishwasher, he remembered his uncle’s letter. It wasn’t anything he’d want any band members to see, and they ran in and out of his coach at will.

Hurrying into the living area, he saw that the letter was gone. Obviously Donovan had discarded it for him. Cleaning up after him and the band was a duty of his recording label’s babysitter. Which pretty much explained Donovan’s role. Who else would show up wearing a suit at 7:00 a.m.? Although today he had dispensed with his usual tie.

Saxon sighed and went back to restoring order to his kitchen. Maybe he needed a break from touring more than he thought. He’d requested downtime after LA. His agent hadn’t sounded happy when he said he wanted to hide out and write new songs for a month or two. Granted, he hadn’t expected Sid to be overjoyed,

but neither had he figured he'd get flak from the label owner. His band said they could use downtime, too. Harmony Records counted on him. So did Sid. Which was why Saxon thought they should realize no one lasted if they performed stale music. Fans demanded new songs every year.

He was in the process of tying up a bag with last night's trash to toss out in the theater's garbage bins when his driver knocked loudly and came in.

"Yo, Saxon, Donovan said we need to pull out. Are you riding with the band?"

"Not until after lunch. Can you give me a minute to throw this away?" He hurried to the front of the coach and held up the bag.

"I'll get it," the cheerful young man said. "There are puddles of standing water outside and you don't have your boots on."

"Thanks, Dean. I'm running on slow speed today."

The man grinned. "It's probably due to last night's low barometric pressure."

Saxon doubted that. He thought it was due to Jewell's abrupt departure, but he didn't argue. He went back to the bedroom to get his boots, knowing they'd be where he'd toed out of them in his rush to get Jewell into his bed.

Still at loose ends after Dean returned and both buses got under way, Saxon decided he'd be best served to sit with his guitar, keyboard and music pad and maybe get a head start on writing a new song.

But he sat staring at the blank page for a long time.

All at once he felt the bus jerk, slide, then smooth out again.

“Jeez,” Dean grouched. “Sorry, Saxon. There are some low spots filled with water on the road. I don’t know if you’ve looked out, but in places, water’s running across the freeway. I had to swerve to miss a stalled car. Some people tried driving through that storm, I guess.”

Saxon set aside his guitar and went to the railing behind Dean, where he could see the road out the front window. Traffic was heavy. Passing cars threw spray up from their tires. He pictured Jewell driving on this road when it’d been dark.

He knew she was a good driver and had never been bothered by Montana’s deep snow. But traffic there wasn’t an issue. Worry for her wouldn’t let him get back to work. He didn’t have a phone number for her, but hers was probably the only veterinary clinic in Snowy Owl Crossing. Sure he wouldn’t rest until he at least knew if anyone had heard from her after the storm, he went to his bedroom to make a private call.

A man answered the number he’d gotten for J. Hyatt, veterinarian. “Uh, hello. I’m trying to reach Jewell Hyatt.”

“This is Dr. Cooper. I’m covering Dr. Hyatt’s calls. May I help you?”

“I’m phoning from Maryland. I.. We had a hurricane here and I’m checking to make sure she got home okay.”

“Not yet. She called to say her flight was canceled and there’s a backlog. She’s rebooked but due back in a couple of days. May I take your name and leave her a message?”

The news that the other vet had heard from Jewell unwound the tight knot in Saxon's belly. "Thanks, it's not necessary." He clicked off then because he didn't want any more questions. She'd made it safely back to DC. That gave him peace of mind.

But even afterward all the chords he jotted down sounded like other songs he'd written. And thoughts of Jewell kept interfering. Words came to him about how her hair looked like fire and her skin like snow. Saxon tossed aside his guitar with a thud and scrubbed his hands down his face. He should shave.

"Everything cool back there?" Dean called. "I like listening to you play."

"I'm okay. Just wrestling with a new song."

"Carson's asking if you're ready to stop for lunch. Up ahead is a steak-and-burger place he knows. Donovan says we can get out and stretch and go inside without locals bugging you for autographs."

"If that's what the band wants, it's fine by me. I don't mind talking to fans. Most are respectful. We need them."

"Yeah. Carson says Donovan worked with rock stars too long. Those fans mob an artist."

"I guess we'll see in a few weeks. The Hollywood benefit features crossover hits as well as country."

"Hey, there's the steak house. I hope it's open. This dinky town looks sleepy or dead."

Saxon stood again and peered out as Dean parked. He could see from one end of the street to the other. The businesses were

small and built of weathered wood. As he put on his cowboy hat and swung down out of the bus, he was reminded acutely of Snowy Owl Crossing. Surprisingly, he felt a wave of nostalgia but was abruptly jerked back to the present by his rowdy band members trooping inside the eatery.

Donovan engineered seating so that tables where the band sat acted as a buffer to the back booth he chose for himself and Saxon.

Two waitresses emerged from the kitchen, bringing menus and trays of water glasses to the noisy men. The woman who served Donovan and Saxon smiled and winked at Saxon. "Saw you on TV at the last country music awards. Bought some of your songs for our jukebox." She pointed to the opposite end of the room. "Willie Nelson's been here. Reba, too. They gave us autographed photos we framed and put on the wall. Would be right honored to add you," she drawled.

Donovan sighed and adjusted his tie, but Saxon nodded and smiled. "I'm sure we can scare up a photo I can sign." He passed back the menu. "I smelled burgers when I walked in. That's what I'll have, with a large order of fries."

The others ordered, too, and as soon as the women left, Donovan took a wrinkled paper from his suit pocket. Scowling, he set it in front of Saxon. "Why don't Harmon or Andrews know you have family in Montana?"

Saxon stiffened. Fred Harmon was the owner of his label company, and Sid Andrews had been his agent/manager from the

get-go. Saxon snatched the paper, wadded it up and shoved it in his shirt pocket. “What does it matter?”

“You have relatives we don’t know about anxious to see you in person, you bet your butt it’s the label’s business.”

“It’s nobody’s business but mine.” Saxon mustered a thin smile for the waitress who slid a sizzling steak in front of Donovan and a fat burger in front of him.

Donovan waited to speak again until the men at the adjacent tables were served and the waitresses had left. “How old is this uncle? Why can’t he phone you? Is he dying?”

That last question hit Saxon like a barreling freight train. Had Jewell said Leland was sick? “I don’t know.” Squirting ketchup near his fries, Saxon watched Donovan slice his steak. “He’s my dad’s older brother. When my folks died, he was named my guardian. We had a rocky relationship. He thought I should be a rancher, not a singer. This is the first I’ve heard from him since I moved to Nashville.” Saxon pushed a fry through the ketchup, then shoved it in his mouth and picked up his burger. “Can we not discuss this?”

“I knew the redhead who brought the letter spelled trouble the minute you asked to see her backstage. You never invite women to your bus. Now she’s gone and you’re acting weird. I work for Fred. He’s invested a bundle in you. It’s my job to keep you from going off the rails.”

Half choking, Saxon had to take a drink of water. “I earn my keep at the label. As for Jewell, leave her out of it. She had

business in DC, so my uncle asked her to deliver his letter.”

“I admit you earn your keep. The question is, did you hear from your long-lost uncle because he’s suddenly broke and sees you as a potential cash cow?”

“You read his letter. He doesn’t say why he wants to see me.” Saxon stabbed another French fry in the pool of ketchup.

“While we’re in Austin or San Antonio, I’ll put out feelers. You know, to see if the old guy’s in debt or shopping for a loan.”

“No!” Saxon wiped his hands on his napkin, tossed it down on his plate and got up. “Stay out of it, and that goes for Sid and Fred, as well. I get wind of anyone poking around Snowy Owl Crossing, I’ll find a new label.” He stormed out, aware that his band members had stopped talking and gaped after him.

He got back on his bus, scribbled his name on a photo and took it back in to the waitress. He rarely flew off the handle, and so he was sure band members who’d been with him the longest would be curious. He had to decide how much to tell them. For all Donovan’s faults, he didn’t gossip. So the guys wouldn’t be privy to details about his uncle’s letter unless he shared them. However, they’d all seen Jewell, and most knew he’d taken her to his bus. If he said nothing, the guys would speculate that his tussle with Donovan most likely had to do with her. Damn!

Back in the bus he paced. Was his uncle sick? Did he need money? When he was growing up, his parents had never even mentioned his uncle. So he’d been in shock to learn someone he’d never met had been named his guardian. He actually didn’t know

much about his parents' families, period. Maybe he should be the one asking questions. But ask who? Not his uncle. They hadn't spoken since he left home. Jewell? She'd brought his uncle's letter but had claimed she had no idea what Leland wanted. He had no reason to doubt her.

* * *

IT WAS LATE afternoon three days after the hurricane when Jewell finally caught a flight out of DC that eventually got her to Billings. Still feeling off-kilter, she would have spent the night in a hotel and driven home in the morning, but she was anxious to get there. She collected her pickup from the long-term lot, grateful the sun would be setting behind her on the drive.

After connecting her cell to the hands-free device, she phoned Pete Cooper, her fill-in at the vet clinic. "Hey, Pete, it's Jewell," she said when he answered. "I'm heading home as we speak. Thanks for taking my calls. I'll pop a check in the mail tomorrow. Did anything come in that I need to handle tomorrow?"

"Not really. Tawana called. The Artsy Ladies plan to meet for a late lunch at the café Monday at one o'clock. She said it's important. I left you a note."

"Ugh! They're probably in a tizzy over the fact I wasn't able to secure an owl refuge. I'm afraid everyone's getting tired of working so hard to earn money at our Thanksgiving bazaars. Be sure to mark your calendar so you and your wife can come again this year. We need all the support we can get."

"Lois loves doing our Christmas shopping there. Hey, I left

a couple of other messages on your desk. The secretary for the Wild Horse Stampede gave me dates and times they need you as the on-duty vet over the Fourth. And a man called but didn't leave a name. He said he'd seen you back east."

Jewell's bruised heart leaped. Had Saxon looked up her number and phoned?

"All the guy said was that he was calling from Maryland. He mentioned the storm and said he wanted to make sure you'd driven through it okay."

Her heart calmed. "It was probably the owner of the horse farm where I had sperm shipped to Mark Watson. He and his wife were nice folks."

"Ah, speaking of the semen straws, Mark got the package. He'll refrigerate it until you can go plug it into his mare." Pete laughed. "Better you than me. I hate artificially inseminating any animal."

"There are jobs I like better. If that's all, Pete, I'll let you get back to doing whatever you were doing before I phoned."

"It's okay. I'm cleaning cages at my clinic." They shared a laugh, then said goodbye.

It was full darkness by the time Jewell turned down the lane to her ranch. Just seeing the buildings fanned out in front of her headlights sent warmth trickling through her. Travel was exhausting. Home spelled comfort.

She stopped outside the garage connecting her house to the barn, which now served as her clinic. All at once she noticed

her headlights illuminated an animal cowering behind hydrangea bushes her mom had coaxed to life in the harsh Montana weather. Afraid it might be an injured wolf, Jewell squinted to better see before opening her garage. She had a tranquilizer gun in the barn, but Pete hadn't left an outside light on there. The animal slowly crawled out from under the bush and she saw it was a puppy.

She still left her pickup with care. It could have rabies. But the nearer she got, the more clearly she saw it was nothing but a poor bedraggled, half-starved spaniel. Sinking to one knee, she held out a hand. "Here, boy. I won't hurt you. I don't see a collar, but maybe you have a chip. First I'll check for injuries. Then we'll get you some food, followed by a bath. I'll bet you'd like to get back to your owner, huh?"

The pup crept toward her on its belly, crying pitifully. She scooped him up and felt him curl against her in a ball. "Heavens, your ribs are showing. Food comes first." Cradling him carefully, she hurried to open her clinic. Once the lights were on, she could better see his matted brown-and-white fur.

She carried him into an exam room that in her parents' day had been a horse stall and drew a bowl of water. He lapped it down, his big dark eyes showing his gratitude. She stocked all types of animal supplies and at the moment didn't have other boarders except a goat who'd had surgery before her trip. She didn't hear him, so Pete had probably discharged him.

Not wanting the hungry dog to eat too fast, she measured out a short cup of puppy chow. He gobbled it up but sank down without

begging for more. “You have manners. Clearly you’re someone’s pet.” Jewell fondled his ears, which would be silky after a bath. She checked for signs of trauma. All she found were cuts on the pads of his feet. “It appears you’ve been out running around awhile. Warm soap and water will do wonders, but it’ll sting these paws. I have salve for after your bath.” She continued to talk because he seemed to like hearing her voice. And ministering to him let her forget the disappointment caused partly by her failure to gain a refuge for the snowy owls and also her lingering sadness for having slept with Saxon when nothing had changed between them. However, the weariness she’d battled earlier fled in the face of caring for the puppy.

“There, well, don’t you look handsome,” she said after bathing him and toweling dry his curly coat. “I’d say you’re a springer spaniel. That explains why you’re easygoing and affectionate.” She scanned him for a chip and was concerned when she didn’t find one. He licked her chin and wagged his tail, then stared longingly at the empty bowl still sitting on the floor.

“That’s plain enough. You’re so cute I’m going to take you to my house. I still need to retrieve my suitcase and unpack, but I’ll feed you in the kitchen.” She picked him up along with the bowl and kibble. Going out, she doused the clinic lights and unlocked her house.

She didn’t own a dog bed. Long ago she’d learned she couldn’t keep every stray dog or cat that landed on her doorstep. But she did have a soft throw rug. And this pup was so cuddly she might

buy a dog bed if she didn't turn up his owner.

There was no sense naming him until she knew. Attaching a name was like attaching your heart. When she measured out more food and he nudged her fingers with his tongue and gave a happy bark, she experienced a tug in her chest. Heaven knew since walking away from Saxon for the second time, her heart ached. On the drive home she'd dreaded coming into a dark, empty house. The dog changed all that and made homecoming a little better.

It wasn't long after she brought in her suitcase that the dog seemed ready to settle for the night. And so was she. He curled right up on the rug she placed by her bed. His soft, whiffling snore soon let her sleep.

* * *

SOMETHING BLOWING LIGHTLY in her ear partially woke Jewell. She cracked one eye, saw only gray light and shut it again. More insistent wet kisses nuzzled her cheek. "Stop it, Saxon." She batted her face with one hand. Then her morning brain connected with what she'd said and she bolted straight up in bed. Blinking, she saw dark puppy eyes gazing adoringly at her. Jewell laughed and her pounding heart fell into normal rhythm. "You stinker. You made me think you'd spend the night on the rug. In fact, you made yourself at home on my bed."

The pup yawned and licked her nose with a happy little yip.

"Okay, I'm awake. Breakfast time. Then you have to go into one of my holding cages in the clinic. I'll take your picture, make

a flyer and distribute it around town.”

The minute she looked out the window, it was plain her first workday home had opened with a gorgeous sunrise.

Jewell hummed as she showered. She ate, fed the pup and made a mental list of what she had to do today. In the course of unpacking last night she'd found the business card of Saxon's agent. Handing it off to Leland would be her first task after she printed up a stack of flyers.

Two hours later, driving along the lane to Leland's house, she saw he had two men tilling his fields. Her breath caught. Had he sold his ranch?

“Hi, Leland,” she said, making herself sound more cheerful than she felt when the old guy answered her knock and stepped out on his porch. “What's with your fields?”

“I leased a section to Eddie Four Bear and Aaron Younger. My Realtor says ranches aren't selling. This way I have lease money coming in and the fields look productive. I assume my nephew didn't return with you.”

“No.” Jewell made a face. “My flight was delayed a few days due to a hurricane. I came to give you a card for Saxon's agent. He's off on a tour. I left your letter with one of his staff. I'm afraid Saxon's not coming here,” she said as gently as possible. “If you need anything, call me, please.”

The old fellow sighed. “I knew it was a long shot. Thanks for the card,” he said and turned away. “I really need to see him. He and I have to talk.”

Jewell chewed the inside of her cheek. Was his skin more sallow than before she'd left? It must be her imagination, or the lighting. She hadn't been gone that long.

After saying goodbye, she spent the morning tacking up flyers about the pup. No one she spoke to had heard anyone say they'd lost a pet.

* * *

ALL WEEKEND SHE was kept busy with calls from clients, and she hadn't found time to phone her friends. But on Monday, Jewell left a ranch and drove to town for her lunch with the Artsy Ladies. Running a bit late, she rushed into the Snowy Owl Café at ten after one.

Becky, a high school girl who helped Doreen Mercer after school and during summers, greeted Jewell. "The other ladies are at that back table. They've ordered. What can I get for you?"

"Tuna sandwich. And iced tea. Thanks, Becky."

"Hey, there's Jewell," Tawana announced. "Glad you could make it. You were away extra time and then so tied up you've missed all our news."

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