

HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

Love Inspired®

The Pastor's Christmas Courtship

Glynnna Kaye



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The Pastor's Christmas Courtship

Серия «Hearts of Hunter Ridge», книга 3

Серия «Mills & Boon Love Inspired»

Содержание

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Her Holiday Homecoming

Jodi Thorpe's childhood vacation cabin seems the perfect place for her to heal her broken heart...and avoid Christmas cheer. After twelve years, nothing in Hunter Ridge has changed—except Garrett McCrae. The bad boy who was once her secret crush is now the town minister. And Garrett won't let her miss out on all the hope and joy the holiday brings. With every day he's drawn to the vulnerable woman Jodi's become, even as he's about to leave for a mission halfway around the world. But as they grow closer, their plans begin to change. Can Garrett make it a season to remember, with a love they can't forget?

How had she landed in his arms?

Then she remembered. Their sleds had collided, and after rolling in the snow she'd landed in a heap right on top of him.

Once he regained his footing, he reached down to clasp her outstretched hand.

“Easy there. It's slick here.”

She'd barely stood when her footing gave way and she pitched forward into his chest, her arms flying around him to stay upright. And then she looked up at him, eyes wide, her face mere inches from his.

“I'm...sorry.” Why had her words come out a breathy whisper?

Up close, the depths of his stormy gray eyes were even more amazing than she'd remembered. For a long moment they stared at each other.

What was she doing? Garrett was a friend. Just a friend. She stepped back sharply. “I think I have my footing now.”

So why was her heart still pounding?

GLYNNA KAYE treasures memories of growing up in small Midwestern towns—and vacations spent with the Texan side of the family. She traces her love of storytelling to the times a houseful of great-aunts and great-uncles gathered with her grandma to share candid, heartwarming, poignant and often humorous tales of their youth and young adulthood. Glynna now lives in Arizona, where she enjoys gardening, photography and the great outdoors.

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And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must

believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

—Hebrews 11:6

Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you. Show me the way I should go, for to you I entrust my life.

—Psalms 143:8

Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.

—Hebrews 10:22–23

To Natasha Kern—

my agent, encourager and sister in Christ.

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[Chapter One](#)

“Could you use some help there, ma’am?”

Ma’am? Her hooded head jerking up, Jodi Thorpe grimaced at the sound of a male voice carrying over the rumble of a big diesel pickup. Headlights illuminating the lingering remnants of twilight, the truck idled alongside her on the snow-covered dirt road. The passenger-side window had been rolled down, but the driver calling out from the far side of the interior was cloaked in shadow, behind a veil of steadily falling snow.

Exactly what she didn’t need—a small-town Good Samaritan.

“Thanks for the offer,” she responded at a volume she hoped could be heard as she gave the tow rope attached to a four-foot-long, molded plastic toboggan another tug, “but I’m fine, thanks.”

She waved the man off with a mittened hand and trudged on, grateful for the snow glow reflecting off the lowered clouds. Without it, it would be impossible to keep her footing on the rutted shoulder of a ponderosa pine-lined road.

Maybe a December getaway to her family’s soon-to-be-sold mountain cabin in Hunter Ridge, Arizona, wasn’t such a good

idea after all. But with her parents out of the country, the opportunity for a quiet retreat seemed ideal. Not only for soul-searching time alone—Decembers were always a bittersweet reminder of the precious life she'd once carried inside her—but to spare her two Phoenix-based sisters from having to host her for the holidays. Why put a damper on their and their children's Christmas festivities?

“Ma'am?”

The man sounded as if he were addressing someone twice her age. But bundled in an oversize insulated coat and clunky boots she'd found in the cabin—and burdened by a backpack—she probably did look like a hunched-over crone of fairy-tale fame.

“I can throw that stuff in the back of my truck,” the voice came again as the pickup crept along beside her. “And take you to wherever it is you're headed.”

She stiffened. Like she was going to climb into a vehicle with someone she didn't know? The trusting brown eyes of Anton Garcia flashed through her mind. If only years ago she'd overcome her fear of telling him the truth, had accepted his marriage proposal. And if only he hadn't volunteered to hitchhike for help on that deserted Mexican road.

Why, God?

Taking a steadying breath, she yelled over the rumbling engine. “Thanks, but I'm almost there.”

She could see the cabin's porch light not too far in the distance as she dragged behind her the bright red toboggan she'd often

ridden as a kid. Its load of groceries and other supplies hadn't seemed cumbersome when she'd started back to the cabin, nor the journey ahead of her long. Growing up, she and her younger sisters had often traversed this route to run errands for their grandmother. But now her fingers had stiffened with cold and her arm strained at the bulky weight.

"You're going to hurt yourself, ma'am."

Enough of the "ma'am" business. Wanting to get away from the self-proclaimed Boy Scout—or was he only pretending to be a holiday helper?—she gave the tow rope an extra-hearty tug. The toboggan held fast to whatever abruptly anchored it under the frosty mantle and tipped sideways, spilling its load and jerking the rope from her hand. Thrown off balance, she toppled into the snow.

The sound of a truck door slamming tipped her off that the driver had exited his vehicle. Trying not to panic, she struggled to sit upright, but the weight of the backpack rendered her as helpless as a turtle on its back.

"Let me help you up." Through the falling snow, she detected the man reaching out his gloved hand. What choice did she have but to accept his assistance?

Please God, let him be a good guy. After all, it's only two weeks until Christmas. And despite what You may have heard my sisters say, I'm not a Grinch, a Scrooge or anything of the kind.

Not much, anyway.

Reluctantly, she grasped the hand that stretched out to steady her as she staggered ungracefully to her feet. Her hood fell back, snowflakes pelting her face and the cold wind penetrating her long hair.

“Jodi?” The man’s voice held an incredulous note. “Jodi Thorpe?”

She blinked, trying to focus through the falling snow.

“Garrett?” In a community of under two thousand residents, why did Garrett McCrae have to be her rescuer tonight? And what was he doing in a town he vowed never to return to once he could make his escape?

“Yeah, it’s me, Jodi.”

A familiar grin lit his face, and for a horrifying moment she thought he was going to hug her. But something in her eyes as she mentally flew back through time must have halted him. He plunged his hands into the pockets of his navy down jacket and took a step back, his eyes searching her face as intently as hers searched his.

Even though she and Garrett had been the best of friends as kids when she and her two younger sisters visited their grandparents’ vacation home in the mountains, she hadn’t seen or spoken to him in a dozen years. Not since that last ill-fated night when he’d crushed her teenage dream of them ever being more than friends.

But time had treated him well. Gone was the ponytailed hair that as a teen had nearly splintered his relationship with his dad,

replaced by a conservative cut. Lines etched the corners of his eyes, evidence his sense of humor and love of the sunny outdoors had prevailed. His shoulders were impossibly broad. And those eyes...the same deep gray she too-well remembered.

“What are you doing in Hunter Ridge?” they said in unison. Apparently he was as thunderstruck by her presence in town as she was his.

“I’m working here. For a while at least.” His brows raised. “And you?”

“I’m helping my folks get my grandparents’ cabin ready to sell.” At least that was the excuse she intended to use for camping out here until after the holidays. Nobody needed to know the mixed-up mess of the rest of it.

“So, you’ve been living—where? Married, with a houseful of kids, I suppose.”

Her smile threatened to falter, but she held it steady. “None of the above. I’m living in Philadelphia, actually, where I’m a project manager for an athletic apparel company. SmithSmith. And yourself? Still river-running?”

It was a wild guess. Becoming a river guide was all he’d talked about after his first Colorado River rafting trip when he was sixteen, and her grandma had said he’d taken off for training right after high school graduation. So why should she be surprised to find him here in December? Most rafting companies operated with a full crew only in the summer. He probably worked at the family business in the off-season.

“It was the adventure of a lifetime while it lasted.” A fleeting shadow flickered through his eyes, then he shrugged. “But I gave it up a while back.”

At two years her senior, he would have recently turned thirty, an age that at one time appalled them both as prehistoric. Had a domestically inclined wife lured him away from his youthful obsession? “In other words, old man that you are now, you’ve turned river-running over to the younger generation?”

“Ouch!” His yelp was accompanied by an exaggerated flinch. Then he laughed that familiar laugh, and her heart inexplicably leaped. Why had she so easily fallen into teasing him just as she’d once done as his tomboy sidekick? They’d long ago left those days behind.

He openly studied her, and despite the chill air, her face warmed. Did he remember that night, too? She motioned briskly to the groceries strewn in the snow. “You’re responsible for this. If you hadn’t been stalking me, I—”

“Stalking you? I was trying to help you. ’Tis the season. You know, ho ho ho?” Before she could stop him, he snagged the toboggan in one hand and one of her grandma’s now partially filled grocery tote bags in another and slung them into the back of his pickup with what looked to be a dwindling load of firewood.

“What are you doing?”

“What’s it look like? Getting you and your stuff out of the cold.” He squatted to gather the scattered contents back into the other bags. Lifting a cereal box, he waggled it at her. “Still into

Cheerios, I see.”

With a laugh, she snatched it out of his hand, recalling the afternoon that as an elementary schooler she'd been dared to sneak a family-size cereal box from Grandma's pantry and devour the whole thing herself. Garrett couldn't stop snickering when Grandma insisted she still clean her plate at suppertime.

“You don't need to do this, Garrett. I'm almost there.”

“So indulge me.” He held out his hand for the cereal box.

What would be the point in arguing? Used to getting his own way, the high-spirited Garrett had long marched to the beat of his own drummer. She'd once foolishly hoped they were marching to the same beat...but learned a hard, humiliating lesson. Except for that out-of-the-blue instance that he made no secret of immediately regretting, he'd never considered her as more than a pal. A buddy.

As soon as he'd stowed the last of her bags, he helped her off with her backpack and opened the passenger-side door. But before she could hoist herself up, a vehicle coming from the opposite direction pinned them in its lights, then pulled parallel to Garrett's truck.

A ball-capped male poked his head out an open pickup window. “I should have figured I'd find you out here rescuing a pretty damsel in distress. Way to go, Preacher.”

Jodi turned toward Garrett, catching his deer-in-the-headlights look of alarm.

Preacher?

* * *

Uncomfortably conscious of Jodi's questioning gaze, Garrett raised his voice over the rumble of the two vehicles. "Do me a favor, cuz, and keep this to yourself."

"You can count on it." The other man chuckled, then offered a parting wave as he guided his vehicle on down the snowy road.

Garrett didn't meet Jodi's eyes as he held out his hand to assist her into the truck, taking note of the curtain of straight red-blond hair now lightly dusted with snow. It would be too much to hope that she hadn't caught Grady's preacher remark. Nothing much ever got past Jodi, but she'd probably think it was a joke. Some days he wasn't sure if that might be the case. God's little joke, anyway.

As she settled herself in to secure her seat belt, he wedged the backpack at her feet. Then he shut the door and jogged around the front of the vehicle to climb aboard.

"Which cousin was that?"

She'd remembered he had a bunch. "Grady Hunter, the twins' next-to-oldest brother. Luke, Claire and Bekka are all married, and Grady's getting hitched in February. Rio's still single."

She nodded thoughtfully, as if placing long-forgotten faces to the names, maybe recalling that his mother was a sister to the dad of those cousins. He started the truck slowly down the road, its windshield wipers working overtime against the descending snow.

Thankfully, Garrett could trust his cousin to keep his mouth

shut. He sure didn't need questions raised about his personal conduct because he'd stopped to assist an old friend. This past year he'd toed a fine line as interim pastor of Christ's Church of Hunter Ridge—as a single interim pastor, to be exact.

That was a slippery slope in a place used to family men. He couldn't afford to leave doors open for criticism of his actions if he hoped to qualify for a spot on a highly-thought-of missions team. He was so close and needed a positive recommendation from church leadership to seal the deal.

But this was Jodi.

He couldn't leave her stranded on a night like this because someone might not think it acceptable for him to escort her home alone. After all, they'd grown up like brother and sister, right?

Nevertheless, his ears warmed as he shoved away a memory he hoped she had no recollection of—although, from the look on her face when she'd recognized him, the odds of that were slim to none. He was pretty sure her grandma, rest her soul, hadn't forgotten. He'd certainly received a well-deserved earful when she'd walked in on them that Christmas Eve. Thankfully, things hadn't gotten beyond hot and heavy kissing. But he probably still owed Jodi a long-overdue apology.

He adjusted the windshield wiper speed. “What are you doing out here in the dark pulling that sled? Where's your car?”

“I use public transportation—and I didn't want to mess with renting a car.” Her words came almost reluctantly, as if uncertain how much to share with him. “The forecast showed flurries the

next few weeks, so I thought I could get around on one of the bikes at the cabin. I caught a shuttle from the Phoenix airport this afternoon.”

Assuming they still lived in the Valley of the Sun, why hadn't she spent the night with her folks or one of her sisters?

“When I got here,” she continued, “I made a mistake of stretching out for an intended quick nap. Only I woke up not long before sunset to several inches of snow. Who knows what it will be like tomorrow? So off I went.”

He glanced at her, hoping she'd elaborate on what she'd been doing with her life. But she didn't. Incredibly, she wasn't married, but were her sisters? Did her university professor folks still take short-term mission trips during semester breaks? It saddened him that the cabin was to be sold, although to his knowledge the family hadn't gathered there as a whole since her grandma's health abruptly deteriorated and she eventually passed away.

Jodi's mitten-clad hand patted the dashboard. “What's with the monster truck?”

“A loaner from Hunter's Hideaway.” That was the family business that had catered to outdoor enthusiasts since early in the last century. “With this cold snap, Grady and I've been delivering firewood to those in need.”

She laughed. “So you are a do-gooder now.”

Did she have to sound so surprised? Admittedly, growing up he'd been forever into mischief. Always pushing boundaries and looking for a good time wherever he could find it. Not a whole

lot into thinking of others. But still...

“You even took time from your do-gooder efforts,” she noted, “to help this poor old lady stumbling along the side of the road.”

“You gotta admit you looked the part.” But she sure didn’t right now, with that silky hair cascading around her shoulders and a smile lighting her brown eyes. Those very assets had been his downfall the night a transformed sixteen-year-old Jodi showed up in town after a few years’ absence, leaving him stupefied and devoid of common sense.

Sort of how he was feeling at this very moment.

Not good.

After his most recent disappointment in the romance department, he’d steered clear of serious involvements. And for an interim pastor, this wasn’t a good time to start rethinking that choice. So why had it popped into his head that her arrival in town might be the answer to a prayer he’d uttered but twenty minutes ago?

His office assistant Melody Lenter—an energetic lady about his mom’s age—had called around lunchtime, informing him her father in Texas had a heart attack and she and her husband were on their way out of town. She’d have to bail out on overseeing the annual Christmas project she’d single-handedly spearheaded for the past twenty years. Between wood deliveries, he’d spent the afternoon phoning church members, trying to find someone to fill her shoes—but to no avail. He’d barely called out to God that someone had to cover for Melody—he sure couldn’t take

on one more thing—when the capable and ever-dependable Jodi appeared on his doorstep.

Answered prayer? Or a desperate, not-too-bright idea?

“So where’s the motorcycle? And—” She peeked at the back of his head. “What happened to the ponytail?”

Although still waiting for her to zero in on Grady’s “preacher” comment, he managed a laugh. “The tail’s a thing of the past. I have an SUV now, but a motorcycle’s stashed for the winter in a Hunter’s Hideaway barn.”

The motorcycle made some in his congregation uneasy, which wasn’t surprising considering the noisy nuisance he’d made with one as a teenager. No doubt he hadn’t been high on the church’s interviewee preferences list for a few members. But his Grandma Jo, a force to be reckoned with, convinced them—and him—that his filling in while they searched for a permanent ministerial replacement would benefit all involved.

Coming back, though, hadn’t been easy. Nobody in town had a clue what it took to regularly face his old friend Drew Everton and the accusing stares of those who held him responsible for Drew’s debilitating injuries. While Drew insisted he wasn’t to blame, others weren’t so forgiving.

But his year’s commitment at Christ’s Church would be up at the end of the month, and he was more than ready to move on. Ready to live the dream Drew had been forced to abandon.

“Here we are.” He turned the truck into a pine-lined lane leading up to the Thorpe cabin, a wave of nostalgia washing

through him as it often did when he drove by. While the porch light lent a cheery note this evening, in broad daylight the place always struck him as melancholy. Lifeless. Although a guy at the church kept an eye on it, that didn't make up for the absence of the warm hospitality and sound of laughter he remembered. Or for missing familiar faces peeping from the dormered attic windows and the sight of his and Jodi's grandmas relaxing on the broad front porch.

He turned to Jodi. "I felt really bad when I heard your grandma passed away." He couldn't imagine not having his Grandma Jo or Grandma McCrae around. That was one of the blessings of Hunter Ridge he'd sorely miss when he left.

"It's funny," Jodi said as she unbuckled her seat belt, "but even though I haven't been here since high school, when I arrived I almost expected to see her step out on the porch to give me a big hug."

"Smelling of freshly baked cupcakes and that honeysuckle hand lotion she always used."

Surprise lit her eyes. "You remember that?"

"I remember a lot of happy times at this cabin."

While his younger sister and Jodi's siblings gravitated to each other to do girlie things, he and Jodi had teamed up to shoot baskets, climb trees and build woodland forts. It was difficult to reconcile memories of the somewhat stout, rough-and-tumble freckle-faced tomboy of his youth with the sixteen-year-old beauty who'd blindsided his eighteen-year-old self—and with the

woman who sat beside him now.

“What do you say we get your stuff inside?”

But should he ask her if she could spare time for a project her grandma had at one time helped with—providing Christmas cheer for unwed mothers in the region?

Still undecided, he watched as she retrieved the backpack at her feet. Then just as he gave up on the idea and reached for the door handle, her gentle hand settled on his forearm, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

“Thank you—Preacher.”

Chapter Two

It was all Jodi could do to get those words out with a straight face. Garrett would be the last man on earth to be mistaken for minister material. But there it was again—that same caught-in-the-act look she'd seen earlier. What on earth had Garrett been up to that his cousin would mockingly call him “preacher”?

He released his grasp on the door handle, his expression uncharacteristically ill at ease. “You caught that, did you?”

“I take it your cousin has a good sense of humor.”

“Grady,” Garrett said, as he slowly rubbed the back of his neck, “has a good sense of humor, all right.”

Obviously he didn't want to explain. While as a youngster she'd have kept at him, pushed until she all but choked out the whole story, that wasn't appropriate now. They were two adult strangers whose lives had moved on from each other. People were entitled to their privacy. Goodness only knew, she hoped he'd

respect hers.

“I don’t think I want to hear about it,” she said with a teasing lilt, letting him off the hook as she opened the door and climbed out.

In a twinkling he was at the side of the truck, probably grateful for the reprieve, and lifting out the toboggan. He set it on the ground, then snagged several bags and placed them atop it. Pulling two more from the bed of the truck, he handed her one and gripped the heavier of the two in his own hand.

“Ready?” Garrett grabbed the toboggan’s tow rope. “Lead on.”

With the side porch light illuminating the way, they progressed through the snow and up to the porch itself. Garrett held open the screen door as she fumbled with the keys to unlock the dead bolt. Then she stepped inside the dimly lit mudroom.

Ah, the infamous mudroom. Scene of the crime. Or rather the not-so-romantic setting of their first—and only—kiss.

The tiny space had been dark that night, too, an unexpected cocoon of privacy in a cabin teeming with family and friends readying for the Christmas Eve service. Now she self-consciously set the bag and backpack on a counter—the same counter she’d leaned against for support when her legs threatened to give way as Garrett’s lips tentatively touched hers. Or tentatively at first, anyway.

Taking a quick breath, she flipped on the light switch, the bare bulb overhead banishing both the shadows and too-

vivid memory. Avoiding meeting Garrett's gaze—afraid his own memories might have followed hers—she returned to the door and took the proffered bag.

He quickly transferred the remaining ones to the mudroom floor, then propped up the toboggan outside the door. "Looks like that about does it."

"Thanks, Garrett. I'll put the sled in the shed later." She slipped out of the old coat and hung it on a peg of the knotty pine-walled room. "Would you like to come in for a cup of cocoa? Or I could fix coffee."

In all honesty, she didn't want to invite him in. The less she saw of Garrett or any other old acquaintances during her brief stay here, the better. She needed time alone to work through things—the aching loss of Anton's recent death—and to make decisions for her professional future. Time to privately commemorate the loss of an unborn life. This use-it-or-lose-it vacation forced on her at the end of the year couldn't be better timed. But the introspective hours she craved could too easily be aborted if she didn't guard them closely.

"Thanks for the invitation, but I have to get back to..." His uncertain gaze darted to hers as his voice trailed off.

What was with him tonight? Garrett in his youth had never been one to act unsure of himself or beat around the bush. "Get back to what? Your female fan club?"

Everything used to come easy to him. Athletics, schoolwork, making friends—and girlfriends. She used to give him a hard

time about the latter, masking her own supersized crush.

His mouth twitched. “Believe me, no fan club these days. Actually, I need to get back to the church.”

“Picking up another load of wood for delivery?”

“Not exactly.” He cast a look upward as if appealing to the Heavenly realms. “I have to finish my sermon for tomorrow.”

“Sermon?” She laughed, Grady’s remark finally making sense. “You got roped into delivering a message at the old family church, didn’t you? Garrett, whatever were you thinking?”

He ducked his head slightly, then looked up at her with one eye squinted. “I’m thinking that as the pastor of Christ’s Church of Hunter Ridge, that’s one of my responsibilities.”

What? “Come on, tell me another one.”

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “As impossible as it may sound—and believe me, some days it probably seems more impossible to me than it does to you—I’m degreed in church ministry and have been interim pastor here for the past year.”

She stared. He wasn’t joking. His cousin hadn’t been joking.

“Wow, Garrett.”

He chuckled, no doubt in reaction to the stunned look on her face. “Yeah, wow.”

“This is...is quite a stretch. I mean,” she quickly amended, “a turnaround.”

As they’d progressed from Sunday school days to youth group ten years, he’d become increasingly restless, adventurous, more

prone to risk-taking. A party boy who'd enthusiastically indulged a wild streak, he'd certainly never anchored himself to anything spiritual, let alone God.

But then, she couldn't exactly point fingers...

"Which goes to prove—" his smile widened "—that God's still in the business of transforming lives."

"When did— How?" She never would have expected anything like this. Not in a million years.

He shrugged. "Looking back, God's been dogging me at least since my first rafting trip on the Colorado when He really opened my eyes to the beauty and intricacy of His creation. Unfortunately, I wasn't willing to listen until about five years ago."

He was serious. This was for real.

"I'm sorry I laughed, Garrett. I was just so—"

"Shocked? Don't feel bad. My family, except for Mom and Grandma Jo, still isn't quite sure what to make of it. Some church members who knew 'the me that was' haven't bought into it, either."

She couldn't help but continue to stare at him. "This is amazing."

"That it is." He took a step back. "As usual, though, time's gotten away from me this week and my Sunday message awaits. But maybe we could get together while you're in town. Catch up."

She didn't want to catch anybody up on her life outside Hunter Ridge. Things she wasn't proud of. Wounds that had yet to heal.

A faith that was currently so wobbly it wasn't funny. "Let's see how it goes, okay? There's lots to do to get this place ready to sell."

"You'll be at the worship service tomorrow?"

Not eager to interact with those who might remember her—or to see young mothers with their precious little ones—she hadn't planned to go. But having laughed at him, expressed such blatant disbelief, might Garrett take a refusal the wrong way?

"You can count on it."

"See you there then." Eyes smiling, he lifted his hand in a parting wave as he stepped off the side porch. "Ten thirty."

A few strides away, he halted in his tracks as if he'd thought of something he'd forgotten to say. Maybe he wanted to offer her a ride to church? Then apparently changing his mind, he tramped on through the falling snow.

Almost dazed, she stood at the door watching as he disappeared into the darkness. Garrett McCrae. A pastor. A heavy weight settled into the region of her heart as she closed and bolted the door.

Sorry to point this out, Lord, but your timing stinks.

She'd barely turned off the porch light and entered the kitchen when the door rattled from a firm pounding knock.

When she turned on the light and reopened the door, there stood Garrett once again.

"What did you forget?"

"Actually..." He paused as though undecided as to how to

proceed. Totally un-Garrett-like. Then he plunged on. “I need to ask you something.”

Oh, please, don’t say anything about that night. The night he’d made it clear his little tomboy pal didn’t meet his standards for female companionship.

“I know you have to get this place cleaned up, but what if I helped? Recruited others to help?” His gaze now met hers in open appeal. “Do you think, then, that you might have time to oversee a church Christmas project while you’re here?”

Was he kidding?

“I don’t think there’s much left to do,” he hurried on, “but my office assistant who stays on top of it all year had a family emergency and can’t follow through. All afternoon I beat the bushes to find a replacement, but came up empty-handed. Unless things have changed, though, you have more organizational ability in your little finger than most have in their whole body.”

He gazed at her with hopeful eyes as she tried to make sense of what he was saying.

“You want me to take on a church project while I’m here?”

“Oversee it. You wouldn’t have to do all the work. I imagine Melody has it well in hand. But none of the other volunteers feel confident in assuming the responsibility.”

“To be honest, Garrett, I don’t think I would either.” No way did she want to be sucked into something like that, even for a good cause. Getting through church tomorrow would be about as much socializing as she could manage.

“You sell yourself short, Jodi.” Garrett’s words lilted persuasively, too reminiscent of times he’d conned her as a kid into doing things she’d later come to regret. “Remember how you turned around your Grandma’s floundering yard sale? And you were only what—eleven? Twelve?”

“Thirteen.” Grandma hadn’t a clue about grouping similar items and showing them off to best advantage. Or about negotiation. Despite a clearly stickered, more-than-fair price, she would accept the first ridiculously low offer without batting an eye. In addition to rearranging the merchandise, Jodi had put a stop to that.

She couldn’t help but smile at the memory.

“See?” Garrett almost gloated. “You do remember. You have a gift, Jodi, and maybe God’s called you to be in town right now so you can use it for His glory.”

She folded her arms. “I’m not falling for the ‘God loves you and Garrett McCrae has a wonderful plan for your life’ stuff.”

Eyes twinkling, he shrugged. “Figured it was worth a try. So how about it? It won’t take that much time, and I can round up some high schoolers to help whip your cabin into shape. Even if I have to get my own hands dirty, I’ll see that you have extra time for the Christmas project. It’s one that is near and dear to my Grandma Jo’s heart—and was to your grandma’s as well.”

While help cleaning out the place would be welcome, no fair bringing Grandma into the equation.

“What exactly will this entail?” Why was she even asking,

allowing Garrett to sway her after all these years? But maybe she was letting her personal problems turn her into a Grinch as her sisters had accused. Becoming selfish. All about me. “I’d be organizing the distribution of canned goods? Clothing? Toys?”

“All of the above. Behind-the-scenes work.”

Would it really kill her to help out? To make a little room in her own plans during the next two weeks? She might not be able to boil water, but she did have a knack for project management, a talent she was paid well for in the corporate world. How hard could it be if this Melody person had been keeping on top of the project since early in the year as Garrett claimed? And maybe it would be a means of honoring her grandmother’s memory.

“I guess...I can take this on.”

Garrett grinned. “You won’t regret it, Jodi, I promise. Melody says this project is the highlight of her whole year—that there’s nothing better for the soul than making the holiday season brighter for unwed mothers.”

A blast of cold air from the open door swirled in around Jodi’s ankles, sending a shiver rippling through her.

Unwed mothers?

* * *

“You’d better get moving, Garrett. You don’t want to be late again.”

Cutting off his hummed rendition of “O Holy Night,” he glanced at the rail-thin gray-haired woman standing in the doorway to his room on Sunday morning. Seventy-year-old Dolly

Lovell and her husband had taken him in as a boarder a year ago when he'd been cautioned that as a single pastor it might not be advisable to get a place of his own and he hadn't want to bunk back with his folks. As it turned out, this lodging arrangement not only came with meals and occasional help with laundry, but also built-in chaperones.

"I'm heading out right now." He reached to the top of an antique dresser for his Bible and an iPad filled with sermon notes, then gave his part-time church receptionist a kiss on the cheek. "I don't know what I'd do without you and Al to keep me on the straight and narrow."

Dressed for church herself, a smiling Dolly shook her head as he slipped by her. "It's a dirty job, Pastor McCrae, but somebody has to do it."

There was probably more truth in her humorous comment than he cared to think about. Born with—and long indulging—an independent streak made coming under the authority of the church leadership a never-ending challenge. Both for him and them.

It wasn't far to the church, a distance he most often enjoyed walking, but this morning he jumped in his old Ford Explorer to make better time. Although he didn't have a Sunday school class to teach this quarter—he'd used the extra hour this morning to shovel out the Lovells' driveway and polish up his sermon—he'd caught his mind wandering one too many times. If he was late, it would be Jodi Thorpe's fault.

He could still hear her laughter when she thought Grady's preacher comment was a joke. Could see the shock in her eyes at his admission that he was an official God's man. He wasn't unaccustomed to that reaction since returning to Hunter Ridge, of course. With the exception of Drew, he'd taken a lot of ribbing from his high school buddies—and even was shunned by a few. Many adults who'd known him when he was growing up eyed him with skepticism. No surprise. But for some reason Jodi's disbelief pierced him to the core.

Admittedly, it was a stretch to accept the changes in his life. Especially when Jodi was standing in the mudroom where as a hormone-driven teen he'd once attempted to put the moves on her right under her family's nose. But deep down he'd hoped to hear the friend of his youth confess she'd seen something in his early years that foreshadowed this turn of events. Or that her grandmother had admitted to glimpsing a nugget of promise in him.

More likely, though, all her grandma saw was an undisciplined young rascal who couldn't keep his hands to himself.

Nevertheless, Jodi had agreed to take on this year's Christmas project. A load off his shoulders, for which he was grateful.

As always, his spirits rose at the sight of the church building. This morning the weathered brick edifice, built in the 1930s, looked like something out of a magazine with snow coating the roof and the surrounding ponderosa pines. Some noble soul had shoveled the walkways and bladed the parking lot, the sun now

pitching in to do its part.

There were good people here at Christ's Church. He was more than fortunate to land a ministry opportunity with a congregation like this one as he prepared for a future in missions work. But did they consider themselves equally blessed to have been saddled with him? They'd been pretty desperate when he'd come along. Following the departure of their third minister in as many years, they'd been without one for six months when Grandma Jo took a hand in things.

And now they'd be looking for a replacement once again.

“Garrett!”

His cousin Luke Hunter—Grady's older brother—waved him over as he approached the front of the church. A newlywed of only a few months, he looked happier than he had in years. The high-spirited former Delaney Marks had certainly impacted the widower and father of three in a big way. He was much more relaxed now, less hardheaded, and occasionally could even pass for laid-back. While Garrett hadn't heard anything official, if Grandma Jo's suspicions were correct, child number four might be putting in an appearance not too far into next summer.

When he reached his relative's side, the men shook hands, and his cousin lowered his voice. “I want to give you a heads-up. Old Man Moppert isn't happy that you've rearranged things at the front of the church.”

Randall Moppert. Again. The guy had never forgiven him for TP-ing his trees when, in the pitch dark and slightly inebriated, a

teenage Garrett had mistaken Moppert's place for that of a friend next door.

"I didn't rearrange. I shifted the lectern and the Lord's Supper table slightly off-center so there's room for the kids' choir. They're kicking off our service with 'Away in a Manger.'"

"Well, he doesn't like it. I overheard him telling one of the board members that you're taking liberties in God's house."

"I'll talk to him."

"Better you than me." Luke grimaced, then glanced with interest toward the parking lot. "Who's that with the Palmers?"

Following the trajectory of his cousin's gaze, Garrett's heart rate kicked up a notch at the sight of a pretty woman, her red-gold hair flowing around her shoulders as she exited a vehicle. The Palmers must have seen Jodi walking into town and picked her up.

Which was another thing nagging at him.

Last night he'd said he hoped to see her at church, but although grateful for her taking on the project and aware she didn't have transportation, he hadn't offered any.

The church where he'd done a semester's internship had strict guidelines on staff interactions with members of the opposite sex, and he'd instinctively maintained those standards as much as possible when he'd come to Hunter Ridge—even if their rules were more lenient. Which is why he hadn't accepted Jodi's invitation to join her inside for cocoa. But he could have at least drummed up a ride for her.

She looked amazing this morning, her fair cheeks rosy from the cold and a bright smile rivaling the warmth of the morning's welcome sun. Then there was that eye-catching, begging-to-be-touched long hair that as a kid her folks kept cropped up by her ears. Not for the first time, he whispered a silent prayer of thanks that she wouldn't be in town long. Although many times a partner in his schemes when they were kids, she'd increasingly balked when he took his risk-taking tendencies to the extreme. No doubt she'd be unsurprised that those inclinations had finally caught up with him—and he was paying the price.

“Garrett? I said—”

“That’s Jodi Thorpe,” Garrett quickly responded, his face warming at Luke’s curious look. Had anyone else noticed him gaping at the newcomer? Not recommended ministerial manners. “She used to spend summers up here. Sometimes Thanksgiving or Christmas. You may not remember her. She’d have only been about seven or eight when you left for the military.”

“Thanks for the reminder of my old age.” Although still on the sunny side of forty with a wife ten years his junior, Luke gave him a mild look of reprimand. “I don’t remember a Jodi, but I do remember the last name. Grandma Jo was good friends with a Nadene Thorpe. This is a granddaughter?”

“Right. Hey, look, I’ll talk to you later, okay?” Maybe he could make amends for not arranging transportation for Jodi. “I’m going to welcome her to Christ’s Church.”

Luke leaned in. “You do that, flirt master, but don’t forget you have a million eyes on you right now. Until you hear otherwise, you’re still in the running for a full-time position here. Don’t blow it.”

Luke’s warning was unnecessary. Not only did he have God looking over his shoulder, but he was acutely conscious of how closely a single pastor was watched—and judged. Good impressions were especially important right now, even though, unknown to those around him, he had no intention of staying in Hunter Ridge, job offer or no job offer.

“No worries,” he assured Luke as his gaze drifted back to the subject in question. “As a kid, that gal over there could shinny up a tree faster than lightning and nail a can with a slingshot better than I could. She once caught me off guard and pinned me down, too. Filled my mouth with a handful of dirt. Believe me, recollections like that kinda put a damper on any flirting business.”

Or they would, anyway, if he could forget how sweet it had been to kiss her.

Chapter Three

Jodi had barely drawn back from giving a big thank-you hug to Marisela Palmer—one of her grandma’s dear friends—when Garrett approached.

Or rather, Pastor McCrae.

Unbelievable.

It was with a sense of relief, though, that the guy she’d

known since the summer before first grade hadn't let himself be shoehorned into a suit for his Sunday morning duties. Rather, he had on a pair of neatly pressed gray trousers, a white collared shirt, and a gray pullover sweater. No outer jacket despite the chilly morning.

She couldn't resist firing the first volley. "What happened to your tie, Pastor?"

His hand flew to his neck as he looked frantically on the ground around him. "It was there a minute ago."

"I think Jodi's teasing you, Garrett. Just like old times." Marisela, a petite black woman who looked at least a decade younger than Jodi knew her to be, looped her arm through his as she gazed up at him with affection. "I spied her coming out of Nadene's cabin this morning—a delightful surprise—and we gave her a ride. She tells me she had no idea until last night that you've been our minister this past year."

He patted Marisela's hand, but his amused gaze held Jodi's. "It looks as if she sufficiently recovered from the shock since she managed to get herself here on time this morning."

Garrett would have to remember that Grandma practically had to dynamite her out of bed, and often she'd dragged herself to the breakfast table still in her pajamas.

Before Jodi could make a snappy response, a pretty brunette with two small children in tow paused next to Garrett. Bundled against the cold, the faux fur-trimmed hood of the woman's burgundy coat framed a heart-shaped face and long-lashed

dark eyes. She looked up at him expectantly, as if assuming introductions would be made.

Jodi's heart jolted. His wife and kids? Right before turning off the bedside lamp last night, she'd realized Garrett hadn't clarified a marital status. But a quick glance at both his and the woman's ungloved—and ringless—hands put the question to rest. So Garrett was single and still playing the field, although aspects of that part of his life would certainly have made a U-turn, as well.

His gaze flickered to the newcomer. “Sofia, you know Marisela. But I'd like you to meet Jodi Thorpe. Our grandmothers were good friends. Jodi, this is Sofia Ramos and her daughter Tiana.”

He placed a hand affectionately on the head of the black-haired little girl next to him. “Her little brother is Leon.”

While early grade schooler Tiana smiled shyly, Leon, appearing to be about three, paid Jodi no attention as he tugged at his mother's coat, eager to be on his way.

“It's good to meet you.” Jodi shook Sofia's offered hand.

“Are you visiting for the holidays, Jodi?”

“My folks are selling my grandparents' cabin, so I'm here to get it ready to put on the market.” That response seemed to satisfy everyone.

“Such a shame to sell the place.” Marisela shook her head. “But while they keep the utilities turned on and things in good repair, your folks haven't been up here at all this year.”

Garrett looked down at his watch and made a face.

“Oops. Showtime. Children’s choir has the opening number.” He held out a hand to each child. “Kiddos? Let’s get you in there for your moment in the spotlight—all set for your mama’s ever-ready camera if she can sneak off the piano bench for a few shots.”

Both giggling children willingly grasped a hand and trotted up the front steps beside him, evidently comfortable in the man’s presence. Which again made Jodi wonder about his relationship with their mother.

Mr. and Mrs. Palmer invited her to sit with them, and it was with a mix of nostalgia and a sense of time too quickly passing that she spied a few now-older yet familiar faces—including Garrett’s spunky Grandma Jo, who came over to warmly welcome her.

Much of the service was a blur as youthful memories assailed. Sunshine streaming through the stained glass windows illuminated the red velvet bows on each pew, and the familiar scent of furniture oil tickled memories. Remembrances of squirming on a hard pew at her grandmother’s side vividly filled her mind, as did later instances of covertly watching a restless, teenage Garrett sitting with his buddies.

It all blended together with Sofia’s lovely piano renditions in the background, that is until Garrett stood to deliver the morning’s message. As if he had a direct hotline to her troubled soul, his words regarding right and wrong choices—how split-

second decisions could make a lasting impact—unexpectedly hit their fragile target.

It was all she could do to maintain her composure as a montage of uncomfortable images flashed through her mind. Her life was such a muddled mess right now, mostly due to choices made. God had forgiven her. She believed that, not because she felt forgiven, but because that's what He promised. But hadn't she also paid for her mistakes in the worst possible way?

Now she'd very likely lose her job, too, through no fault of her own. Was it any wonder her faith was tottering? She took a steadying breath as a too-familiar suffocating sensation pressed in.

“Jodi? Would you like to join us?”

Jerked back to the present, she realized the service had concluded. She'd zoned out through the closing hymn, people were milling in the aisles, and Marisela was standing beside her, smiling uncertainly.

She gave an apologetic laugh as she stood to slip back into her jacket. “I'm sorry, I didn't catch that. Join you where?”

“Al and Dolly Lovell have invited us to lunch. You remember Dolly, don't you? Another of your grandmother's friends? You're invited, too—or we'd be happy to drop you off at the cabin if you'd prefer.”

“Oh, do come.” Another older woman, her fair hair cut in a chin-length bob, placed a hand on her arm. “You remember me, don't you? Georgia Gates. I was your vacation Bible school

teacher in third and fourth grades. Your grandma was such a dear friend. We miss her so much.”

“Of course, I remember you.” But for a fleeting moment, surrounded by those who knew and loved Nadene Thorpe, she couldn’t help but wonder why Grandma couldn’t still be there among them, too.

While she’d prefer to return to the seclusion of the cabin, she didn’t want to be rude to her grandma’s friends. If she got through the expected socializing today, she could then oversee the Christmas project as quickly and efficiently as possible. After that, she’d be free to withdraw from human contact for the remainder of her time in Hunter Ridge. “I’d be delighted to come as long as I won’t be intruding.”

“Of course you won’t be,” Georgia said, giving her arm a squeeze. “We’d love to catch up on your life and that of your folks and sisters.”

Thankfully, they could all reminisce about Grandma, too, and there was plenty she could fill them in on regarding family members—marriages, kids, travels. She should be able to keep the attention off herself for the most part.

She’d started down the main aisle when she caught a glimpse of a familiar-looking young man in a wheelchair making his way toward a nearby side door she knew led to an outside ramp. She paused as her grandmother’s friends continued toward the back of the church.

Drew Everton?

He'd been one of her friends from church and a longtime buddy of Garrett's. Top-notch student. Athlete extraordinaire. But she didn't see any sign of a cast or elevated leg, so what had...? He glanced up and caught her eye, an ear-to-ear grin illuminating his face. Then he expertly spun the wheelchair in her direction.

"Well, look who's here." His eyes smiled as he rolled up to her. "My mom said she thought she saw you, but I didn't believe her."

"Moms are always to be believed. It's me."

"You look great, Jodi." His dark-eyed gaze warmed as he looked her over. "Better than great."

"Thanks. You do, too." A lock of sand-colored hair dipping over his forehead, he was even better-looking than she remembered from the last time she'd seen him when he was a senior in high school. He'd sometimes joined her and Garrett in their youthful escapades, but he didn't have that wild streak Garrett had been known for. He'd been more cautious, a look-before-you-leap sort, a steadying influence that probably kept Garrett out of more serious trouble. "How are you, Drew?"

He gave a self-deprecating laugh and motioned to his legs. "I do all right, considering I can no longer chase after cute little gals like you and can't outrun their boyfriends should I attempt to steal a kiss."

She smiled uncertainly. "What happened?"

He shrugged. "A little accident. You think you're in control of your life and the next thing you know, you get your legs knocked

out from under you. In my case, literally.”

“This is...permanent?”

“It’s been my reality for several years, but who’s to say? Strides are being made in medical science, and God can always choose to step in. So I’m not giving up hope.”

“I admire your attitude, but I’m sorry, Drew. This can’t be easy.”

A shadow flickered through his eyes. “Far from that.”

His attention was caught by something behind her and his expression brightened. “Hey, you! Get on over here before I make off with your pretty little buddy.”

She turned as Garrett approached. He nodded to her, and the two men shook hands.

“Did you know Jodi was in town?” Drew studied his friend intently. “You kept that to yourself.”

Garrett raised his hands in a gesture of innocence. “I only found out last night. Ran into her by accident.”

Drew squinted one eye. “That true, Jodi?”

“One hundred percent.” It seemed surreal to be standing here talking to these two grown men she’d known when they were boys, and again she felt that faint sensation of suffocation. Disorientation. “I’ll be in town long enough to take care of family business related to Grandma and Grandpa’s cabin and then right back out again.”

“Maybe we can—”

“Wish I could let you two catch up on old times.” Garrett gave

them a regretful look. “But Marisela Palmer sent me in here to retrieve Jodi, and I don’t want her to come looking for the both of us.”

“Scaredy-cat,” Drew taunted.

“Guilty as charged.” He tilted his head toward Jodi. “Marisela’s in the car and waiting.”

She and Drew said their goodbyes, then she impulsively leaned over to give him a quick hug.

“Talk about a shock,” she whispered to Garrett as they stepped into the noontime sun and still-crisp air. “I feel so bad for Drew.”

Garrett’s jaw hardened as he nodded, but he didn’t meet her gaze. “Me, too.”

* * *

“How did you con this poor girl into taking on the Christmas project, Garrett? Shame on you for burdening a visitor with church responsibilities.” Georgia Gates clucked her tongue as she gazed at him from across the Lovells’ dining table. “When we heard Melody headed off to Texas, we thought for sure you’d recruit Sofia.”

Here we go again.

Garrett reluctantly looked up from his half-eaten apple pie to focus his attention on the older woman. Aware that all eyes at the Sunday lunch table were on him—including Jodi’s—he placed his fork on his plate and carefully schooled his features to what he hoped was a pastor-like demeanor.

The ink had barely dried on his church contract when it

seemed a not-too-subtle campaign commenced to set him up with Sofia Ramos. Is that why all the church ladies he'd talked to yesterday turned down his plea for assistance? They thought if none of them stepped up he'd be forced to call on the attractive single mom?

But they didn't know Sofia's whole story, and it wasn't his to tell.

"I think Sofia's hands are plenty full right now, don't you, Georgia? She's working full-time, and there are Leon's health issues to consider."

"I've always heard," Georgia persisted, with an emphatic nod to the others, "that if you need something done, give it to the person who is already successfully juggling a million things and they'll get it done, too. That's our Sofia."

"It's the holidays, though." Garrett again picked up his fork. "Let's show her a little mercy, shall we?"

Jodi gave him a pointed look as if to convey he hadn't let her off the hook for the holidays. But Sofia was the widow of a volunteer fireman who'd been killed on an icy winter road two years ago. She had enough on her shoulders as it was.

"The issue's been settled, Georgia," Dolly chimed in, coming to his rescue. "Thanks to Jodi, who has a big heart like her dear grandma."

Marisela smiled at Jodi fondly. "You probably wouldn't remember—you were only here a few days at Christmas some years—but your grandmother had so much fun helping Melody

make deliveries. She loved holding the babies.”

“So, then, young lady—” Good-natured Bert Palmer, Marisela’s balding, rotund husband, leaned a forearm on the table. “Christmas is two weeks away. What’s the plan?”

Startled—and looking prettier in that emerald-green turtleneck sweater than a woman had a right to look—Jodi’s gaze flew to Garrett. “I assumed that at some point that’s what someone would tell me.”

“She accepted the role last night, Bert.” Garrett set his fork down again with an inward sigh. Forget the pie. “I picked up Melody’s notes and checklist from the office this morning, so we need time to sort it out.”

“You’ll need volunteers. I can help.” Georgia smiled encouragingly at Jodi. Then, apparently realizing she’d been asked to volunteer yesterday and turned him down flat, she cut a sheepish look in Garrett’s direction. “I can help, Pastor. But I can’t take on the whole thing right now. Getting ready for grandkids coming next week, you know.”

“I can assist, too.” Marisela nodded in Jodi’s direction. “I’ve helped in past years but, like Georgia, I couldn’t assume responsibility for it all.”

Dolly cut another slice of pie and slid it onto her husband’s offered plate. “You can count on me, too, sweetheart. Let me know what I need to do. The young unwed mothers are so appreciative of any assistance they get, and we always come through for them. Baby food. Diapers. Maternity and infant

wear. All topped off by a generous helping of things intended to pamper them a bit. I love seeing their faces when they open the packages.”

Jodi's gaze, unexpectedly bleak, met Garrett's.

Guilt stabbed. Had he, in trying to get the project off his own overloaded plate, asked her to take on too much?

* * *

Unwed mothers.

She still couldn't believe she'd signed on to immerse herself in the world of young women with babies and no husbands. That was a situation she could all too vividly relate to. But she'd given Garrett her word, and Grandma's friends were looking at her as if she were Grandma come back to life.

But Garrett now appeared rather uncertain. Was he having second thoughts about her ability to take it on, thinking she'd let him and the church down?

Despite the initial shock last night, she could handle this. There was no reason she had to spend time with unwed mothers and their infants, was there? She'd sit in the overseer's chair and delegate. Her grandmother's friends promised support, as, she assumed, would others. They could be the ones making any required personal contacts.

Holding the babies.

Feeling the phone vibrating in the purse nestled by her feet, she excused herself from the table. In the hallway outside the dining room, she checked the caller ID. Her sister, Star.

“Aunt Jodi?” The giggling voice of her sister’s five-year-old, Bethany, came through the earpiece.

“Hi, sweetie.”

“Is it true you’re a Grinch?” A peal of childish laughter ensued, and Jodi could hear Star whispering something to her daughter as she took possession of the phone.

“Funny, Star.”

“I didn’t coach her to say that, Jodi. Honest.”

“Maybe not. But she overheard that somewhere, and I doubt the source is your ever-lovin’ husband.”

“Well, if the shoe fits...”

“It doesn’t.”

“The kids are disappointed that you aren’t coming here for Christmas. They were looking forward to you taking them to see the holiday lights at the Phoenix Zoo again this year.”

She’d miss that, too. The zoo put on a display of almost four million lights, special shows and rides to delight kids of all ages. Even grown-up ones.

“The thing is, things are really up in the air right now with my job and other stuff, and I told Mom and Dad I’d get the cabin in shape to put on the market while they’re in Mexico.”

“Which brings me to the reason I called. We’re not going to let you spend Christmas all by yourself. Ronda and I and the kids are coming up a couple of days before Christmas.”

Her heart sank.

“Isn’t that a great idea?” Her sister’s voice rose in excited

anticipation. “Our hubbies will join us Christmas Eve.”

This could not be happening. Not now. Not when she needed time alone. Time to ask God some hard questions and, hopefully, get her life back on track.

“Star, this isn’t a good idea. I’m here a limited amount of time to get the cabin in shape. I can’t do that with a houseful of kids underfoot.” While Star’s Bethany could be counted on to behave herself, little sister Savannah was only three and would be at that better-watch-her-every-minute stage. Then there was sister Ronda’s four-year-old, Henry, who, from what she’d been told, was still a rambunctious handful.

“We can help,” Star continued. “The kids will play outside most of the time, especially if it snows. You do have snow already, don’t you? I think I saw that on the news.”

“Yes, there’s snow, but—”

“Perfect. They can go sledding and build snowmen like we used to do. And what was that game we played with the paths made in the snow? Fox and geese or something like that?”

“Yes, but—”

“Ronda and I were reminiscing last night about all the wonderful times we had at our grandparents’ place up there. Amazing summers and fun-filled Christmases. Stringing popcorn for the big tree. Opening grab-bag presents. Finding baby Jesus in the manger on Christmas morning. Remember?” She sighed happily. “We were so fortunate to experience that—something our kids have never gotten to enjoy. Something that

they'll never have the opportunity to experience when the cabin sells.”

“Star—”

“This is it, Jodi, our last chance.” Her sister’s voice now openly pleaded. “I know you can pull something amazing together for the kids’ sake. Our last big Christmas together at the cabin. One like Grandma and Grandpa used to give us.”

Would kids that young actually make any lasting memories from a family get-together at the cabin—or was this a front for her sisters’ own nostalgic journey?

Still trying to take in all her sister was saying, Jodi stared blankly down the hallway, then caught movement out of the corner of her eye—Garrett, who’d stepped to the dining room door, his eyes filled with concern.

“Everything okay?” he mouthed.

Oh, sure. Everything was fine. Just fine.

Chapter Four

“Thanks again, Garrett, for the loan of the pickup.”

Jodi’s words warmed him as he sat across from her in a cozy corner of his book-lined church office Monday morning, the soft strains of “Joy to the World” wafting from the open door that led to his now-absent assistant’s work area, manned today by Dolly.

The grateful smile of his childhood friend was enough to tempt even the most determined man to rethink his priorities. But being tempted and following through on temptation were two different matters. He’d committed to a plan for his future, and

not even Jodi reappearing in his life could stop him now.

Besides, undoubtedly she still thought of him as a big brother. She had no idea how he couldn't get her out of his mind for months after that amazing kiss he'd recklessly drawn her into. How he'd tried to shrug it off. Joke it off. Run other guys off. He'd never forget, either, the shock in her eyes. Big brothers didn't kiss little sisters like that. He'd broken a trust.

Did she think, by his asking her to help on the church project, that he still had designs on her? If so, no wonder she'd looked dazed after he'd all but twisted her arm to "volunteer."

"Rio's more than happy to lend you her truck since she's out of town until Christmas." Having Jodi on foot would have been problematic, but driving her around town and to neighboring communities could only lead to being targets of gossip. So he'd gotten in touch with his cousin Rio—Grady and Luke's little sister—and found a solution.

Jodi shook her head as if in wonder, the burgundy shade of a cable-knit sweater lending an attractive glow to her fair skin. "It's so funny to think Rio's all grown up now. I remember when she was competing at the county fair kids' barrel-racing division in elementary school."

"Twenty-one next spring and still barrel racing."

"Makes me feel old." A shadow that troubled him flickered momentarily through her eyes as she shifted in the wingback chair to look out the window beside them. Rio's red pickup, parked in the gravel back lot next to his SUV, already sported

a light layer of snow. It looked like the lingering effects of an El Niño weather pattern were going to make themselves known this winter.

She again turned her attention to him, holding up the compact spiral notebook in which she'd been writing as they'd talked. "It sounds as though there's still a lot to be done."

In the past hour, they'd gone over the budget and checklist, and brainstormed strategies—over which they had opposing ideas—to meet the looming deadline. Not counting today, there were only eleven days until everything had to be delivered before Christmas Eve. Had his powerhouse office assistant actually thought it could be pulled together in such a short time?

Now he'd unintentionally dumped his own headache on Jodi. "I apologize for that. Melody's usually on top of things. One of the most organized people I know, and she keeps me organized, too. But with her mother passing away last spring and then trying to keep tabs on her father's welfare from a distance, I don't think her focus was on the project as it usually is much of the year."

"There's a lot of solicitation yet to be done for both monetary and physical item donation. Then supplementary purchases to be made. And distribution."

"That sums it up." He ran his hand through his hair. "You know, though, Jodi, like I said yesterday when you told me about your family coming, you don't have to do this. It's certainly a worthwhile project to help out unwed moms in the area, but Georgia was right. This isn't your responsibility. Church

members need to pick up the ball and run with it.”

Or he'd have to.

He couldn't risk a dark blot on his performance evaluation right here at the end of the year should the annual Christmas project flop. But he'd do all he could not to call on Sofia. Neither of them needed to encourage the matchmakers.

“Grandma's friends said they'd help.” Jodi's chin lifted as she offered a determined smile, reminiscent of childhood days when she'd set her mind to something. “I'll make getting funding and donation commitments a priority this week, then leave it to the others if it comes down to that.”

He squinted one eye. “From what you shared with me this morning, though, this is the first real vacation you've had all year. Maybe in several years.”

“I'm good with it.” She tapped the notebook now on her lap. “I have Melody's cell number, checklist and contact numbers of past donors. I can take it from here.”

It sounded as if she wanted him to stay out of the way. Why should that disappoint him? Wasn't that what he wanted—someone else to take over the project and free up his time for other demands?

“Okay, then, if you're sure.” He stood to look down at her, noticing how her hair glinted softly in the lamplight. “Did you want to take a look at the storeroom? See what has already come in?”

“Good idea.”

She'd just risen to her feet, standing what some might consider a shade too close, when Sofia appeared in the doorway, a plate of cookies clutched in her hands.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Her dark-lashed eyes widened slightly. "I didn't know you had someone with you. Whoever is covering for Melody today must have stepped away."

She motioned apologetically to the work area behind her.

"We're finishing up." He took a step back, putting more distance between him and Jodi. "I'm going to show Jodi the storeroom where we keep donations for the unwed mothers project. She's going to manage it while Melody's away."

"Oh, really? When I heard yesterday that Melody had to leave town abruptly, I thought for sure I'd hear from you with a plea for assistance." Sofia thrust the plate of cookies into his hands—pumpkin spice, his favorite—then focused a curious gaze on Jodi. "That's very...nice of you, especially considering you're only in town for a short time."

"Blackmailed," Jodi whispered in a deliberately audible aside. "Believe me, someone who has known you since you were a first grader has loads of ammunition to work with."

She cut a playful look at him.

"Come on now, don't give Sofia the impression I railroaded you into this."

"You didn't?"

He had. Sort of. But he'd given her the opportunity to back out, hadn't he? "You said you could handle it."

“And I can.” She leaned toward Sofia, mischief still in her eyes. “Garrett and I don’t quite see eye to eye on some of the details, so you’d be doing me a great service if you could keep him out from underfoot.”

“I think that can be arranged.” Sofia’s own gaze now teased as she looked up at him.

“Well, then—” Suddenly feeling compelled to escape the confines of the small office, he set the cookies on his desk, then motioned them both toward the door. “Please join us, Sofia.”

No way did he want anyone stumbling across him alone in a storage room with Jodi. Where was Dolly when he needed her?

Together they made their way to the wing of the church that housed classrooms and a fellowship hall. In a side hallway, he unlocked a door with a smiling paper snowman taped to it. Then, holding it open to reveal a shadowed, eight-by-twelve shelved space, he flipped on the light.

It was all he could do not to gasp aloud.

Viewing the sole package of disposable diapers sitting on the floor, Sofia looked at him doubtfully. “The cupboard looks pretty bare, Garrett.”

Where did everything go?

“Melody took some stuff to the crisis pregnancy center in Canyon Springs earlier in the fall, but it looks as if it hasn’t been replenished.” As pastor of the church, he should have been more attuned, not let it fall through the cracks. But he’d trusted his office assistant. Last December when he’d started here, the room

had been overflowing with holiday baby bounty even before the final push for donations.

“We’ll get this room filled,” Jodi said matter-of-factly as she stepped away from the door, but not meeting his likely guilt-filled gaze. She probably wanted to throttle him. But he’d always been able to count on her to come through for him when they were kids. Covering for him. Saving him from the repercussions of his own misdeeds and shortcomings.

Apparently, despite the rough-and-tumble tomboy’s transformation in many other ways, that invaluable attribute hadn’t changed.

He took a relieved breath.

God rest ye merry gentlemen, let nothing you dismay...

* * *

“I’m sorry to hear that, Mr. Bealer.”

Jodi stared blankly across the room at the cabin’s stone fireplace, the phone pressed to her ear. Pete Bealer was the seventh person on Melody’s contact list that she’d called following the “enlightening” meeting with Garrett. At the rate things were going, she’d consider herself fortunate to have a single baby rattle to split among the unwed mothers next week. Oh, and that package of disposable diapers sitting in the otherwise empty storage room.

“Wish I could help out but, yeah, it’s been a rough year,” the owner of the local ice-cream shop continued. “As much as I’d like to, I can’t even blame all those artists in town for this

one. According to the Chamber of Commerce's findings, they actually drew even more business to Hunter Ridge last summer than the one before. Go figure."

He chuckled. It was nice he could find humor in the fact that his outgo had nearly exceeded his income.

"I heard it was unusually cool late in the summer," she commiserated.

"It was, it was. Near-record rainfall, too. So folks were looking for something to warm them up rather than cool them down. I hear eateries with a fireplace or woodstove did a booming business."

"Well, thank you for your time. I hope things go better for you next year."

She returned the cell phone to her purse, then surveyed the knotty pine-walled, open-plan space—living room, kitchen, dining area—remembering it as much bigger than it was in actuality. Yes, there were two small bedrooms and an attic room that stretched the length of the cabin, but how had Grandma and Grandpa packed them all in here when Mom and Dad, her sisters, and other friends and relatives gathered for a weekend or longer?

It had been a comfy, kid-friendly retreat, with two sofas and several rockers. Folding card tables leaned against the wall for playing games at night. A bookcase filled with classics had welcomed them on a rainy day. And next week the now-silent rooms would be filled once again. But how did her sisters expect her to replicate for their children the delightful Christmases they

remembered?

She wasn't Grandma.

A touch of melancholy permeated as she moved to the front window to watch snow flurries dancing through the early-afternoon air. Maybe her sisters were right. She was becoming a Grinch. And so much for the phone calls she'd made, trying to drum up a bit of Christmas spirit among potential donors—and within herself. An hour's worth of effort down the drain when she had too many other things to attend to.

"Where," she mumbled aloud, "is all the good cheer and generosity characteristic of the season?" No doubt she'd have had more success with her calls two weeks ago, before credit card bills from Black Friday purchases started rolling in.

She glanced over at the stack of Christmas decoration boxes she'd dragged out of the attic last night, but hadn't the heart to open. It hadn't been her intention to decorate during the brief time she was in town, but with her nieces and nephew coming next week and her sisters anticipating a nostalgic sojourn to the good old days, they clearly expected a little effort on her part.

Maybe if she wasn't trying to manage the church project, clean the cabin and prayerfully sort through her tumultuous life, she could handle a little holiday festivity for the kids. Maybe. Playing hostess wasn't one of her God-given gifts.

"How did I get myself into this?" Her voice reverberated through the raftered, wood-floored space.

No thundering voice from Heaven responded to her plaintive

query. But then she already knew the answer to how she'd gotten saddled with the Christmas project—and unwed mothers of all things. It came down to the unfortunate fact that she was still infatuated with Garrett McCrae. Dumb. Dumb. Dumb. She was too old for crushes, especially on someone who'd made it clear that kissing her had been the worst mistake of his life.

Are you kidding me? Kissing Jodi would be about as thrilling as kissing our Labrador retriever. And she'd probably double up her fist and belt the first guy who tried.

Her breath caught at the still-vivid memory. After a heart-soaring kiss only a short while earlier, she'd overheard him joking with his buddies later that same night, after the Christmas Eve service. One of them—Richard?—had mumbled something she didn't catch, and Garrett's mocking response brought a round of laughter that she could still hear. Could still feel the hot waves of humiliation that had coursed through her.

Thankfully, neither Garrett nor any of the others had seen her, and shaking all the way to her core, she'd slipped silently away. But it cut deep, making it the worst Christmas of her whole life. The worst, that is, until she lost a baby to miscarriage four years ago this very month.

Looking back now, she recognized that she'd allowed overhearing Garrett and the laughter of the other boys to set her up for a fall when, not too many years later, Kel O'Connor blarneyed her—and her rickety self-image—right into his arms and into his bed.

Jodi clenched her fists. She was not going to think about Kel right now. Or Garrett. Not even Anton, although he was an innocent party in all of this.

As she took a step away from the window, she glimpsed an SUV making its way up the pine-lined lane to the cabin. Garrett. What was he doing here? He hadn't said anything about stopping by.

There was someone in the seat beside him, too. Sofia? No, thankfully it was Dolly. Sofia, although seemingly as sweet as could be, was one of those women who made her overly aware of her own shortcomings in the domesticity department. Those cookies she'd delivered while Jodi was at the church hadn't looked store-bought, but what exactly was her relationship with Garrett that she was stopping by his office in the middle of the morning? Hadn't he mentioned on Sunday that she worked someplace full-time?

"This is a surprise," Jodi said as she ushered her guests in from the cold.

"I told Dolly about the bargain I'd made with you." Garrett unlooped what looked to be a hand-crocheted scarf from around his neck—Sofia's work?—and hung it on the coatrack by the door. His jacket joined it. "You know, how if you helped with the Christmas project, I'd see that you got assistance cleaning this place."

"He bullied you into cleaning, Dolly?" Jodi gave Garrett a look of reprimand as he helped the older woman off with her coat.

He'd said earlier that he'd have high schoolers pitch in, not drag one of her grandma's friends into it.

"In case you haven't noticed, he's more of a sweet-talker than a bully. Which is why we've been delighted to have him heading up Christ's Church's ministry." His landlady smiled at him with affection in her eyes. "I told him I'd be happy to help, and he suggested we find out firsthand exactly what you need to have done."

"Well..." Jodi looked around the space somewhat helplessly. A housekeeper came in once a week in Philly while she was at work, so she wasn't certain what all might be involved in that vaguely mysterious process. Kind of like the baffling nuances of home cooking—that's what delis and restaurant takeout were for, right? "Mom and Dad haven't been here this year, so everything's dusty. And they said they haven't done deep cleaning in years. I've found more than a few cobwebs."

Which she was not touching.

"Cobwebs?" Garrett's eyes gleamed. "That must have made your day."

"Funny." She gave him a smirk, then offered an explanation to Dolly. "When we were kids Garrett talked me into going first when we were exploring one of the attic spaces under the eaves, knowing full well spiders had strung their sticky webs across our intended path."

She shuddered at the memory, and Garrett laughed.

"That's our Garrett." Dolly shook her head in amusement. "Is

it okay, Jodi, if I take a look around? That will give me an idea of what type of cleaning supplies I need to bring.”

“Look to your heart’s content. And I’ll pay for any supplies.”

Dolly disappeared in the direction of the bedrooms and bath. One bathroom. How on earth would her family get through next week in a packed house?

Garrett clapped his hands together. “So, how’s it going with the project? Have you drummed up any donations?”

Jodi rubbed her hands up and down her sweated arms to warm herself up. Another thing she’d need to get—firewood. “I made a few calls with little to show for it.”

As in nothing.

“I plan to hit it hard this afternoon,” she continued, unwilling to admit defeat. “But I may call Melody first. See if she has any tips.”

“I remember her saying that some years she’d get more of one thing than another and had to fill in for what came up short.”

This year might take a lot of supplementing if the results of the initial phone calls were an accurate gauge.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

His attention abruptly focused across the room. “Hey, what’s all this? Christmas decorations?”

Before she could stop him, he covered the distance to the holiday-designed boxes, crouched down, and popped the lid off one. “Oh, wow. I remember this.”

He carefully lifted out a rustic-looking wooden crèche, a good

eighteen inches tall and a maybe two feet wide. “This sat on the console table over there, didn’t it? And baby Jesus never put in an appearance in the manger until Christmas morning.”

“You have a good memory.”

She moved to stand beside him as he continued to rummage, reaching in for the Bubble-Wrapped wooden figurines and freeing them from their plastic-encased confines one at a time.

“Remember the year we nearly ransacked this place trying to find where your grandma hid baby Jesus so we could kidnap him?”

“You thought Grandma would pay the ransom in chocolate chip cookies.”

“Brats, weren’t we?” He lifted up a black-bearded wooden figurine, a wise man cloaked in a turquoise robe. “This guy, he was my favorite. Remember how we’d march them around, making them talk about the star and going in search of baby Jesus?”

“And got them into Star Wars battles along the way.” She knelt down beside him and picked up one of the sheep. She hadn’t seen this nativity set since she left for college. Since before they stopped coming to Hunter Ridge for Christmas when Grandma’s health deteriorated.

Frowning, Garrett pawed through the plastic.

She placed the sheep down next to the other pieces. “What are you looking for?”

He dug around a bit more, then sat back on his heels, a solemn

look on his face. “Sorry you lost your baby, Jodi.”

Her breath caught, a wave of cold flooding her body as her gaze flew to his. How did he—

“Hey, Jode, don’t look so distraught.” He patted her arm in consolation. “I’m sure baby Jesus will turn up by Christmas Day. He always did, didn’t He?”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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