



MILLION-DOLLAR MAVERICK

Christine Rimmer

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Christine Rimmer

Million-Dollar Maverick

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Finding true love: priceless
RUST CREEK RAMBLINGS
People say that the odds of finding your perfect partner are rather like the odds of hitting the lottery: slim to none. It's hard to believe, faithful readers, but Nate Crawford may just have accomplished both. We have the scoop on Rust Creek Falls's best-kept secret: our former mayoral candidate is now a very wealthy man! Yet he is going out of his way to make sure no one finds out. The question is, why? Insiders whisper that Nate is also keeping another secret from his new girlfriend, nurse Callie Kennedy—a big one—and it could be a game changer. Place your bets, dear readers! What will she do when she learns her «regular guy» boyfriend is really a maverick millionaire?

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“I shouldn’t have been kissing you,” he muttered darkly, as a warning.

“I’m not a good bet. There’s something ... broken in me, you know? I haven’t been such a good man in the years since I moved back home. I’ve been a Crawford through and through, you might say—too proud and too sure I knew every damn thing. You are a quality woman. You deserve a better man than me.”

She only looked at him, eyes wide, bright with the sheen of unshed tears. He wanted to grab her and start kissing her all over again.

And that couldn’t happen. He made himself clearer. “The last eight years, since I’ve been back in town, I’ve gone out with several women. But it never ends well.”

Callie kept her gaze level. He couldn’t tell what she might be thinking. “I understand,” she said. He leaned a little closer. “Do you really?”

“I do, Nate. Although I happen to think you’re a much better man than you’re giving yourself credit for.”

“You’re just softhearted.”

She gave a tiny shrug. “Maybe I am.”

Dear Reader,

Welcome back to Rust Creek Falls, Montana—and the twenty-year anniversary of Mills & Boon’s fabulous Montana Mavericks series. Last year, the Fourth of July Flood of the Century almost washed Rust Creek Falls away.

But the small, close-knit community pulled together and survived. Now Rust Creek Falls is coming back better than ever. There’s a lot of rebuilding going on and several interesting newcomers to town—including a few memorable characters from the past two decades of Montana Mavericks stories.

Yep. Things have changed a lot since last year. Especially for Nathan Crawford. You may remember Nate. A community leader, he made some bad choices and did a few good people wrong. You could say he was the villain of last year’s series.

Not this year. Nate’s come into some serious money and he’s out to make up for the bad things he’s done. It’s a tough job to right all those old wrongs. But his heroine, intrepid, bighearted nurse Callie Kennedy, is just the woman to help him with that.

I hope you enjoy this Montana Mavericks story—and all those to come.

Yours always,

Christine Rimmer

Million-Dollar Maverick

Christine Rimmer



www.millsandboon.co.uk

CHRISTINE RIMMER came to her profession the long way around. Before settling down to write about the magic of romance, she’d been everything from an actress to a salesclerk to a waitress. Now that she’s finally found work that suits her perfectly, she insists she never had a problem keeping a job—she was merely gaining “life experience” for her future as a novelist. Christine is grateful not only for the joy she finds in writing, but for what waits when the day’s work is through: a man she

loves who loves her right back, and the privilege of watching their children grow and change day to day. She lives with her family in Oregon. Visit Christine at www.christinerimmer.com.

MILLS & BOON

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For my mom.
I love you, Mom,
and I'm so grateful
for every moment we had together.

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January 15

On the ten-year anniversary of the day he lost everything, Nate Crawford got out of bed at 3:15 a.m. He grabbed a quick shower and filled a big thermos with fresh-brewed coffee.

Outside in the yard, his boots crunched on the frozen ground and the predawn air was so cold it seared his lungs when he sucked it in. He had to scrape the rime of ice off his pickup's windshield, but the stars were bright in the wide Montana sky and the cloudless night cheered him a little. Clear weather meant he should make good time this year. He climbed in behind the wheel and cranked the heater up high.

He left the ranch at a quarter of four. With any luck at all, he would reach his destination before night fell again.

But then, five miles north of Kalispell, he spotted a woman on the far side of the road. She wore a moss-green, quilted coat and skinny jeans tucked into lace-up boots. And she stood by a mud-spattered silver-gray SUV hooked up to a U-Haul trailer. With one hand, she held a red gas can. With the other, she was flagging him down.

Nate grumbled a few discouraging words under his breath. He had a long way to go, and the last thing he needed was to lose time playing Good Samaritan to some woman who couldn't be bothered to check her fuel gauge.

Not that he was even tempted to drive by and leave her there. A man like Nate had no choice when it came to whether or not to help a stranded woman. For him, doing what needed doing was bred in the bone.

He slowed the pickup. There was no one coming either way, so he swung the wheel, crossed the center line and pulled in behind the U-Haul on the far shoulder.

The woman came running. Her bright-striped wool beanie had three pom-poms, one at the crown and one at the end of each tie. They bounced merrily as she ran. He leaned across the seats and shoved open the door for her. A gust of icy air swirled in.

Framed in the open door, she held up the red gas can. Breathlessly, she asked, "Give a girl a lift to the nearest gas station?" It came out slightly muffled by the thick wool scarf she had wrapped around the bottom half of her face.

Nate was known for his smooth-talking ways, but the cold and his reluctance to stop made him curt. "Get in before all the heat gets out."

Just like a woman, she chose that moment to hesitate. "You're not an ax murderer, are you?"

He let out a humorless chuckle. "If I was, would I tell you so?"

She widened her big dark eyes at him. "Now you've got me worried." She said it jokingly.

He had no time for jokes. "Trust your instincts and do it fast. My teeth are starting to chatter."

She tipped her head to the side, studying him, and then, at last, she shrugged. "All right, cowboy. I'm taking a chance on you." Grabbing the armrest, she hoisted herself up onto the seat. Once there, she set the gas can on the floor of the cab, shut the door and stuck out her hand. "Callie Kennedy. On my way to a fresh start in the beautiful small town of Rust Creek Falls."

"Nate Crawford." He gave her mittened hand a shake. "Shooting Star Ranch. It's a couple of miles outside of Rust Creek—and didn't you just drive through Kalispell five miles back?"

Pom-poms danced as she nodded. "I did, yes."

"I heard they have gas stations in Kalispell. Lots of 'em."

She gave a low laugh. "I should have stopped for gas, I know." She started unwinding the heavy scarf from around her face. He watched with more interest than he wanted to feel, perversely hoping he wouldn't like what he saw. But no. She was as pretty as she was perky. Long wisps of lustrous seal-brown hair escaped the beanie to trail down her flushed cheeks. "I thought I could make it without stopping." Head bent to the task, she snapped the seat belt closed.

"You were wrong."

She turned to look at him again and something sparked in those fine eyes. "Do I hear a lecture coming on, Nate?"

"Ma'am," he said with more of a drawl than was strictly natural to him. "I would not presume."

She gave him a slow once-over. "Oh, I think you would. You look like a man who presumes on a regular basis."

He decided she was annoying. "Have I just been insulted?"

She laughed, a full-out laugh that time. It was such a great laugh he forgot how aggravating he found her. "You came to my rescue." Her eyes were twinkling again. "I would never be so rude as to insult you."

"Well, all right, then," he said, feeling suddenly out of balance somehow. He put the pickup in gear, checked for traffic and then eased back onto the road again. For a minute or two, neither of

them spoke. Beyond his headlight beams, there was only the dark, twisting ribbon of road. No other headlights cut the night. Above, the sky was endless, swirling with stars, the rugged, black shadows of the mountains poking up into it. When the silence got too thick, he asked, “So, did you hear about the great flood that took out half of Rust Creek Falls last summer?”

“Oh, yeah.” She was nodding. “So scary. So much of Montana was flooded, I heard. It was all over the national news.”

The Rust Creek levee had broken on July Fourth, destroying homes and businesses all over the south half of town. Since then, Rust Creek Falls had seen an influx of men and women eager to pitch in with reconstruction. Some in town claimed that a lot of the women had come with more than helping out in mind, that they were hoping to catch themselves a cowboy. Nate couldn’t help thinking that if Callie Kennedy wanted a man, she’d have no trouble finding one—even if she was more annoying than most.

Was she hungry? He wouldn’t mind a plate of steak and eggs. Maybe he ought to ask her if she wanted to stop for breakfast before they got the gas....

But no. He couldn’t do that. It was the fifteenth of January. His job was to get his butt to North Dakota—and to remember all he’d lost. No good-looking, mouthy little brunette with twinkly eyes could be allowed to distract him from his purpose.

He said, “Let me guess. You’re here to help with the rebuilding effort. I gotta tell you, it’s a bad time of year for it. All the work’s pretty much shut down until the weather warms a little.” He sent her a quick glance. She just happened to be looking his way.

For a moment, their gazes held—and then they both turned to stare out at the dark road again. “Actually, I have a job waiting for me. I’m a nurse practitioner. I’ll be partnering up with Emmet DePaulo. You know Emmet?”

Tall and lean, sixty-plus and bighearted to a fault, Emmet ran the Rust Creek Falls Clinic. “I do. Emmet’s a good man.”

She made a soft sound of agreement and then asked, “And what about you, Nate? Where are you going before dawn on a cold Wednesday morning?”

He didn’t want to say, didn’t want to get into it. “I’m on my way to Bismarck,” he replied, hoping she’d leave it at that.

No such luck. “I went through there yesterday. It’s a long way from here. What’s in Bismarck?”

He answered her question with one of his own. “Where you from?”

There was a silence from her side of the cab. He prepared to rebuff her if she asked about Bismarck again.

But then she only said, “I’m from Chicago.”

He grunted. “Talk about a long way from here.”

“That is no lie. I’ve been on the road since two in the morning Monday. Sixteen hundred endless miles, stopping only to eat and when I just had to get some sleep....”

“Can’t wait to get started on your new life, huh?”

She flashed him another glowing smile. “I went through Rust Creek Falls with my parents on our way to Glacier National Park when I was eight. Fell in love with the place and always wanted to live there. Now, at last, it’s really happening. And yeah. You’re right. I can’t wait.”

It was none of his business, but he went ahead and asked anyway, “You honestly have no doubts about making this move?”

“Not a one.” The woman had a greenhorn’s blind enthusiasm.

“You’ll be surprised, Callie. Montana winters are long and cold.” He slid her another quick glance.

She was smiling wider than ever. “You ever been to Chicago, Nate? Gets pretty cold there, too.”

“It’s not the same,” he insisted.

“Well, I guess I’ll see for myself about that.”

He really was annoyed with her now, annoyed enough that he said scornfully, “You won’t last the winter. You’ll be hightailing it back to the Windy City before the snow melts.”

“Is that a challenge, Nate?” The woman did not back down. “I never could resist a challenge.”

Damn, but he was riled now. Out of proportion and for no reason he could understand. Maybe it was because she was slowing him down from getting where he needed to be. Or maybe because he found her way too easy on the eyes—and then there was her perfume. A little sweet, a little tart. Even mixed with the faint smell of gasoline from the red can between her feet, he liked her perfume.

And it wasn’t appropriate for him to like it. It wasn’t appropriate for him to be drawn to some strange woman. Not today.

She was watching him, waiting for him to answer her question, to tell him if his mean-spirited prediction had been a challenge or not.

He decided to keep his mouth shut.

Apparently, she thought that was a good idea because she didn’t say anything more, either. They rode in tense silence the rest of the way to the gas station. She filled up her can, paid cash for it and got in the pickup again.

He drove her straight back to her waiting SUV.

When he pulled in behind the U-Haul, he suggested grudgingly, “Maybe I’d better just follow you back to town, see that you get there safely.”

“No, thanks. I’ll be okay.”

He felt like a complete jerk—probably because he’d been acting like one. “Come on.” He reached for the gas can. “Let me—”

She grabbed the handle before he could take it and put on a stiff smile. “I can do it. Thank you for your help.” And then she leaned on the door, jumped down and hoisted the gas can down, too. “You take care now.” In the glow of light from the cab, he watched her breath turn to fog in the icy air.

It was still pitch-dark out. At the edge of the cleared spot behind her, a big, dirty For Sale sign had been nailed on a fence post. Beyond the fence, new-growth ponderosa pines stood black and thick. Farther out in the darkness, perched on a high ridge and silhouetted against the sky, loomed the black outline of a house so enormous it looked like a castle. Built by a very rich man named Nathaniel Bledsoe two decades ago, the house had always been considered a monstrosity by folks in the Rust Creek Falls Valley. From the first, they called the place Bledsoe’s Folly. When Bledsoe died, it went up for sale.

But nobody ever bought it. It stood vacant to this day.

Who was to say vagrants hadn’t taken up residence? And anyone could be lurking in the close-growing pines.

He didn’t like the idea of leaving her there alone. “I mean it, Callie. I’ll wait until you’re on your way.”

Unsmiling now, she gazed at him steadily, her soft chin hitched high. “I will last the winter.” The words had steel underpinnings. “I’m making myself a new life here. You watch me.”

He should say something easy and agreeable. He knew it. But somehow, she’d gotten under his skin. So he just made it worse. “Two hundred dollars says you’ll be gone before June first.”

She tipped her head to the side then, studying him. “Money doesn’t thrill me, Nate.”

“If not money, then what?”

One sleek eyebrow lifted and vanished into that bright wool hat. “Let me think it over.”

“Think fast,” he muttered, perversely driven to continue being a complete ass. “I haven’t got all day.”

She laughed then, a low, amused sound that seemed to race along his nerve endings. “Nate Crawford, you’ve got an attitude—and Rust Creek Falls is a small town. I have a feeling I won’t have any trouble tracking you down. I’ll be in touch.” She grabbed the outer handle of the door. “Drive safe now.” And then she pushed it shut and turned for her SUV.

He waited as he'd said he would, watching over her until she was back in her vehicle and on her way. In the glare of his headlights, she poured the gas in her tank. It only took a minute and, every second of that time, the good boy his mama had raised ached to get out and do it for her. But he knew she'd refuse him if he tried.

In no time, she had the cap back on the tank, the gas can stowed in the rear of the SUV, and she was getting in behind the wheel. Her headlights flared to life, and the engine started right up.

When she rolled out onto the road again, she tapped the horn once in salute. He waited for the red taillights of the U-Haul to vanish around the next curve before turning his truck around and heading for Bismarck again. As he drove back through Kalispell, he was shaking his head, dead certain that pretty Callie Kennedy would be long gone from Rust Creek come June.

Ten and a half hours later he rolled into a truck stop just west of Dickinson, North Dakota, to gas up. In the diner there, he had a burger with fries and a large Dr Pepper. And then he wandered through the attached convenience store, stretching his legs a little before getting back on the road for the final hour and a half of driving that would take him into Bismarck and his first stop there, a certain florist on Eighth Street.

Turned out he'd made good time after all, even with the delay caused by giving mouthy Nurse Callie a helping hand. This year, he would make it to the florist before they closed. And that meant he wouldn't have to settle for supermarket flowers. The thought pleased him in a grim sort of way.

Before heading out the door, he stopped at the register to buy a PayDay candy bar.

The clerk offered, "Powerball ticket? Jackpot's four hundred and eighty million now."

Nate never played the lottery. He was not a reckless man, not even when it came to something as inexpensive as a lottery ticket. Long shots weren't his style. But then he thought of pretty Callie Kennedy with her pom-pom hat, her gas can and her twinkly eyes.

Money doesn't thrill me, Nate.

Would four hundred and eighty million thrill her?

He chuckled under his breath and nodded. "Sure. Give me ten dollars' worth."

The clerk punched out a ticket with five rows of numbers on it. Nate gave it no more than a cursory glance as she put it in his hand.

He had no idea what he'd just done, felt not so much as a shiver of intuition that one of those rows of numbers was about to change his life forever.

Chapter One

At seven in the morning on the first day of June, Callie Kennedy knocked on the front door of Nate Crawford's big house on South Pine Street.

Nate hadn't shared two words with her since that cold day last January. But he'd seen her around town. He'd also kept tabs on her, though he would never have admitted that. Word around town was that she was not only a pure pleasure to look at, she was also a fine nurse with a whole lot of heart. Folks had only good things to say about Nurse Callie.

He pulled the door wide. "Well, well. Nurse Callie Kennedy," he drawled. Then he hooked his fingers in the belt loops of his Wranglers. "You're up good and early."

She gave him one of those thousand-watt smiles of hers. "Hello, Nate. Beautiful day, isn't it?"

He knew very well why she'd come. It wasn't to talk about the weather. Still, he leaned on the door frame and played along. "Mighty nice. Not a cloud in the sky."

"Happy June first." She beamed even wider, reminding him of a sunbeam in a yellow cotton dress with a soft yellow sweater thrown across her shoulders and yellow canvas shoes on her slim little feet.

"Let me guess...." He wrinkled his brow as though deep in thought. "Wait. I know. You're here to collect on that bet I made you."

"Nate." Her long lashes swept down. "You remembered." And then she looked up again. "I love your new house."

“Thank you.”

“That’s some front door.”

“Thanks. I had it specially made. Indonesian mahogany.” It had leaded glass in the top and sidelights you could open to let in a summer breeze.

“Very nice.” She looked at him from under impossibly thick, dark lashes. “And the porch wraps all the way around to the back?”

“That’s right, opens out onto a redwood deck.” And they might as well get on with it. “Come on in.”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

He stepped out of the doorway and bowed her in ahead of him. “Coffee?”

“Yes, please.” She waited for him to take the lead and then followed him through the central foyer, past the curving staircase, to the kitchen at the back. He gestured at the breakfast area. She took a seat, bracing an elbow on the table and watching him fiddle with his new pod-style coffeemaker.

“I’ve got about a hundred different flavors for this thing....”

The morning light spilled in the window, making her skin glow and bringing out auburn gleams in her long dark hair. “Got one with hazelnut?”

“Right here.” He popped the pod in the top and turned the thing on. Thirty seconds later, he was serving her the steaming cup. “Cream and sugar?”

“I want it all. How many bedrooms?”

He got her the milk and the sugar bowl. “Three to five, depending.”

“On what?”

“I have an office down here in the front that could be a bedroom. The master also has a good-sized sitting room with double doors to make a separate space. That sitting room could be a bedroom, too.” He got a cup for himself and sat opposite her. “Not a lot of bedrooms, really, but all the rooms are nice and big.”

“More than enough for a man living alone, I’d say.”

He wasn’t sure he liked the way she’d said that. Was she goading him? “What? A single man is only allowed so many rooms?”

She laughed. “Oh, come on, Nate. I’m not here to pick a fight.”

He regarded her warily. “Promise?”

“Mmm-hmm.” She stirred milk and sugar into her cup. “I heard a rumor you’re planning on leaving town.”

“Who told you that?”

“You know, I don’t recall offhand.” She sipped. “This is very good.”

“You’re welcome,” he said gruffly.

She sipped again. “It’s odd, really. Three months ago, you moved from the ranch into town, and now people say that you’re leaving altogether.”

“What people?” He kept his expression neutral, though his gut twisted. How much did she know?

No more than anyone else, he decided. To account for his new, improved lifestyle, he’d started telling folks that he’d had some luck with his investments. But as for the real source of his sudden wealth, even his family didn’t know. Only the Kalispell lawyer he’d hired had the real story—which was exactly how Nate wanted it.

“You know how it is here in town,” she said as though she’d been living in Rust Creek Falls all her life. “Everybody’s interested in what everyone else is doing.”

“No kidding,” he muttered wryly.

“Several folks have mentioned to me that you’re leaving.”

Why not just admit it? “I’m looking for a change, that’s all. My brothers can handle things at the ranch, so my bowing out hasn’t caused any problems there. At first, I thought moving to town would be change enough.”

“But it’s not?”

He glanced out the sunny window, where a blue jay flew down and landed on the deck rail and then instantly took flight again. “Maybe I need an even bigger change.” He swung his gaze to her again, found her bright eyes waiting. “Who knows? Maybe I’ll be heading back the way you came, making myself a whole new start in Chicago. I’m just not sure yet. I don’t know what the next step for me should be.”

She studied his face with what seemed to be honest interest. “You, living in Chicago? I don’t know, Nate. I’m just not seeing that.”

He thought, You don’t know me well enough to tell me where I might want to live. But he didn’t say it. She’d seemed sincere just now. And she was entitled to her opinion.

She wasn’t through, either. “I heard you ran for mayor last year—and lost to Collin Traub. They say you’re bitter about that because of the generations-long feud between the Traubs and your family, that it really hurt your pride when the town chose bad-boy Collin over an upstanding citizen like you. They say it’s personal between you and Collin, that there’s always been bad blood between the two of you, that the two of you once got into a knock-down-drag-out over a woman named Cindy Sellers.”

“Wow, Callie. You said a mouthful.” He actually chuckled.

And she laughed, too. “It’s only what I’ve heard.”

“Just because people love to gossip doesn’t mean they know what they’re talking about.”

“So none of it’s true, then?”

He admitted, “It’s true, for the most part.” Strangely, today, he was finding her candor charming—then again, today he wasn’t on his way to North Dakota to keep his annual appointment with all that he had lost.

She asked, “What parts did I get wrong?”

He should tell her to mind her own business. But she was so damn pretty and she really did seem interested. “Well, the mayor’s race?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m over that. And it’s a long story about me and Collin and Cindy, one I don’t have the energy to get into right now—and your cup’s already empty.”

“It was really good.” She smiled at him coaxingly.

He took the hint. “More?”

“Yes, please.”

Each pod made six cups. All he had to do was put her mug under the spigot and push the brew button. “You’ve collected a lot of information about me. Should I be flattered you’re so interested?” He gave her back her full cup.

She doctored it up with more sugar and milk. “I think about that day last winter now and then....”

He slid into his seat again. “I’ll just bet you do.” Especially today, when it’s time to collect.

Her big eyes were kind of dreamy now. “I wonder about you, Nate. I wonder why you had to get to Bismarck, and I keep thinking there’s a lot going on under the surface with you. I love this town more every day that I live here, but sometimes people in a small town can get locked in to their ideas about each other. What I think about you is that you want...more out of life. You just don’t know how to get it.”

He grunted. “Got me all figured out, don’t you?”

“It’s just an opinion.”

“Yeah, and that and five bucks will get you half a dozen cinnamon buns over at the doughnut shop.”

She shrugged, her gaze a little too steady for his peace of mind. Then she asked, “So, what about Bismarck?”

He was never telling her about Bismarck. And, as much as he enjoyed looking at her with all that shiny hair and that beautiful smile, it was time to get down to business. “Excuse me.” He rose and turned for the door to the foyer, leaving her sitting there, no doubt staring after him.

In his study at the front of the house, he opened the safe built into his fine wide mahogany desk and took out what she’d come for. Then he locked up the safe again and rejoined her in the kitchen.

“Here you go.” He set the two crisp one-hundred-dollar bills on the table in front of her. “I get it. You like it here. You’ve made some friends. They all say you’re an excellent nurse, kind and caring to your patients. You’re staying. I was wrong about you.”

“Yes, you were.” She sat very straight, those soft lips just hinting at a smile now. “I like a man who can admit when he’s wrong.” She glanced down at the bills and then back up at him. “And I thought I told you way back in January that money doesn’t do much for me.”

Okay. Now he could start to get annoyed with her again. “Then what do you want?”

She turned her coffee mug, slim fingers light and coaxing on the rim. “I’ve been staying in one of the trailers they brought in for newcomers, over on Sawmill Street.”

“I know,” he admitted, though he hadn’t planned to. Her pupils widened slightly in surprise. It pleased him that he’d succeeded in surprising her. “Maybe I think about you now and then, too.”

She gazed at him steadily for a moment. And then there it was, that hint of a smile again. “I’m tired of that trailer.”

“I can understand that.”

“But as I’m sure you know, housing is still kind of scarce around here.” So many homes had been damaged in the flood the year before, and they weren’t all rebuilt yet. “I really like the look of the empty house next door to you. And I heard a rumor you might own that one, too.”

The woman had nerve, no doubt about it. “You want me to give you a house just for sticking out a Montana winter?”

Her smile got wider. “Not give it to me, Nate. Sell it to me.”

Sell it to her....

The former owners of both houses had chosen not to rebuild after the flood, so Nate got them cheap. He’d been a long way from rich at the time. His plan then had been to fix the houses up slowly, starting with the smaller one next door. He’d figured he would put money in them when he had it to spare, getting his brothers to lend a hand with the work.

But after his big win, he found he could afford to renovate them both without having to drag it out. With everyone believing his cover story of a windfall on the stock market, he’d told himself it was safe to go for it. He could fix them up and do it right.

He should have been more cautious, probably. Not spent so much on the finishes, not redone both houses. Or at least, if he had to go all out, he should have had his lawyer advise him, maybe put them under the control of the trust he’d established to make sure he would remain an anonymous winner.

Callie kept after him. “Oh, come on, Nate. You can’t live in two houses at once, can you? I’m guessing you fixed that other one up with the intention of selling it, anyway.”

He thought again that she was one aggravating woman. But she did have a point: he’d bought both houses with the idea that he would eventually turn them around. And really, she didn’t seem the least bit suspicious about where his money might have come from. She just wanted to get out of the trailer park. He needed to stop being paranoid when there was absolutely nothing to be worried about. “Finish your coffee.”

“And then what?”

“I’ll give you a tour of the other house.”

Those fine dark eyes gleamed brighter than ever. She pushed back her chair. “I can take my coffee with me. Let’s go.”

An hour later, after he’d shown her the property and then gone ahead and fed her breakfast, Callie made him an offer. It was a fair offer and he didn’t need to quibble over pennies anymore. She stuck out her soft hand and they shook on it. He ignored the thrill that shivered along his skin at the touch of her palm to his.

* * *

On the first of July, Callie moved into her new house next door to Nate Crawford. The day before, she’d had a bunch of new furniture delivered, stuff she’d picked out in a couple of Kalispell furniture stores. But she still had to haul all her other things from the trailer park on Sawmill Street.

Emmet DePaulo insisted she take the day off from the clinic and loaned her his pickup. Then, being Emmet, he decided to close the clinic for the morning and give her a hand.

He got a couple of friends of his, Vietnam veterans in their sixties, old guys still in surprisingly good shape, to help load up the pickup for her. Then he drove it to her new house, and he and his pals carried everything inside, after which they returned to the trailer and got the rest of her stuff. With the four of them working, they had the trailer emptied out and everything over at the new house before noon.

In her new kitchen, Callie served them all takeout from the chicken-wing place on North Broomtail Road. Once they’d eaten, Emmet’s friends took off. Emmet told her not to work too hard and left to go open the clinic for the afternoon.

She stood out on the porch and waved as he drove away, her gaze wandering to Nate’s big house. She hadn’t seen him all day. There were no lights shining from inside and no sign of his truck. But then, it was a sunny day, and his house had lots of windows. He could be inside, and his truck could very well be sitting in that roomy three-car garage.

Not that it mattered. She’d bought her house because she liked it, not because of the man next door.

After living in a trailer for six months, her new place felt absolutely palatial. There were two bedrooms and a bath upstairs, for guests or whatever. Downstairs were the kitchen, great room, front hall and master suite. The master suite had two entrances, one across from the great room in the entry hall and the other in the kitchen, through the master bath in back. The master bath was the only bathroom on the first floor. It worked great that you could get to it without going through the bedroom.

Callie got busy putting her new house together, starting with her bedroom. That way, when she got too tired to unpack another box, she’d have a bed to fall into. She put her toiletries in the large downstairs bath and hung up the towels. And then she went out to the kitchen to get going in there.

At a little after three, the doorbell rang.

Nate? Her silly heart beat faster and her cheeks suddenly felt too warm.

Which was flat-out ridiculous.

True, she found Nate intriguing. He was such a big, handsome package of contradictions. He could be a jerk. Paige Traub, her friend and also a patient at the clinic, had once called Nate an “unmitigated douche.” There were more than a few people in Rust Creek Falls who agreed with Paige.

But Callie had this feeling about him, a feeling that he wasn’t as bad as he could seem sometimes. That deep inside, he was a wounded, lonely soul.

Plus, well, there was the hotness factor. Tall, with muscles. Shoulders for days. Beautiful green eyes and thick brown hair that made a girl want to run her fingers through it.

Callie blinked and shook her head. She reminded herself that after her most recent love disaster, she was swearing off men for at least the next decade. Especially arrogant, know-it-all types like Nate.

The doorbell rang again and her heart beat even faster. Nothing like a visit from a hunky next-door neighbor. Her hands were covered in newsprint from the papers she'd used to wrap the dishes and glassware. She quickly rinsed them in the sink and ran to get the door.

It wasn't Nate.

"Faith!" Like Paige Traub, Faith Harper, Callie's new neighbor on her other side, was a patient at the clinic. Also like Paige, Faith was pregnant. Both women were in their third trimester, but Faith was fast approaching her due date. Faith had big blue eyes and baby-fine blond hair. She and Callie had hit it off from the first.

Faith held out a red casserole dish. "My mom's chicken divan. It's really good. I had to make sure my favorite nurse had something for dinner."

Callie took the dish. "Oh, you are a lifesaver. I was just facing the sad prospect of doing Wings to Go twice in one day."

Beaming, Faith rested both hands on her enormous belly. "Can't have that."

"Come on in..." Callie led the way back to the kitchen, where she put the casserole in the fridge and took out a pitcher of iced herbal tea. "Ta-da! Raspberry leaf." High in calcium and magnesium, raspberry-leaf tea was safe for pregnant women from the second trimester on. It helped to prepare the uterus for labor and to prevent postpartum bleeding. Callie had recommended it to Faith.

Faith laughed. "Did you know I'd be over?"

"Well, I was certainly hoping you would." Callie poured the tea, and they went out on the small back deck to get away from the mess of half-unpacked boxes in the kitchen. The sky had grown cloudy in the past hour or so. Still, it was so nice, sitting in her own backyard with her first visitor. And it was definitely a big step up from the dinky square of back stoop she'd had at the trailer park.

They talked about the home birth Faith planned. Callie would be attending as nurse/midwife. Faith had everything ready for the big day. Her husband, a long-haul trucker, had left five days before on a cross-country trip and was due to return the day after tomorrow.

Faith tenderly stroked her enormous belly. "When Owen gets back from this trip, he's promised he's going nowhere until after this baby is born."

"I love a man who knows when it's time to stay home," Callie agreed.

"Oh, me, too. I— Whoa!" Faith laughed as lightning lit up the underbelly of the thick clouds overhead. Thunder rumbled—and it started to rain.

Callie groaned. Already, in the space of a few seconds, the fat drops were coming down hard and fast. She jumped up. "Come on. Let's go in before we drown."

They cleared a space at the table in the breakfast nook and watched the rain pour down. Faith shivered.

Callie asked, "Are you cold? I can get you a blanket."

"No, I'm fine, really. It's only... Well, it's a little too much like last year." Her soft mouth twisted. "It started coming down just like this, in buckets. That went on for more than twenty-four hours straight. Then the levee broke..."

Callie reached across the table and gave Faith's hand a reassuring squeeze. "There's nothing to worry about." The broken levees had been rebuilt higher and stronger than before. "Emmet told me the new levee will withstand any-and everything Mother Nature can throw at it."

Faith let out a long, slow breath. "You're right. I'm overreacting. Let the rain fall. There'll be no flooding this year."

* * *

It rained hard all night.

And on the morning of July second, it was still pouring down. The clinic was just around the block from Callie's new house, and she'd been looking forward to walking to work. But not today. Callie drove her SUV to the clinic.

Overall, it was a typical workday. She performed routine exams, stitched up more than one injury, prescribed painkillers for rheumatoid arthritis and decongestants for summer colds. Emmet was his usual calm, unruffled self. He'd done two tours of duty in Vietnam and Cambodia back in the day. It took a lot more than a little rain to get him worked up.

But everyone else—the patients, Brandy the clinic receptionist and the two pharmaceutical reps who dropped by to fill orders and pass out samples—seemed apprehensive. Probably because the rain just kept coming down so hard, without a break, the same way it had last year before the levee broke. They tried to make jokes about it, agreeing that every time it rained now, people in town got worried. They talked about how the apprehension would fade over time, how eventually a long, hard rainstorm wouldn't scare anyone.

Too bad they weren't there yet.

Then, a half an hour before they closed the doors for the day, something wonderful happened: the rain stopped. Brandy started smiling again. Emmet said, "Great. Now everyone can take a break from predicting disaster."

At five, Callie drove home. She still had plenty of Faith's excellent casserole left for dinner. But she needed milk and bread and eggs for breakfast tomorrow. That meant a quick trip to Crawford's, the general store on North Main run by Nate's parents and sisters, with a little help from Nate and his brothers when needed.

Callie decided she could use a walk after being cooped up in the clinic all day, so she changed her scrubs for jeans and a T-shirt and left her car at home.

It started sprinkling again as she was crossing the Main Street Bridge. She walked faster. Luck was with her. It didn't really start pouring until right after she reached the store and ducked inside.

Callie loved the Crawfords' store. It was just so totally Rust Creek Falls. Your classic country store, Crawford's carried everything from hardware to soft goods to basic foodstuffs. It was all homey pine floors and open rafters. The rafters had baskets and lanterns and buckets hanging from them. There were barrels everywhere, filled with all kinds of things—yard tools, vegetables, bottles of wine. In the corner stood an old-timey woodstove with stools grouped around it. During the winter, the old guys in town would gather there and tell each other stories of the way things used to be.

Even though she knew she was in for a soggy walk home, Callie almost didn't care. Crawford's always made her feel as if everything was right with the world.

"Nurse Callie, what are you doing out in this?" Nate's mother, Laura, called to her from behind the cash register.

"It wasn't raining when I left the house. I thought the walk would do me good."

"How's that new house of yours?" Laura beamed.

"I love it."

"My Nathan has good taste, huh?" Laura's voice was full of pride. Nate was the oldest of her six children. Some claimed he'd always been the favorite.

"He did a wonderful job on it, yes." Callie grabbed a basket. Hoping maybe the rain would stop again before she had to head back home, she collected the items she needed.

Didn't happen. It was coming down harder than ever, drumming the roof of the store good and loud as Laura started ringing up her purchases.

"You stick around," Laura ordered as she handed Callie her receipt. "Have a seat over by the stove. Someone will give you a ride."

Callie didn't argue. "I think I will hang around for a few minutes. Maybe the rain will slow down and..." The sentence wandered off unfinished as Nate emerged through the door that led into the storage areas behind the counter.

He spotted her and nodded. "Callie."

Her heart kind of stuttered in her chest, which was thoroughly silly. For crying out loud, you'd think she had a real thing for Nate Crawford, the way her pulse picked up and her heart skipped a beat just at the sight of him. "Nate. Hey."

For a moment, neither of them said anything else. They just stood there, looking at each other. And then Laura cleared her throat.

Callie blinked and slid a glance at Nate's mother.

Laura gave her a slow, way-too-knowing smile. Callie hoped her face wasn't as red as it felt.

Nate lurched to life about then. He grabbed a handsome-looking tan cowboy hat from the wall rack behind the counter. "I moved the packaged goods out of the way so they won't get wet and put a bigger bucket under that leak." He put the hat on. It looked great on him. So did his jeans, which hugged his long, hard legs, and that soft chambray shirt that showed off his broad shoulders. "I'll see to getting the roof fixed tomorrow—or as soon as the rain gives us a break."

"Thanks, Nathan." Laura gave him a fond smile. And then she suggested way too offhandedly, "And Callie here needs a ride home..."

Callie automatically opened her mouth to protest—and then shut it without saying a word. It was raining pitchforks and hammer handles out there, and she did need a ride home.

Nate said, "Just so happens I'm headed that way. Here, let me help you." He grabbed both of her grocery bags off the counter. "Let's go."

Callie resisted the urge to tell him she could carry her own groceries. What was the point? He already had them. And he wasn't waiting around for instructions from her, anyway. He was headed out the door.

"Um, thanks," she told Laura as she took off after him.

"You are so welcome," beamed Laura with way more enthusiasm than the situation warranted.

[Chapter Two](#)

"My mother likes you," Nate said as he drove slowly down Main Street, the wipers on high and the rain coming down so hard it was a miracle he could see anything beyond the streaming windshield.

Callie didn't know how to answer—not so much because of what Nate had said but because of his grim tone. "I like her, too?" she replied so cautiously it came out sounding like a question.

He muttered darkly, "She considers you quality."

Callie didn't get his attitude at all—or understand what he meant. "Quality?"

"Yeah, quality. A quality woman. You're a nurse. A professional. You're not a snob, but you carry yourself with pride. It's a small town and sometimes it takes a while for folks to warm to a newcomer. But not with you. People are drawn to you, and you made friends right away. Plus, it's no hardship to look at you. My mother approves."

She slid him a cautious glance. "But you don't?"

He kept his gaze straight ahead. "Of course I approve of you. What's not to approve of? You've got it all."

She wanted to ask him what on earth he was talking about. Instead, she blew out a breath and said, "Gee, thanks," and let it go at that.

He turned onto Commercial Street a moment later, then onto South Pine and then into her driveway. He switched off the engine and turned to her, frowning. "You okay?"

She gave him a cool look. "I could ask you the same question. Are you mad at your mother or something?"

"What makes you think that?"

She pressed her lips together and drew in a slow breath through her nose. "If you keep answering every question with a question, what's the point of even attempting a conversation?"

He readjusted his cowboy hat and narrowed those gorgeous green eyes at her. "That was another question you just asked me, in case you didn't notice. And I asked the first question, which you failed to answer."

They glared at each other. She thought how wrong it was for such a hot guy to be such a jerk. And then he said ruefully, “I’m being an ass, huh?”

And suddenly, she felt a smile trying to pull at the corners of her mouth. “Now, that is a question I can definitely answer. Yes, Nate. You are being an ass.”

And then he said, “Sorry.”

And she said, “Forgiven.”

And they just sat there in the cab of his pickup with the rain beating hard on the roof overhead, staring at each other the way they had back at the store.

Finally he said, “My parents are good people. Basically. But my mom, well, she kind of thinks of herself as the queen of Rust Creek Falls, if that makes any sense. She married a Crawford, and to her, my dad is king. She gets ideas about people, about who’s okay and who’s not. If she likes you, that’s fine. If she doesn’t like you, you know it. Believe me.”

“You think she’s too hard on people?”

There was a darkness, a deep sadness in his eyes. “Sometimes, yeah.”

“Well, Nate, if your mother’s the queen, that would make you the crown prince.”

He took off his hat and set it on the dashboard—then changed his mind and put it back on again. “You’re right. I was raised to think I should run this town, and for a while in the past seven or eight years, I put most of my energy into doing exactly what I was raised to do.”

“You sound like you’re not so sure about all that now.”

“Lately, there’s a whole lot I’m not sure of—which is one of the reasons I’m planning on leaving town.”

She shook her head. “I don’t believe that. I think you love this town.”

“That doesn’t mean I won’t go.” And then he smiled, a smile that stole the breath right out of her body. “Come on.” He leaned on his door and got out into the pouring rain. He was soaked through in an instant as he opened the backseat door and gathered her groceries into his arms. “Let’s go.” He made a run for the house.

She was hot on his tail and also soaked to the skin as she followed him up her front steps.

Laughing, she opened the door for him and he went right in, racing to the kitchen to get the soggy shopping bags safely onto the counter before they gave way. He made it, barely. And then he took off his dripping hat and set it on the counter next to the split-open bags. “A man could drown out there if he’s not careful.”

It was still daylight out, but the rain and the heavy cloud cover made it gloomy inside. She turned on some lights. “Stay right there,” she instructed. “I’ll get us some towels.”

In the central hall, a box of linens waited for her to carry them upstairs to the extra bath. She dug out two big towels and returned to the kitchen. “Catch.” She tossed him one.

He snatched it from the air. They dried off as much as possible, then she took his towel from him and went to toss them in the hamper. When she got back to him, he was standing in the breakfast nook, studying a group of framed photographs she’d left on the table last night.

She quickly worked her long wet hair into a soggy braid. “I’m going to hang those pictures together on that wall behind you.” And then she gestured at the boxes stacked against that same wall. “As soon as I get all that put away, I mean.”

He picked up one of the pictures. “You were a cute little kid.”

She had no elastic bands handy, so she left the end of the wet braid untied. “You go for braces and knobby knees?”

“Like I said. Cute. Especially the pigtails.” He glanced at her, a warm, speculative glance. “An only child?”

“That’s right.” She went to the counter and started putting the groceries away. “They divorced when I was ten. My mother died a couple of years ago. My father remarried. He and his second wife live in Vermont.”

He set the picture down with the others. “I’m sorry about your mom.”

She put the eggs in the fridge. “Thanks. She was great. I miss her a lot.”

“Half siblings?”

“Nope. They travel a lot, my dad and my stepmom. They like visiting museums and staying in fine hotels in Europe, going on cruises to exotic locales. He really wasn’t into kids, you know? My mom loved camping, packing up the outdoor gear and sleeping under the stars in the national parks. So did I. But my dad? He always acted like he was doing us a favor, that having to deal with sleeping outside and using public restrooms was beneath him. And having a kid cramped his style. I never felt all that close to him, to tell you the truth. And after he and my mom split up, I hardly saw him—Sheesh. Does that sound whiny or what?”

He watched her for a moment. And then he shrugged. “Not whiny. Honest. I like that about you.”

She felt ridiculously gratified. “I.. Thank you.”

He nodded, slowly. They stared at each other too long, the way they had back at the store.

And then she realized that one of them should probably say something. So she piped up with, “On a brighter note, I have a couple of girlfriends in Chicago who are like sisters to me. They’ll be coming to visit me here one of these days— Beer?”

He left the pictures and came to stand at the end of the granite counter. “Sure.”

She got a longneck from the fridge. “Glass?”

“Just the bottle.” He took it, screwed off the top and downed a nice, big gulp. She watched his Adam’s apple working, admired the way his wet shirt clung to his deep, hard chest. He set the bottle on the counter and ran those lean, strong fingers through his wet hair. “You leave anyone special behind in Chicago?”

She stopped with the carton of milk held between her two hands. “I told you. My girlfriends.”

He picked up the beer, tipped it to his mouth, then changed his mind and didn’t drink from it. “I wasn’t talking about girlfriends.”

She didn’t really want to go there. But then, well, why not just get it over with? “There was a doctor, at the hospital where I worked. A surgeon.”

“It didn’t work out?”

“No, it did not.” She glanced toward the bay window that framed the breakfast nook. The rain kept coming down. The wind was up, too. “Listen to that wind.”

He nodded. “It’s wild out there, all right.” Lightning flashed then, and thunder rumbled in the distance. Callie put the milk in the fridge and threw the ruined paper bags away. He held up his beer bottle. “I’ll finish this up and get out of your hair.”

She had plenty of boxes left to unpack, and the sooner he went home, the sooner she could get going on that. Still, she heard herself offering, “Stick around. Faith Harper brought me a jumbo baking dish full of chicken divan last night. I have plenty left if you want to join me.”

He took his hat off the counter and then dropped it back down. “You sure?”

She realized she was. Absolutely. “Yes.”

Half an hour later, he’d cleared all the stuff off the table and set it for them with dishes she’d unpacked the night before. She’d cut up a salad and baked a quick batch of packaged drop biscuits. He said yes to a second beer and she poured herself a glass of wine. They sat down to eat.

After a couple bites, he said, “I remember this casserole. Faith’s mom always brought it to all the church potlucks. It was a big hit. The water chestnuts make a nice touch.”

Callie chuckled and shook her head.

“What?” he demanded.

“I don’t know. It’s just... Well, that’s a small town for you. I love it. I give you chicken divan and you can tell me its history.”

He ate another bite. “It’s the best.” He took a biscuit, buttered it, set down his knife. “So how do you like working with Emmet?”

“What’s not to like? He really is the sweetest man, and he’s good, you know, with the patients. Everyone loves him, me included.” She sipped her wine. “The equipment we’re working with, however, is another story altogether.”

His brows drew together. “I thought Emmet got some grants after the flood, that everything was back in shape again.”

“That’s right. He had the building restored. It is in good shape now, and he saved most of the equipment by moving it to the upper floor before the levee broke. But was all that stuff even worth saving? It’s a long way from state of the art, you know? The diagnostic equipment is practically as old as I am. And the exam table cushions are so worn, they’re starting to split.”

“You’re saying you need funding?” He was looking at her strangely, kind of taking her measure....

“What?” she said sharply. Did she have broccoli between her teeth or something?

“Hey, I’m just asking.” That strange expression had vanished—if it had ever been there at all.

She spoke more gently. “Yeah, we could use a serious infusion of cash. So if you know anybody looking to give away their money, send them our way.”

“I’ll do that,” he said. And then he picked up his fork and dug into his food again.

A few minutes later, he helped her clear the table. It was a little after seven. If he left soon, she could still get a couple more hours of unpacking done before calling it a night.

But the longer he stayed, the more she didn’t want him to go.

In the back of her mind, a warning voice whispered that she was giving him the wrong signals, that she was supposed to be swearing off men for a while, that she might be really attracted to him, but her friend Paige Traub had called him a douche—and he’d acted like one the first time they met. Plus, well, he kept saying he was moving away, and she never wanted to live anywhere else but Rust Creek Falls.

It couldn’t go anywhere. And the last thing she needed was to get herself all tied in knots over a guy who wouldn’t be sticking around.

But then, instead of waiting for him to say how he should get going, she opened her big mouth and offered, “Coffee? And if you’re lucky, I may even have a bag of Oreos around here somewhere....”

He rinsed his plate in the sink and handed it to her. “Oreos, did you say?”

“Oh, yes, I did.”

“And I know you’ve got milk. I saw you put it away.”

She bent to slide the plate into the lower dishwasher rack. “Have I found your weakness?”

He moved in a step closer. “There are just some things a man can’t resist....”

She shut the dishwasher door and rose to face him, aware of the warmth of him, so close, of the gold striations in those moss-green eyes, of how she loved the shape of his mouth, with that clear indentation at the bow and the sexy fullness of his lower lip.

He lifted a hand and brushed his fingers along the bare skin of her arm, bringing a lovely little shiver racing across her skin. Outside, the sky lit up and thunder rolled away into the distance. The rain just kept pouring down, making a steady drumming sound on the roof.

She whispered, “Nate...”

And his fingers moved over her shoulder, down her back. He gave a light, teasing tug on her unbound braid. “I keep thinking of those pictures of you, with your braces and your pigtails. I’ll bet you had a mouth on you even then.”

This close, she could smell his aftershave, and beneath that, the healthy scent of his skin. “What do you mean, a mouth?”

“You know. Sassy. Opinionated.”

Her lips felt kind of dry, suddenly. She started to stick out her tongue to moisten them but caught herself just in time and ended up nervously pressing her lips together. “I am not sassy.” She meant it to sound firm, strong. But somehow, it came out all breathless and soft.

He chuckled, rough and kind of low. She felt that chuckle down to her toes. It seemed to rub along her nerve endings, setting off sparks. “Yeah,” he said. “You are. Sassy as they come.”

“Uh-uh.”

“Uh-huh.”

“No, Nate.”

“Yes, Callie.” Now his voice was tender.

And she felt warm all over. Warm and tingly and somehow weightless. She’d gone up on her tiptoes and was swaying toward him, like a daisy yearning toward the sun.

His hand was on her shoulder now, rubbing, caressing. And then he said her name again, the word barely a whisper. And then he did what she longed for him to do. He pulled her closer, so she could feel the heat of him all along the front of her body, feel the softness of her own breasts pressed to that broad, hard chest of his.

He made a low questioning sound. And in spite of all her doubts, she didn’t even hesitate. She answered with a slow, sure nod, her eyes locked to his as his mouth came down.

And then, in the space of a breath, those lips of his were touching hers, gently. Carefully, too. To the soft, incessant roar of the rain, the constant harsh whistling of the wind, she lifted her arms and wrapped them around his neck, parting her lips for him, letting him in.

The kiss started to change. From something so sweet it made her soul ache to something hotter, deeper. Dangerous.

A low growling sound escaped him. It seemed to echo all through her, that sound. And then his tongue slid between her lips, grazing her teeth. She shivered in excitement and wrapped her arms tighter around him.

He held her tighter, too, gathering her into him, his big hands now splayed across her back, rubbing, stroking, while she lifted up and into him, fitting her body to his, feeling that weakness and hunger down in the core of her and the growing hardness of him pressed so close against her.

Her mind was spinning and her body was burning and her heart beat in time to the throb of desire within her.

Bad idea, to have kissed him. She knew that, she did—and yet, somehow, at that moment, she didn’t even care. She was on fire. Worse, she was right on the verge of dragging the man down the hall to her bedroom, where they could do something even more foolish than kissing.

But before she could take his hand, the whole kitchen lit up in a wash of glaring light so bright she saw it even with her eyes closed. She gasped.

Lightning. It was lightning.

And then thunder exploded, so close and loud it felt as if it was right there in the kitchen with them.

Callie cried out, and her eyes popped wide open. Nate opened his eyes, too. They stared at each other.

He muttered, “What the hell?”

She whispered, “That was way too close,” not really sure if she meant the lightning strike—or what had almost happened between the two of them.

He only kept on watching her, his eyes hot and wild.

And right then, the lights went out.

“Terrific,” Callie muttered. “What now?”

It wasn’t dark out yet—but the rain and the cloud cover made it seem so. He was a tall shadow, filling the space in front of her, as her eyes adjusted to the gloom.

That had been some kiss. Callie needed a moment to collect her shattered senses. Judging by the way Nate braced his hand on the counter and hung his head, she guessed he was having a similar problem.

Finally, he said, "I'll check the breaker box. Got a flashlight?"

She had two, somewhere in the boxes still stacked against the wall. But she knew where another one was. "In my SUV."

So he followed her out to her garage, where she got him the flashlight and then trailed after him over to the breaker box on the side wall. The breakers were perfectly aligned in two even rows.

He turned to her, shining the flashlight onto the concrete floor, so it gave some light but didn't blind her. The rain sounded even louder out here, a steady, unremitting roar on the garage roof. He said what she already knew. "None of the breakers have flipped. I had all the wiring in the house replaced. This box is the best there is. I'm thinking it's not a faulty breaker. A tree must have fallen on a line, or a transformer's blown." The eerie light bouncing off the floor exaggerated the strong planes and angles of his face.

She stared up at him, feeling the pull, resisting the really dumb urge to throw herself into his arms again. Suddenly, she was very close to glad that the power had gone out. If it hadn't, they would probably be in her bedroom by now.

Her throat clutched. She had to cough to clear it. "We can call the power company at least." They trooped back inside. She picked up the phone—and got dead air. "Phone's out, too."

He took a cell from his back pocket and she got hers from her crossbody bag. Neither of them could raise a signal. He tipped his head up toward the ceiling and the incessant drumming of the rain. "I'm not liking this," he muttered, grabbing his hat and sticking it back on his head. "I'll be right back."

"Where are you going?" she demanded. But she was talking to an empty kitchen.

He was already halfway down the central hallway to the front door.

"Nate..." She took off after him, slipping out behind him onto the porch.

No light shone from any of the windows up and down the block. It looked like the power was out all around them. And the rain was still coming down in sheets, the wind carrying it at an angle, so it spattered the porch floor, dampened their jeans and ran in rivulets around their feet. Scarier still, Pine Street was now a minicreek, the water three or four inches deep and churning.

He sent her a flat look. "Go inside. I'm having a look around."

"A look around where?"

But of course, he didn't answer. He took off down the front steps and across her soggy lawn, making for his pickup.

Go inside? No way. She needed to know what was going on as much as he did.

She took off after him at a run and managed to get to the passenger door and yank it open before he could shift into gear and back into the rushing, shallow creek that used to be their street.

"You don't need to be out in this." He glared at her, water dripping from his hat, as she swung herself up to the seat, yanked the door shut and grabbed the seat belt.

She snapped the belt shut and arched water off her forehead. "I'm going. Drive."

He muttered something low, something disparaging to her gender, she was certain, but at least he did what she'd told him to do, shifting the quad cab into gear and backing it into the street. He had a high clearance with those big wheels cowboys liked so much, so at that point the water running in the street posed no threat to the engine. He shifted into Drive, headed toward Commercial Street, which was also under water. He turned left and then right onto Main.

They approached Rust Creek and the Main Street Bridge. In the year since the big flood, the levee had been raised and the bridge rebuilt to cross the racing creek at a higher level.

He drove up the slope that accommodated the raised levee and onto the bridge. The water level was still a long way below them.

"Looks good to me," she said.

With a grudging grunt of agreement, he kept going, down the slope on the other side and past the library and the town hall and the new community center with its Fourth of July Grand Opening banner drooping, rain pouring down it in sheets.

“Um, pardon me,” she said gingerly. “But where are we going now?”

He swung the wheel and they went left on Cedar Street. “I’m checking the Commercial Street Bridge, too,” he said grimly, narrowed eyes on the streaming road in front of them. “It’s the one I’m really worried about. Last year, it was completely washed out.”

They went past Strickland’s Boarding House and the house where Emmet lived and kept going, turning finally onto a county road just outside town. It was only a couple of minutes from there to Commercial Street. He turned and headed for the bridge.

It wasn’t far. And there were county trucks there, parked on either side of the street. A worker in a yellow slicker flagged them to a stop and then slogged over to Nate’s side window, which he rolled down, letting in a gust of rain-drenched wind.

Nate knew the man by name. “Angus, what’s going on?”

Angus was maybe forty, with a sun-creased face and thick, sandy eyebrows. Water dripped off his prominent nose. “Just keepin’ an eye on things, Nate.”

“The levee?”

“Holding fine and well above the waterline. It’ll have to rain straight through for more than a week before anybody needs to start worryin’.”

“Power’s out.”

“I know, and landlines. And a couple of cell towers took lightning strikes. But crews are already at work on all of that. We’re hoping to have services restored in the next few hours.” Angus aimed a smile in Callie’s direction. “Ma’am.” She nodded in response. He said, “With all this water in the streets, it’s safer not to go driving around in it. You should go on home and dry out.”

“Will do.” Nate thanked him, sent the window back up and drove across the bridge and back to South Pine, where he pulled into her driveway again and followed her inside.

As she ran across the lawn, her shoes sinking into the waterlogged ground, she knew she should tell him to go, that she would be fine on her own. But for someone he’d called mouthy, she was suddenly feeling more than a little tongue-tied, not to mention downright reluctant to send him on his way.

Which was beyond foolish. If he stayed, it was going to be far too easy to get cozy together, to take up where they’d left off when the lights went out.

She decided not to even think about that.

Inside, she kicked off her shoes and left them by the door. “I’ll bring more towels. And it’s pretty chilly. If you’ll turn on the fire, we can dry off in front of it.” Her new energy-efficient gas fireplace required only the flip of a switch to get it going.

With a low noise of agreement, he turned for the great room off the front hall.

When she came back to him he stood in front of the fire. He’d taken off his boots and set them close by to dry. She gave him a towel and then sat down cross-legged in front of the warm blaze. He dropped down beside her. They got busy with the towels. Once she’d rubbed herself damp-dry, she set her towel on the rectangle of decorative stone that served as a hearth. He tossed his towel on top of hers, bending close to her as he reached across her, bringing the smell of rain on his skin and that nice, clean aftershave he wore.

“Feels good,” he said.

And she was oh, so achingly aware of him. “Yep,” she agreed. “We’ll be dry in no time.”

Her makeshift braid was dripping down her back, so she grabbed her towel again and blotted at it some more, letting her gaze wander to the bare walls he’d painted a warm, inviting butterscotch color and on to her tan sofa, and from there to the box of knickknacks by the coffee table, which she’d yet to unpack....

She looked everywhere but at him.

And then he caught the end of the towel and tugged on it.

Her breath got all tangled up in her chest as she made herself meet his eyes.

And he asked, soft and rough and low, “Do you want me to go?”

She should have said yes or even just nodded. There were so many reasons why she needed not to do anything foolish with him tonight.

Or any night, for that matter.

But the problem was, right at the moment, none of those reasons seemed the least bit important to her. None of them could hold a candle to the soft and yearning look in his eyes, the surprisingly tender curve of his sexy mouth, the way he took the towel from her hands and tossed it back over her shoulder in the general direction of the other one.

“Yes or no?” He pressed the question.

And, well, at that moment, by the fire, with him smelling so wonderful and looking at her in that focused, thrilling way, what else could she say but, “No, Nate. I want you to stay.”

He smiled then. Such a beautiful, open, true sort of smile. And he laid a hand on the side of her face, making a caress of the touch, fingers sliding back and then down over her hair, curving around her wet braid, bringing it forward over her shoulder.

And then reaching out his other hand, using his fingers so deftly, unbraiding and combing through the damp strands. “There,” he said at last. “Loose. Wet. Curling a little.”

She felt a smile tremble on her mouth. And all she could say was, “Oh, Nate...”

And he said, “That first day, back in January?”

“Yeah?” The single word escaped her lips as barely a whisper, a mere breath of sound.

“You had that heavy scarf covering the bottom of your face. And then you took it off. What’s that old Dwight Yoakum song? ‘Try Not to Look So Pretty.’ That was it—how I felt. I hoped you wouldn’t be so pretty. But you were. And you had that hat on, bright pink and green, with those three pom-poms that bounced every time you shook your head. And your hair, just little bits of it slipping out from under that hat, so soft and shiny, curling a little, making me think about getting my hands in it...”

She said, feeling hesitant, “You seemed so angry at me that day.”

He ran his index finger along the line of her jaw, setting off sparks, in a trail of sensation. “I had somewhere I needed to be.”

“I, um, kind of figured that.”

“I wasn’t prepared for you.” Gruffly, intently.

And then his eyes changed, moss to emerald, and he was leaning into her, cradling the back of her head in his big, warm hand.

And she was leaning his way, too.

And he was pulling her closer, taking her down with him onto the hearth, reaching out and pulling the towels in closer to make a pillow for her head.

She asked his name, “Nate?” And she was asking it against his warm, firm lips.

Because he was kissing her again and she was sighing, reaching her hungry hands up to thread her fingers into his damp hair. She was parting her lips for him, inviting his tongue to come inside.

And he was lifting a little, bracing on his forearms to keep from crushing her against the hard floor, his hands on either side of her face, cradling her, kissing her.

Outside, lightning flashed and thunder rumbled and the rain kept coming down.

She didn’t care. There was only the warmth of the fire and the man in her arms, the man who could be so very aggravating, but also so tender and true and unbelievably sweet.

He lifted his head and he gazed down at her and she thought that his eyes were greener, deeper than ever right then. He opened that wonderful mouth to say something.

But he never got a word out.

Because right about then, they both realized that someone was knocking on the front door.

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