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LINDA LAEL MILLER

Christmas IN MUSTANG CREEK

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THE BRIDES OF
BLISS COUNTY

The Brides of Bliss County

Linda Lael

Christmas In Mustang Creek

«HarperCollins»

Lael L. M.

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— (The Brides of Bliss County)

No one does the holidays like Linda Lael Miller, whose Christmas novels have warmed the hearts of millions of readers the world over! Charlotte Morgan grew up in Mustang Creek, Wyoming, and couldn't wait to escape to the big city. But life in New York isn't as fabulous as she'd like to admit—she's lonely, doing a job she doesn't love and dating too many frogs she meets online. There was one potential prince, though—Jaxon Locke, a veterinarian with definite possibilities—but his move to Idaho to fill in at his dad's vet practice ended things just as they were getting interesting. What Charlotte doesn't know is that he misses her, more than he expected... Meanwhile, Charlotte's great-aunt Geneva—the woman who raised her—needs to enter an assisted-living facility. So, just before Christmas, Charlotte moves back home. When Jax catches wind of her move back West, he's determined to get to Wyoming and do whatever it takes to win her back. Christmas in Mustang Creek is a magical time in a magical place, not least because of a mysterious visitor named Mrs. Klozz. She knows that love is the greatest gift of all, and she's ready to help out Santa by giving these two a push in the right direction!

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Christmas in Mustang Creek

Linda Lael Miller



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[Dear Friends,](#)

It's Christmas in Mustang Creek and you're invited to join the celebration! You'll catch glimpses of some of your favorite characters from The Marriage Pact, The Marriage Charm and The Marriage Season, and make some new book friends, as well.

Charlotte Morgan, somewhat at loose ends after losing her high-paying, high-profile job in New York City, has come home to Mustang Creek to look after her aunt, Geneva, and the family home, a charming old Victorian in need of some TLC. Imagine her chagrin when the first person she runs into is Jaxon "Jax" Locke, the handsome veterinarian she used to love. When they wind up sharing a hotel room due to a raging blizzard—separate beds, please—the adventure begins.

Christmas in Mustang Creek is a magical story in many ways—for instance, what about the mysterious Millicent Klozz, the white-haired cooking genius of a housekeeper nobody remembers hiring?

And then there are the animals, always a favorite element in my stories.

The tree is decorated and sparkling with a thousand points of light. There's a fire crackling on the hearth, and snow is drifting past the windows. Sit right down, have one of Mrs. Klozz's delicious cookies and get ready to share in the joys of Christmas, Mustang Creek style.

With love,



For all those who believe in magic.

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[1](#)

Charlotte Morgan shouldn't have checked her bag for the flight from New York to Wyoming. Her layover in Denver had already been far longer than planned because of a storm that was coming in from the West Coast, and now she was—*finally*—waiting by a luggage carousel at the Cheyenne airport. And waiting... As her friend Karin always said, there were two kinds of luggage—carry-on and lost. And hers appeared to be of the lost variety.

December 21 meant it was almost the festive season, but her spirits were definitely on the low side.

This airport mess was typical of the dismal way her luck had been running lately.

Let's see. She'd had to arrange for her aunt Geneva to move into assisted living. Dealing with that, mostly by email and over the phone, hadn't been easy. Then there was the fact that a stranger was staying at Geneva's house, the house Charlotte had grown up in. Of course, she'd questioned her aunt about Mrs. Klozz, asking how she and the mysterious visitor had met, but Geneva's answers had been consistently vague, even evasive.

Worried, Charlotte had called Spencer Hogan, an old friend and Mustang Creek's chief of police, to request a background check. He'd chuckled and said that wouldn't be necessary; Mrs. Klozz was, as he'd put it, "all right."

Finally, Charlotte had decided to drop the subject. She'd meet the woman soon enough and form her own opinion.

Despite all this, she felt uneasy.

Then—just when she'd thought things couldn't get any worse—she'd been laid off.

Merry, merry Christmas.

Oh, the company, an advertising firm, had given her a generous enough severance package. Her boss had explained that budget cuts were taking a toll on everyone.

Not on him, apparently. *His* job seemed to be safe, unlike her own. It had taken some effort to not say something to that effect, but in truth, she just wanted to go home.

As she watched everyone retrieving luggage while hers was, predictably, nowhere in sight, she realized how ironic it was—as a teenager, she'd been convinced that all she wanted was to leave the small town of Mustang Creek, become successful, meet the right man and never look back. She'd done it. She'd left. She'd gotten a great job. She'd met the right man.

But she sure had looked back.

There was one other hopeful passenger waiting, and they exchanged a shrug of commiseration. The carousel was still moving, so maybe...

Yep, she'd left the small town. Got the dream job—and lost it. Met one Dr. Jaxon Locke, fell in love, and that hadn't worked, either.

The other passenger won the lottery and his case slid down.

"Happy holidays," he said in sympathy as he hurried away.

Then...a Christmas miracle! Her suitcase actually bumped out—no more than two seconds before she was going to head over to the airline counter to fill in the claim form—and began the journey toward her. Yay! Clean underwear for Christmas.

Aunt Geneva would tell her to count her blessings, and as she heaved her bag off the carousel and wheeled it toward the rental car area, Charlotte actually smiled. Things were already looking up. Oh, she still had to make the drive home with a giant storm roaring in, coasting a clipper from the Arctic, but at least she had her clothing. She'd need to make arrangements to have everything else sold or shipped home but would deal with that headache later. Her ridiculously expensive apartment had been sublet and all the rest of it was in storage.

The snow was coming in sideways when she finally reached her rental car. Nothing like driving an unfamiliar rig in bad weather, she thought, as she climbed into the midsize sedan and turned the key in the ignition.

She was on her way home.

After seven years in New York City.

Back in the day, she'd craved the city life, but now she simply wanted to get back to that big old drafty house, that *comfortable* house, where she'd grown up. Mustang Creek was the kind of small town where, if you sneezed, people were concerned you might be coming down with something and offered you their grandmother's favorite remedy. She wanted the fragrance of grass in the summer, the view of the Tetons, the old grape arbor in the backyard.

She wanted *home*.

Geneva needed her, Charlotte mused as she tried to figure out how to turn on the windshield wipers. But *she* might need this change even more. Losing her job wasn't a financial catastrophe since her aunt had taught her a lot about saving her money. She hated that the vibrant woman she remembered was slowly fading. Still, Charlotte viewed her own changed circumstances as a positive in some ways. They'd be able to spend time together. Quality time. Not just the fly-in, fly-out visits of the past few years. She could take care of the house, maybe use some of her savings to fix it up. The place had needed a new roof for at least ten years. She'd offered to pay for it more than once, but Aunt Geneva, her only living relative, had declined.

* * *

Stubborn pride was a family trait, no question about that. She came by hers honestly.

She should've looked more closely at the forecast, she decided when whirls of snow, like errant ghosts, circled her car. Almost no one else was traveling, which was just as well, since she could barely see enough to stay in her own lane. Other than the dim lights of one car some distance behind her, she had the road to herself.

She was happy that she'd grabbed coffee and a sandwich in the Denver airport, although—exhausted as she was—she could've used another coffee right now. She slowed her speed even more as she squinted at the increasing whiteout conditions. There was one other immediate problem she hadn't considered. She didn't have keys to the house. Aunt Geneva had been a seamstress, working at home; she was a wizard with her machine and had probably made most of the wedding dresses in Bliss County for the past half century. So Charlotte had never really needed one.

To be honest, she wasn't even sure there *were* keys. The doors with their beautiful faceted glass panels were original, and to her knowledge the locks had never been replaced. Maybe Aunt Geneva had given keys to the friend who was watching her house and taking care of her beloved cat and dog, but it was already after ten, and she wasn't going to get to Mustang Creek anytime soon at this speed.

It seemed wrong to go pounding on the door at midnight when she didn't even know this Millicent Klozz. She certainly didn't want to wake the poor woman from a sound sleep.

"Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" came on the radio, and Charlotte turned up the volume. She loved the song, which brought back memories of getting tucked into bed on Christmas Eve, Geneva reading her a story and forbidding her to go downstairs until daybreak.

She'd always heeded this admonition—except for the year she was seven. She'd gone downstairs in the middle of the night—not all the way down that creaky staircase because she'd known she'd get caught—and seen the packages under the tree. When she'd heard Aunt Geneva get up—for a drink of water, judging by the running tap—Charlotte had taken a small liberty and peeked at the gifts. Most of them had *her* name on them.

Then she'd climbed into her aunt's bed and nestled there, eyes wide. When Geneva had rolled over, she'd given a small scream, obviously not expecting a small face right next to hers, dimly visible in the glow of the hallway night-light.

"Santa was here," Charlotte had informed her excitedly.

"I hope he brought me a new heart," Geneva had replied, after gasping and pressing her hand to her chest. "Lord, child, you startled me."

"He came to our house!"

Charlotte still remembered Geneva hugging her, remembered the warmth of her arms, the loving smile on her face. "Of course he did."

Negotiating a slick turn, Charlotte wondered what her aunt had sacrificed to make sure Santa came to their house every year. As a child she hadn't comprehended the effort that went into raising a toddler. Especially if you'd inherited that responsibility in your late fifties, because your much younger sister and her husband had died tragically in a train accident. Geneva had been single and inexperienced with tantrums and packing lunches, and later on, cheerleading practice and track meets, sleepovers with giggling girls...

Her aunt had done it all unflinchingly, and when it had come time for college, given her guidance, but let her choose. Now it was Charlotte's turn to give back.

* * *

Jaxon Locke had been chased all the way from Idaho by the storm and it was starting to catch up with him, mentally and physically.

He had no idea if he was being an idiot or not, going to Mustang Creek. After their breakup just over a year ago, he'd continued, though casually, to follow Charlotte Morgan on social media—they'd "friended" each other. A few days before, he'd checked in on her page and discovered that she'd left the firm. Even if she hadn't mentioned her plans to return to Wyoming, he would have known where she was headed.

No part of him believed it was a coincidence that both he and Charlotte had ties to Mustang Creek. She'd been raised there, and he'd been hired by his friend Nate Cameron to work as a veterinarian in Nate's practice.

He'd met Charlotte—Charlie, he called her—through an online dating service. Sort of.

Except he'd cheated. Sort of. He'd sat next to the girlfriend of one of his college roommates at a cocktail party. The event had taken place in midtown Manhattan. He had been working in a nearby Connecticut town at the time, and he'd come into the city for his friend Remy's wedding. This woman had studied him over the rim of her cosmopolitan glass, then asked, "Single?"

No doubt she'd made that assumption because while he'd taken the time to pick out what he considered a nice shirt, he'd still worn jeans and boots. His best boots, expensive, but he'd probably looked like a cowboy. "Not married, not dating," he'd answered wryly. "The invitation said casual dress. I took it to heart."

Her lips had twitched. "You could use a haircut, too, but the look you've got going suits your style. Put you in an Armani suit, give you a five-o'clock shadow and you could be on the cover of a magazine. You're from where?"

"Originally, Idaho."

She'd gotten right to the point. "I know just the girl for you."

He'd doubted that, not only because she was dressed in three-inch heels, wore too much perfume and spent most of the time talking on her cell phone, but also because they were strangers. "You don't know anything about me."

"Sure I do. Remy's mentioned you before. You're an animal doctor, right? You and Remy and a bunch of other guys all met at Ohio State."

He'd nodded. "We shared a house. And, yes, I'm a veterinarian."

She'd leaned in a little closer. "I work with this girl who's beautiful, smart and hates the city as much as you obviously do but won't admit it. Loves animals and is from a small town. Here's the catch. She refuses blind dates from friends. I do know that she's recently joined an online dating service. Let me write down her name for you, plus the site info. It won't hurt to check out her profile." Her smile was audacious. "Don't tell her I had anything to do with it."

"Since I don't know your name, that would be impossible."

"We'll do official introductions if the two of you actually get together, okay?"

"Okay with me," he'd said, figuring nothing would come of this odd conversation anyway.

"She's a Wyoming girl, Mr. Cowboy. I have a feeling you'll ride off for bluer skies and fresher air soon—and I think she will, too."

The deliberately mysterious woman's cell had rung again and while she'd answered it, she'd scribbled down *Charlotte Morgan* on a napkin, along with the name of a popular dating site.

Even though he'd basically just been playing along, passing the time, Jax had realized he was curious enough to take a look at Ms. Morgan's profile.

He'd never even considered online dating. Later, when he got home, he'd typed in the information and, eventually, been completely...well, the English would have called it *gobsmacked*.

Charlotte Morgan was beautiful, all right. More than beautiful.

They'd exchanged a few tentative, getting-to-know-you emails over the coming days, and one fine day they'd agreed to meet for coffee. He'd been doing a stint at a small animal practice just across the state line, so the trip had involved trains and various other methods of transportation.

When he'd finally met Charlie face-to-face, Jax had discovered that her pictures hadn't done her justice, and on top of her good looks, she was sexy, intelligent, charming...

A whirlwind romance later, Charlie still lived in New York and he'd had to go back to Idaho to help his dad, also a vet, after he'd had a heart attack.

Jax had missed Charlie, but he'd also learned something about himself. The West was still his home, the place where he belonged. He'd realized he wanted to stay—not necessarily in Idaho, since his father, once fully recovered, didn't really need his help, but somewhere out there, under that sweeping sky.

He'd asked—okay, practically *begged*—Charlie to join him, but for reasons he still didn't fully understand, she'd dug in her heels. Yes, she longed for the wide-open spaces sometimes, she'd said, but she liked her job, her neighborhood, her friends.

All of a sudden, she claimed to love the city, despite her colleague's assertion to the contrary, back at Remy's wedding reception.

They'd been at an impasse. He wanted to settle in a small town on the other side of the country. She wanted to stay in the city.

Jax recalled all too well the last time they'd tried to discuss the situation rationally, to arrive at some compromise. They'd just made love, she was still in his arms, but her averted face had made her feelings clear. It was true that she couldn't have a job making the same sort of salary anywhere except a place that was a major financial and cultural center. It was also true that in a small town she couldn't walk down the street and pick from a dozen different types of restaurants. No shopping, no theater, no symphony... The list went on.

A classic standoff. He might be Dr. Locke, but he didn't have a glamorous profession like most of the men she met. He helped cows give birth and he treated horses, driving to some remote places

at some strange hours to do so. He vaccinated dogs and cats, spayed and neutered house pets. No, the work wasn't glamorous, but it was satisfying. Jax loved animals, loved his job and honestly couldn't see himself living in a big city for very long. He'd grown up bottle-feeding abandoned kittens and baby goats, ridden horses every day, dug fence posts with the best of them and rarely went to art galleries or museums, her favorite forms of recreation.

He liked the outdoors; she liked skyscrapers.

Let's call the whole thing off.

They had. Sadly, regretfully, unable to agree, they'd gone their separate ways.

The trouble was, Jax had never been able to get her off his mind.

So he was on his way to Mustang Creek, of all places.

What were the chances he'd know someone from her hometown, wind up practicing there?

Maybe this was more than a coincidence, a meant-to-be kind of thing. Like sitting beside the woman at Remy's shindig—her name turned out to be Kendra Nash—and just happening to hear about Charlie for the first time.

Was fate intervening again? Jax hadn't expected a job offer when he'd contacted Nate; he'd just wanted to know if there might be openings in the area.

Charlotte's last Facebook post had said: "Catching a flight back to Wyoming soon. Goodbye, NY. It's been nice but I'm heading home. Merry Christmas."

Jax punched the hands-free device when his phone rang, startling him a little. Beyond his windshield, the weather was getting worse by the second. "Hello."

"Jax, you're still driving, right? Making progress?"

Nate Cameron, the man he'd be sharing a practice with.

Jax answered a little grimly, "Sort of, if you call thirty miles an hour progress. I was hoping to outrun the storm, but obviously that didn't happen."

"I booked you a room at the motel on Main about two hours ago. Last room, in fact. I'd be happy to have you stay with me, but you'll never find my place in this mess. People miss the drive in broad daylight, never mind the middle of a blizzard. Besides, the way the snow's drifting, I don't care what kind of truck you have, you might get stuck. That's one wicked wind. In town at least they've got the snowplows out."

That sounded like a plan. He was starting to doubt he could even find the town; the road ahead was disappearing before his eyes. "Thanks. I'll call you tomorrow morning."

"Let's just meet up. This is supposed to blow through pretty fast. Betsey's Café is where I usually have breakfast, and it's next to the motel. Eight o'clock?"

"See you then."

When Jax finally saw the lights of Mustang Creek glowing in the distance, he felt a measure of relief. His shoulders ached from the tension, and what he really needed was a soft bed and a good night's sleep.

It wasn't hard to spot what he suspected was the town's only motel. The parking lot was full, and the one car that had been in front of him for miles pulled in, too. After searching for ten minutes or so, he found a parking spot then grabbed his suitcase and ran for it, flipping his collar up.

The dated lobby was empty except for the clerk and a very dismayed-looking young woman at the counter.

She said, "No rooms?"

"None. I'm sorry. The storm and all." The young man did seem apologetic.

Glossy dark hair swung as she turned around, obviously disappointed, and then she froze. "Jax?"

Charlie. She stared at him, incredulous recognition in those gorgeous green eyes.

"Yep. Hi." He was almost too stunned to speak.

Coincidence? No way. Fate or *something* was definitely messing with his head.

Yes, he'd expected to run into Charlie—Mustang Creek was a small community after all—but he'd never dreamed she'd be one of the first people he encountered, especially in the middle of a snowstorm.

"What are you doing here?" Charlie's eyes were wide and a little wary. Did she think he was stalking her?

"Job offer," he said lamely.

"Oh...well..." She seemed to be struggling for words, too. Small comfort. "What are the odds of that?"

Good, when a person actively pursues a goal, he thought wryly.

He cleared his throat. "I have a room if you need a place to stay."

The clerk hit a few keys on his computer. "You're Dr. Jaxon Locke? Last person to check in tonight. Room 215. Two queen beds. Maybe there's some holiday magic in the air, since you two seem to know each other. Let me get your key cards."

Just then, the sound system began to play "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas."

Maybe he would, Jax thought. Maybe he would.

2

No way was she sharing a room with Jaxon Locke.

Charlotte was incredulous, completely thrown off balance by seeing him there, the last person in the universe she would've expected to run into in *Mustang Creek*, of all places. This was *her* hometown, damn it, her safe place, her sanctuary. What was *he* doing here? She could almost believe she was dreaming, except that every part of her ached with travel fatigue and the rigors of driving for hours through that wicked snowstorm.

Nope, this was real. And just to make it worse, the man had the gall to look good, too, even with tousled hair that still had flecks of snow, rumpled clothes and the slope of weariness in his broad shoulders. His beard was coming in, an attractive stubble, and there was a hint of lively amusement in his eyes.

"I don't need a key card," she told the clerk in a more abrupt tone than she'd intended. She immediately felt bad because he'd been accommodating, this young, apologetic local. More graciously, she added, "Thanks for trying, though."

"I didn't help much. I'm afraid there's no place else to stay."

He was probably right about that. Despite its relatively close proximity to Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks, not to mention the ski slopes that attracted winter-sport enthusiasts from all over the world, Mustang Creek was still a small town. Other than this hotel, there were a few modest motels and B and Bs, of course, but on a night like this one, and so close to the holidays, those places would fill up fast.

Jax stepped past Charlotte to slap his credit card down on the counter. Was that a smirk she saw, that faint twitch at one corner of his mouth?

"There are two beds, Charlie," he reminded her with a brief, sidelong glance. "Count 'em, two. Trust me, I drove here all the way from Idaho, and I'm so tired I might forget my own name. Your virtue is safe, for tonight, anyhow." He paused—he *was* smirking, damn it—and then brought the whole matter in for a landing. "Besides, what other option do you have? Sleeping in your car? Sounds chilly to me."

The clerk swiped the card with a cheerful flourish of resignation and said helpfully, "The temperature is supposed to drop like a rock falling off a mountain."

Great analogy. Maybe Mrs. Klozz was still awake...

She doubted it.

It was pushing midnight. Aunt Geneva would've been in bed hours ago. And what if Millicent Klozz was hard of hearing and Charlotte stood there knocking on the door, shivering?

Ending up here—with Jax—was an unexpected twist to a long, long day.

“Key card?”

Jax offered it.

After a moment she took it. “Don’t look so smug.”

“This isn’t smug,” he said, grabbing her suitcase and his. “I feel confident that my normal expression of wry triumph would be considerably better than anything I can summon up at the moment. Let’s go find our room so I can collapse. It might be the holiday season, but there’s no cheer in *my* spirit right now. I’m damned tired.”

And no room at the inn.

Irony.

She followed him. This was definitely going to be awkward, and not just because she hadn’t planned on having a roommate. Jax Locke might not be an ax murderer, but he wasn’t precisely harmless, either, like a favorite cousin or an old friend or a trusted business colleague.

Oh, no.

She and Jax had a *history*. The last time she’d seen him was in New York, and suddenly, out of nowhere, he was in Mustang Creek?

What exactly was going on?

Something weird, that was what.

With a sense of the world being off its axis, Charlotte followed him down a hallway to the appropriate door and watched him open it. He waited for her. “After you,” he said with the slightest bow.

This was *such* a bad idea. But so were her only other choices: waking up an elderly lady in the middle of the night, risking hypothermia by bedding down in her rental car or crashing in the lobby, which would be embarrassing.

The room was okay, she decided. It was generic, but what would anyone expect? There were the requisite furnishings—two beds facing a long, narrow dresser with a TV on top, a round table with a chair on either side and a hanging lamp suspended above it. The decor also included heavy draperies with plastic pull rods and colorful but highly forgettable art on the walls.

The place looked and smelled clean, thank heaven.

And it was blessedly warm. No small consideration, with the wind howling outside the window.

“I hope they have a generator,” Jax remarked, probably in an effort to make conversation. “This storm is amping up into a full-scale blizzard.” He sighed and added, “I’m going to take a hot shower and then sleep for about a hundred years. If you want the bathroom first, go ahead.”

The window rattled under a fresh assault of ice-barbed wind.

Charlotte was just as tired as he was, and it was too much effort to argue, even though she had a question—or two—about what he was doing there. He’d had his reasons for leaving New York and settling in Idaho, but what could possibly have brought him to Mustang Creek? A job offer, he’d said. How...coincidental. Or was it? “Just give me a moment to brush my teeth.”

“Help yourself.” Jax sank down on the edge of the bed closest to the window and started hauling off his boots.

She hurried into the bathroom, clutching her cosmetic bag and the flannel pajamas from her suitcase. After closing the door with a firm click, she brushed her teeth, changed and emerged to find Jax wearing only his jeans, brows raised as he took in her less-than-sexy garb.

What had he expected? A little number from Victoria’s Secret, maybe?

Since his bare, muscular chest reminded her of other times, better times, she looked away.

“Pink kitty cats?” he teased.

Charlotte took a deep breath. “My aunt gave me these pajamas,” she said tersely, “so I wear them. They’re comfortable. Not to mention warm.”

“I believe that. Finished with the bathroom?”

She flounced toward her bed. No one ever *flounced* that she knew of—besides maybe a few select romance-novel heroines who did not do it in kitty-patterned flannel pajamas—but she tried anyway. She waved toward the bathroom door. “Yep. It’s all yours.” With that, she threw back the covers and scrambled beneath them.

“Thanks.” He disappeared into the bathroom and shut the door, and she finally relaxed a little, settling in and staring up at the ceiling.

Then she heard the water running.

He was naked in there, she realized, with sudden, visceral clarity. She imagined water streaming in rivulets over the chiseled landscape of his body, a terrain she knew all too well...

You’re hopeless, she told herself. Then, with tired resolution, she jerked the blankets up to her chin and once again came to terms with the baffling fact that *that* was then and *this* was now. And despite the bizarrely coincidental *It Happened One Night* situation she found herself in, things would return to normal in the morning. All she had to do now was close her eyes and let sleep take her under, enfold her in blissful oblivion.

Exhausted as she was, however, her brain remained busy, chewing and fretting, gnawing at a single thought.

Jaxon Locke was in Mustang Creek.

While she was in New York and he was in Idaho, she’d managed to ignore his existence. Mostly. She’d gotten on with her life, learned to live, even thrive, without him.

Mostly.

Now, all of a sudden, she was sharing a hotel room with him in a tiny Wyoming town.

Where was the logic?

And how was she supposed to survive this?

Simple question.

But no answers in sight, simple or otherwise.

She squeezed her eyes shut, determined to lose herself in sleep.

But she was still awake when Jax emerged from the bathroom long minutes later; through her lashes, she noted that he was naked, except for the towel wrapped around his lean waist. He seemed to know she was awake, although she was pretending she’d already drifted off.

“Listen to that wind,” he said. “Sounds like a pack of hungry wolves. It’s brutal out there.”

She gave up on the sleeping-beauty act. He’d always been able to read her energy in some mysterious way, and fooling him was usually too much work. “Nice of you to share the room.” There. She’d said something civil. Even cordial.

But distant, as well. She certainly didn’t want to send the wrong message.

No way was she going to sleep with him.

Not that he seemed to expect it.

The problem was that a part of her *wanted* to leap from her bed to his—talk about sending messages—to open her arms to him, brazen as could be, and abandon herself to his lovemaking, to him. To the singular combination of *them*.

Even after all this time, and all the deliberate forgetting, her body remembered.

They’d certainly never had any problems in bed. Their troubles had stemmed from other things, like his old-fashioned attitudes. He hadn’t wanted a professional woman who could go toe-to-toe with some of the most intimidating people in the advertising world. Some of the bitterness flooded back, sobering and hurtful. No, as far as she could tell, Jax had wanted a carpooling, cookie-baking wife and mother for his children, someone who loved small-town life to the exclusion of all else. Or, at any rate, to the exclusion of any other kind of place. Someone who sewed gingham curtains for the kitchen windows and taught Sunday school and fussed over her flower beds.

All right, maybe he hadn’t mentioned those things specifically, but they went with the territory, didn’t they?

To Jax's credit, he'd never pretended to like New York City as much as she did. For him, it was a mere stopping place along the way to someplace else, third base in some metaphoric baseball game. Next stop, home plate.

Translation: wide-open spaces, pickup trucks, mixed-breed dogs.

The country.

Well, at least he'd been honest. That was more than she could say for a lot of the guys she'd dated, before and after him.

He'd been considerate, polite, intelligent...and sexy.

Very, very sexy.

Once again, Charlotte was stricken with quiet astonishment. One moment she'd been firmly planted in a reality she knew and understood. The next...

Well, the next moment Jax was *here*. She still didn't quite believe it.

"Of course I'd share the room," he said.

Charlotte was confused. Share the room?

Oh, yes. She'd thanked him earlier, and now he was responding.

Keep up, she chided herself silently.

It occurred to her then that Jax's voice had sounded a little too gruff. Maybe he'd picked up on her thoughts. Maybe he was going to drop that towel any second now.

She flipped over onto her side, facing away from him.

"Thanks," she murmured. For some reason, her throat seemed to swell, and her eyes burned.

"You're welcome." He hadn't moved. She would've known it, *felt* it, if he had. And his voice was still low, still hoarse. "I really want you, by the way."

There went that honesty of his, kicking in at exactly the wrong moment.

Charlotte tensed. "Not gonna happen." Was she warning him off—or reminding *herself* not to let yesterday's memories overwhelm today's good sense?

"Your choice, of course," Jax told her quietly.

She rolled back to face him again and said the worst thing possible. "It would be a bad idea, you know."

Great. She'd just admitted she'd been thinking about how good it would be to lie in Jax's arms, to let him awaken her body just one more time.

Jax grinned, and he had the single most appealing boyish smile of any man she'd ever met. "But not out of the realm of possibility?"

She might as well be honest with him, too. "Unless you happen to have a condom, yes, *way* out."

She was happy—and yet somewhat disappointed—that he seemed dismayed. "Yeah, good point. I don't."

"Then, go to sleep." Charlotte closed her eyes again.

She heard the whispery rustle as he pulled on whatever he was going to wear to bed. He must've let the towel drop to the carpet... This whole thing was entirely too intimate, too familiar. If she could just fall asleep...

"Charlie..." Jax's voice was soft, and she wanted to scream, because she was trying so hard to distance herself. She was, wasn't she? Despite that dumb remark about the condom. But it wasn't working at all. "I really have missed you," he said.

Now he wasn't playing fair.

Charlotte wouldn't, couldn't, look at him. "Am I the reason you're here in Mustang Creek?" The question tumbled right out of her mouth, going straight from her subconscious mind to the tip of her tongue and neatly bypassing her normally competent brain. "I mean, I know you had a job offer, but..." She fumbled to extricate herself.

Must have been the exhaustion, she reflected, frantic to find an explanation for herself.

"Could be," he said.

Then he sighed, and she heard his mattress give way as he got into his own bed.
And that was it. Two seconds later he began to snore gently.
She, on the other hand, was wide-awake.
Momentarily, she considered homicide. A pillow over his face might do the trick.
It was certainly tempting.

* * *

Jax woke, blinking, confused at first, having slept like the proverbial rock, but then it all came back to him.

The long drive.

The blizzard.

And Charlotte, sharing his hotel room but not his bed.

Right.

The storm must have eased up a little; the wind was no longer buffeting the window like a whole tribe of banshees trying to get inside. Intricate patterns of frost, stars and whorls covered the glass.

Water ran in the nearby bathroom, and he pictured billows of steam rolling out when the door opened.

Charlotte was in the shower. It felt good to lie there and imagine her gloriously naked, and so close by. He had an excellent memory, and she had the kind of body that did it for him: slender, nicely proportioned breasts, not big but not small, either, long legs that looked sexy when she wore a business skirt, but in his opinion would look even better bared by some cutoff shorts and tanned by the Wyoming sun.

He was definitely a leg man.

He enjoyed the fantasy he had going. A while later the shower was turned off and then, subsequently, the hair dryer. She appeared, wearing a pair of jeans and a light blue sweater, still barefoot, her dark hair shining and brushing her shoulders. She'd never worn much makeup; she didn't need it, in his opinion. Other than a touch of lip gloss and maybe some mascara to accentuate those green eyes, she personified the small-town girl she'd tried so hard to leave behind.

"Good morning." He said it cheerfully because he was feeling pretty cheerful, especially when her gaze dropped briefly to his bare chest before she realized it and looked him in the eyes.

"Uh, yeah, good morning."

"How much snow did we get?" He was just making conversation, not actually expecting her to know, since she probably hadn't been up long enough to check the weather.

She surprised him, though. "About a foot, I think, but it's hard to tell with the window iced over." She rummaged through her suitcase, produced some socks and sat down on her rumpled bed to put them on. "My rental car is sporty—I'm not sure it has studded snow tires." A reflective pause. "I hope they have the streets cleared."

Jax felt the need to keep things on an even keel. "I have a breakfast meeting next door at eight. If you want to join us, I can take you anywhere you want to go afterward. My truck can handle it."

She hesitated, visibly preoccupied. There were tiny candy canes on her socks. Another gift from her aunt? He guessed that was the case, since the sophisticated woman he'd known in New York would not wear candy canes. He preferred the small-town candy-cane girl; he'd always known she was there.

Charlotte said, "I might call you if I have problems but I need to go home and make sure everything's fine so that when I see Aunt Geneva, I can tell her Can-Can and Mutley are okay. That's the first thing she'll want to know."

"Dog and cat?" It was an educated guess, based on previous conversations.

She nodded, and actually ripped loose with a tiny smile. "A friend of my aunt's is taking care of them. My aunt might be too...vague to have animals. Her doctors seem to think so anyway. The

whole idea breaks my heart. She loves those critters so much. They're wonderful company, and she'd be lonely without them. I can't stand the thought."

He might have fallen more in love with her right then, if that was possible. "So you came back for Christmas," he said carefully.

She meant to stay in Mustang Creek for good, but he didn't want to let on that he knew, didn't want to confess that he'd been paying attention to her social media posts. He'd watched to see if she was dating anyone else while he was back in Idaho, and there'd been no hint of anything serious, not even one picture or perky post. There'd been images of her and friends here and there, but either she was just more private than most of *his* friends, or she hadn't really dated.

He figured it was the latter, and that gave him hope.

"I'm not going back to New York," she told him flatly, pulling on a pair of short boots. She stood and shook back her hair. "Aunt Geneva needs me, so this is where I'll be."

"What a coincidence," he said. That word again. "This is where I'll be, too."

"Coincidence, huh?" Charlotte seemed skeptical and a little intrigued. "I guess we'll just have to agree that this town *is* big enough for both of us." It was difficult to look innocent if you were wearing only a pair of boxers while the woman of your dreams stood in the same room. He adjusted the sheet. "I knew Nate in college. Now that he's gone into partnership with Tate Calder in the horse-breeding business, he needs an associate for the practice. So, yes, maybe it's a coincidence—that my friend from vet school happens to live in your hometown. I remembered how you'd described the place, and when he suggested I might want to join his practice, I jumped at the chance."

Her reply made Jax wonder if she'd heard his explanation at all. "We'll both be in Mustang Creek," she said. She sounded resigned, but he couldn't quite interpret her expression.

"We sure will. Maybe we can go out for dinner sometime. You can buy."

"Dream on, cowboy." Charlotte fished out a small knitted cap from her suitcase and slipped it on.

Her aunt had crocheted it, he figured. It looked homemade, and *she* looked delectable.

The woman he'd known in New York, always wearing designer outfits and pricey shoes, the woman he'd called Charlie, probably wouldn't have been caught dead in that hat, not in the city anyway.

Cute was the only word he could come up with, and it made him laugh. Charlie, the original uptown girl—cute? What a concept. "We spent the night together, so maybe you do owe me dinner. Just sayin'."

She pointed at her bed, but he could swear there was a gleam in her eye. "I slept here, and you slept *there*. Which means we didn't 'spend the night together,' not in the strictest sense of the term, anyhow."

"You're right," he said, with a twinkle.

"Jax, could you stop messing with my head for a second, please?"

He did his best cowboy imitation. "I'll try, but, darlin', you make it difficult."

Some nuance in his tone or manner must have gotten to her, because she blushed. Despite all the big-city polish, Charlotte was still a small-town girl. She said hurriedly, "I need to go. I haven't met this Mrs. Klozz who's been helping Aunt Geneva, but apparently, she doesn't have a cell phone, so I doubt she even knows I'm in town. I also need to check on the house and the animals, and then visit Aunt Geneva."

"Don't get stuck in the snow."

She muttered as she wheeled her suitcase toward the door, "I'll do my best."

3

The old house was covered in snow, but it looked warm and inviting. A decorated Christmas tree stood framed in the big front window, and Charlotte could have described every single one of those beloved ornaments in detail.

She smiled at the blue one with the image of a small town that had “Silent Night” printed on it in lacy white letters. The twisty ones with frosted glass in various colors. The sparkly red reindeer she’d bought with babysitting money and hung on the tree when she was twelve, so delighted to contribute. It really didn’t match the antique decorations, but Aunt Geneva had loved it, hugged her tightly, and the memory of her warm acceptance left Charlotte sitting in the car for a few minutes, teary eyed. This was hard.

Very hard.

Geneva should be coming out on the porch right now, wearing an apron like she always did and waving hello, her eyes alight.

Okay, put that aside. Life changed, Charlotte knew it did. Her aunt was in her eighties, and she’d seen a lot of Christmases over the years. The two of them had shared so many good memories; Charlotte refused to spoil them with regrets. She got out and shut the car door, noting that someone, no doubt Mr. Simpson next door, had plowed the driveway.

She didn’t need a key after all.

The faceted glass front door opened easily. The smell of cinnamon and allspice immediately hit her, and Charlotte realized someone was inside, baking cookies.

It was very much like coming home—even without Aunt Geneva.

“Hello,” she called out cautiously, not wanting to startle anyone.

Mutley came running, leaping all over her, barking with excitement. His breed certainly wasn’t a known pedigree—more like a combination of half a dozen or so—hence his name. She appreciated being greeted with all that unbridled enthusiasm. Can-Can was curled up on the sofa on her special blanket, and she raised her head and gave a feline yawn, followed by her version of a smile before she settled back into her nap.

Both animals were fine. That was a relief anyway. Charlotte assured Mutley she loved him, too, fended off a few more dog kisses, then set down her suitcase and tried again. “Um, hello?”

“Hello, dear.” The woman who bustled out of the kitchen was short and a little stout, white-haired, her eyes bright and her smile infectious. “I’ve been expecting you. That was quite a storm, wasn’t it? I made coffee and there’s a warm crumb cake, sweet rolls, too. It’s a new recipe, and I need an opinion.”

She tried for a semiformal introduction. “I’m Charlotte.”

“Of course you are, child.”

“Did Aunt Geneva tell you I was coming?” She hadn’t even told her aunt she was on her way, in case any of her flights were delayed or canceled. At least, she hadn’t mentioned a specific day; it was a given that she’d be in Mustang Creek for Christmas.

“No, dear, she didn’t. But there are pictures of you everywhere, so it was no trick to recognize you. You’re just as pretty in person.” The older woman smiled. “The cake is still warm. Are you hungry?”

Slightly bemused, Charlotte trailed her into the familiar kitchen. She *was* hungry, actually. She’d eaten her last meal, a prepackaged sandwich at the airport, yesterday afternoon. And the spice-scented air promised something special enough to make her salivate. “Yes, I am. It smells great in here.”

The outdated kitchen was as immaculate as ever, with the same ruffled curtains at the window, the familiar wooden table and the ancient refrigerator humming away.

“I’m fairly sure the cake is fine, but I’m trying to perfect my cinnamon rolls.” Millicent Klozz breezed over to the old oven, and the door creaked in its usual way as she opened it and took out a pan. “You’d think at my age I’d have the process down cold, but I believe life requires us to continually ask more of ourselves, wouldn’t you agree?” She moved energetically between the oven and the table, setting out two plates. “I want an honest opinion. Too much vanilla in the icing? That’s my biggest fear.” She sat down. “Now, what’s your young man doing today?”

Her *what*?

“I’m sorry?”

Mrs. Klozz handed her a plate with a roll and a fork as she tilted her head. “You know, the young man. The tall one. Good-looking.”

Charlotte nearly choked on a bite of her pastry. Once she recovered, she managed to say, “I don’t really have a *young man*.”

“Oh, yes, you do. The one with the blue eyes.” Millicent Klozz waved a hand. “He’s a veterinarian, isn’t he? Yes. That’s right, I remember now. I don’t want to seem old-fashioned, but you stayed with him last night, young lady. This *is* Mustang Creek.”

There was the perfect amount of vanilla in the icing, Charlotte thought, although that was beside the point.

Yes, this *was* a very small town, but still... How many people had been out spreading gossip in a storm like that?

She shook off a twinge of—what?

“I shared a room with Jax because there wasn’t any alternative. It was so late, I knew you’d be sleeping, and the weather was terrible. In any case, he isn’t *my* young man.” Wait, did she sound snarky? Defensive? She hoped not. “The roll is delicious, by the way. You definitely got the vanilla right. Thank you.”

Mrs. Klozz’s eyes fairly twinkled, and she waved off Charlotte’s thanks with a good-natured smile and a motion of one hand. Then she rushed on, caught up in the story she was spinning. “He followed you here. It’s quite romantic. What are you going to do now?”

Wow. The grapevine was in fine form, evidently.

Had Jax followed her to Mustang Creek? Charlotte had her suspicions, but he hadn’t come right out and said so—had he? He’d come to town expressly to join his friend’s veterinary practice; that was her understanding anyway.

Beside her, Mutley gave a very small begging whine. She ignored it. Aunt Geneva didn’t approve of animals hovering during dinner, although Charlotte had been guilty of sneaking him a morsel or two if she was through eating, so his bad habits could be her fault.

Charlotte realized she’d been asked a question and offered a belated response. “I’m not going to do anything,” she said. “Jax has his life, and I have mine. Mustang Creek might be small, but that doesn’t mean we have to be in each other’s pockets.”

Brave words.

Mrs. Klozz didn’t seem to be listening. She picked up a cinnamon roll, took a tiny bite and chewed thoughtfully. “Maybe some more brown sugar in the filling? Raisins? I always hesitate there. Not everyone loves raisins. An acquired taste.” A pause. “What do you think?”

Charlotte wanted to laugh. She liked this woman already. “About brown sugar or raisins? It’s delicious as it is.”

“No, no, dearie, about Jaxon Locke. Keep up with the conversation.” A second pause. “So...what do you have to say about that young man?”

Mrs. Klozz was pleasant, and quite eccentric, as well. Where *had* Aunt Geneva found her?

By then, Mrs. Klozz was beaming, offering up another cinnamon roll.

Charlotte helped herself. She was getting full, but the pastries were among the best things she’d ever tasted. “I...um, don’t have a lot to say where Jax is concerned,” she replied, picking up the thread of the discussion.

Millicent pointed a fork in her direction. “He’s going to join that practice and take over the small-animal part of the business for now. Which reminds me, we need to take Mutley and Can-Can in to have their nails trimmed. I’m sorry to push the job of getting them there on you, but I hate the expressions on their furry faces when they realize where they’re headed. Animals are so sensitive. Would you mind, dear?”

Mutley, sensitive guy that he was, scratched himself then, sort of ruining the moment. Mrs. Klozz ignored his less-than-charming behavior.

"I was unaware of his exact plans," Charlotte said, shoving about half a roll into her mouth. "Jax's, I mean," she mumbled.

They *were* talking about Jax now, right? With Millicent Klozz making one verbal hairpin turn after another, it was hard to know.

Apparently regarding the trip to the vet's office as a done deal, Millicent swung the conversation into yet another curve. "Geneva will be able to come home for Christmas, according to her doctor," she announced. "Oh, dear, I need to get more baking done. Then I can take cookies to the other patients. Just because dear G gets to come home doesn't mean everyone's that lucky. You're sure about the icing?"

She looked anxious, and Charlotte's mouth was still full, so she merely nodded.

"Well, good." Millicent settled back and sighed. "I love this old house. It's so comfortable, isn't it? That's the word for it. *Comfortable*. I'm very glad you're home, Charlotte. I was rattling around here all by myself except for Mut and Can, and I needed some company."

* * *

Jax scraped the snow off his windshield and tried to cheer himself up. Sure, Charlie had hightailed it out of there at warp speed this morning, declining to stick around for breakfast, but there was no point in reading something into it that wasn't there.

Maybe she hadn't wanted to sit through his meeting with Nate, and who could blame her?

They'd be seeing each other again soon. He was convinced of it.

He'd come to Mustang Creek to find Charlotte again. He'd succeeded. The job was a bonus, since it provided him with a legitimate reason to show up here, but he couldn't deny that she'd been his *real* reason.

Okay, last night hadn't been the evening of his dreams, although it came closer than any other evening of the past year.

So what if he hadn't gotten to hold her in his arms, let alone kiss her, let alone—

There was a downside to everything, he supposed.

At least he'd been with Charlotte. Just the two of them...

Anyway, the last thing he wanted to do was crowd her.

For now, he was content to be in the same part of the country. At one point during the night, he'd rolled over and lay there, listening to her soft breathing in the dark, and that had been enough. He wouldn't mind being a little closer the next time, but that was a start.

The meeting with Nate had gone well, too. His flourishing practice needed another pair of caring hands, Jax was experienced with both large animals like ranch stock and small ones, typically beloved pets, and the new arrangement seemed to be a good fit. If not for Charlotte, would he have stayed in Idaho and eventually taken over his father's practice? Probably. But it had been his father who'd encouraged him to pursue her, with that signature genial smile of his. *Son, seems to me you can't forget Charlotte, and I know you've tried*, he'd said. *I think maybe you need to take a trip to Wyoming.*

Well, he was in Mustang Creek, he had a job and now he needed to win the girl.

Mission not quite accomplished, but he was two-thirds of the way there.

The clinic was a low sprawling facility that had a simple sign and a parking lot big enough for trailers; inside, it was surprisingly modern, with computers at the reception desk and a full surgery suite. Nate was young and vibrant, just as Jax remembered him from vet school.

Nate showed him around enthusiastically. "Kennels here." He pointed. "And we have an excellent care staff. They love all the animals and make sure they feel as comfortable as possible in an unfamiliar environment. I have to warn you, we do an animal-rescue adoption on Christmas Eve, which is right around the corner. Free puppies and kittens, all shots included. That's one busy night. Hope you don't mind. Volunteer basis. If you have other plans, I understand."

He didn't have plans. Wouldn't be heading back to Idaho for the festivities. His dad would be all right; he was spending the holiday with his older brother, Jax's uncle Seth, which he did every year, so he wouldn't be alone. The two men usually celebrated Christmas Eve by swapping stories and reminiscing over spiked eggnog. Jax always enjoyed the informal get-together because *they* enjoyed it so much, but this year, he'd skip it. He had a new job, after all, and besides, he'd heard those same yarns time and time again.

All the same, he felt a little nostalgic, thinking about his family. Christmas Day, the whole crew gathered at his aunt's house and utter mayhem ensued with excited grandchildren running amok, too many women in the kitchen, stray scraps of wrapping paper on the floor here and there...

He would miss that, but out of all the cousins, he was the only one still unmarried. No one tried to make him feel left out, but he couldn't help it, especially when everyone settled down to dinner next to his or her spouse, chatting comfortably. There was always the inevitable question—*So, Jax, you seeing anyone special?*

"The Christmas Eve pet-rescue deal is a great idea," Jax said, meaning it. Normally, he didn't encourage people to introduce pets to their households during the upheaval of a holiday, but he knew Nate would have some kind of screening process in place, and the need to find good homes for otherwise unwanted animals was year-round. "Count me in."

"Thanks." Nate glanced at his phone. "I'll see you at my place around four o'clock. I've got to go check on a husky that had surgery on his leg this morning and then run out to the Calder ranch because we have a mare who's about to drop. It's like an early Christmas present."

Jax walked back out to his truck.

Maybe Charlotte needed a kitten. Or a puppy. He had no idea what else to get her for Christmas. Someone had beaten him to candy-cane socks, and the pink kitten pajamas had already been done, too. He felt himself grin over that one.

A pet might not be a bad gift, but it was unfair to give an animal to someone who might not be ready to make that kind of commitment. Although he could take it if she decided to move back to New York...

He hoped she'd choose to stay.

Charlie was such a mix of country girl and city woman. He'd fallen for the city woman, and now he wanted to know the country girl. She'd looked right at home in the jeans and casual sweater that morning. It would've been even better if he could have taken them off and made love to her. He hoped that scenario was in his future.

Speaking of his future... He had a job, but he still needed a place to live. Sacking out on Cameron's couch, which he'd been invited to do tonight, was fine for the short term. It would get old fast, for both of them. The hotel was adequate, if impersonal, and he wasn't going to live there.

Time to look for a house or apartment.

So he got into his truck, started the engine and called Charlie. That took some fortitude. She didn't answer so he left a message. "This is Jax. I need a place and wondered if you could recommend somewhere."

Two minutes later, she called back. At least, that was her number on his call display.

Only it wasn't Charlotte's voice he heard on the other line. "Jaxon Locke?"

"Uh, yes."

"Oh, good. Charlotte accidentally left her phone behind. I think she was in a hurry. I can use these gadgets, but they aren't all the same, you know, so it's an iffy proposition. I guess I pressed the right button, though." A brief pause. "I'm so glad you're here."

Jax actually removed the phone from his ear, stared at it, then went back to the conversation. "I am, too. I'm not sure who I'm speaking to, but Charlie mentioned... Are you Mrs. Klozz, by any chance?"

"Call me Millicent, dear."

Call her Millicent. “So, Charlie—Charlotte—isn’t home at the moment?”

“She’s out” came the reply. “I’ll tell her you called.”

All well and good, but Jax still didn’t understand why Mrs. Klozz—Millicent—had troubled herself to return someone else’s phone call.

“O-kay,” Jax said, drawing out the word. “Sorry to bother you.”

“Now, don’t you worry.” Millicent went on with the disjointed conversation. “You aren’t bothering me at all. Not one bit.” She drew in an audible breath. “I did want to answer your question, though. You should just stay here. We have plenty of room.”

Jax’s mind went blank. “What?”

Millicent sounded sympathetic. “This is a big house, and we could use a man around here. I can’t fix that stupid door on the upstairs bathroom—the one that won’t close properly—although I swear I’ve tried. There are other small problems you could probably take care of much better than I can, so why don’t you come and stay here with us? How ridiculous for you to pay rent somewhere.”

He finally understood. And he could imagine how Charlotte would react to *that* idea. “Ma’am, that’s very kind of you, but—”

“Call me Millicent,” she reminded him. “I realize this might be construed as bribery, but I make some mean Christmas cookies.”

He didn’t doubt that, but...

“Here’s the address. Even with Charlotte and me, there are four empty bedrooms. Think about it that way, Jaxon. Two helpless women who could use a little protection and someone to fix the bathroom door would appreciate having you here. You need a roof over your head, and you and Charlotte already know each other. Perfect.”

They needed protection? In Mustang Creek, Wyoming?

First of all, Charlotte Morgan could hardly be described as helpless. Plus, Jax might be new in town, but he was fairly sure that if he so much as dropped a quarter in the snow, some upstanding citizen would hunt him down and return it.

And how did Millicent know his name anyway?

Caller ID, maybe. But that didn’t explain how she’d found out he was in the market for a place to live. Surely she hadn’t gone so far as to listen to Charlotte’s voice mail. And even if she’d been so inclined, how would she have gotten the password?

“See you soon,” Millicent said breezily, ending the call.

Nate had emerged from the building at that moment and stopped by the truck, looking at him with amusement.

Jax rolled down the window. “The husky okay?”

“Husky is fine. Everything okay with you?”

“Not sure,” Jax said, scratching his jaw. “I think a little old lady just railroaded me. I might not need your couch, but don’t lend it to anyone else yet. Not all the parties involved have weighed in.”

“Okay. If it doesn’t work out, just walk in, shove off the dog if you can manage it because he weighs about a hundred and fifty and settle down with a pillow.”

Jax had to laugh. “Rufus sounds like quite the watchdog.”

“He’s conscientious in his own way. He barks if he can see the bottom of his food bowl. You could steal my car and he’d sleep through it, but try to take his bowl. And if you end up with no place to stay, remember that Rufus can sleep on the floor.” He went to his SUV, got in and waved cheerfully as he drove out of the parking lot.

Jax planned on getting a dog of his own someday. A midsize animal, maybe a beagle mix. Beagles barked a lot, even bayed now and then, but they were sweet tempered, good around kids and well mannered in general, although you had to keep an eye on them where low-lying food was concerned, because they were unabashed thieves.

Family friendly, though.

Jax chuckled, shook his head. Must be the season—he seemed to be thinking about settling down a lot.

Family friendly.

Really?

He needed to talk to Charlie.

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