



*The
Christmas
Village*

Linda Andrews



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LINDA ANDREWS



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THE CHRISTMAS VILLAGE

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❖❖ Dedication ❖❖

*To everyone who believes
Christmas should be celebrated
all year long*

Chapter I

“Did you hear me, dear?” Margaret Starr’s exasperation filled the line like static.

“Yes, Mom.” Egypt tucked the cordless phone between her ear and shoulder then closed the lid on the suitcase. The teeth of the zipper remained four inches apart. Maybe she should have used a bigger suitcase.

A splash of red caught her eye. The American Tourister was larger. It also had a broken clasp. She smacked open the suitcase lid. Wads of sweaters and pants rose above the soft-sided confines. Maybe she should have packed less stuff.

“I don’t think you know how hard this is on your sister.”

“Weddings are hard on everyone.” Egypt buffered her mother’s irritation with a well-rehearsed line. Thirteen weddings had taught her something—a patient, well-modulated tone calmed fretful brides, harried mothers and a bevy of bridesmaids. Too bad it couldn’t shrink the contents of her suitcase. She had packed only the essentials, hadn’t she? Air stirred the papers on her coffee table as she swatted the lid closed and took a seat on top. Fabric oozed out the sides.

“Yes, well, this kind of thing just does not happen to me.” Irritation chased the anxiety from her mother’s voice. “Paris has had her wedding planned since the fourth grade. The dress design was in pink crayon with purple butterflies and blue

hearts floating around it. Oh, why did Minnie Houser have to move to Phoenix six weeks before the wedding?”

Egypt’s gaze traveled around the small studio apartment. Had she forgotten anything? Undoubtedly. She combed her hands through her short hair then shook the strand from her fingers. Perhaps she should get into the habit of making lists. Heaven knew her mother and sister were constantly giving her pads of paper with cutesy logos and patterns. She picked up a note with hearts stamped across the top. Her sister’s handwriting accused her: *Leave on December 22nd at seven a.m. Arrive Dragoon’s Springs Country Club at 1:30 p.m. for bridal shower.* It was 8:17 a.m. on the twenty-third.

“Guess Paris can’t plan everything.”

“Egypt!” Disapproval whipped down the line. “That is not a very nice thing to say. You know your sister is under a lot of strain. Weddings are stressful on everyone.”

She blinked as a recap of her own words echoed back to her. Merciless monkeys, she had turned into her mother. Egypt shook the unpleasant thought from her head.

“I only meant that the quadruple bypass kind of snuck up on Max and Minnie Houser.”

She crossed her fingers behind her back. What her mother didn’t know wouldn’t cause high long distance charges to invade her parent’s phone bill.

“Yes, well...” Suspicion dragged the words.

Egypt’s stomach flipped in her belly. She had better change the subject quickly. Her gaze flicked to the white confection draped over the back of the Bentwood rocker.

“Paris’s dress turned out beautifully. Mrs. Houser even sewed iridescent seed beads on the bodice. Lavender butterflies, just like Paris drew when she was ten.”

Air hissed through the miles of phone line. “Paris *had* wanted, dear. Our budget—”

“She sewed them on for free.” The words gushed past Egypt’s lips. Her mother hated being interrupted almost as

much as she hated glitches in her plans. “She said she owed you something for driving to Phoenix for the fittings. Sewing gave her something to do and stopped her from worrying so much while she sat in the hospital waiting room.”

“Well...” The scales tipped in her favor. “That was very nice of Minnie. I’ll make certain Paris sends her an extra-special thank you note, maybe even a few pictures.”

“I’m certain she’d appreciate that. She misses Dragoon’s Springs.” Egypt made one last sweep of the room. She seemed to have everything. “According to Minnie, she hasn’t had a nice chat or a decent cup of coffee since she came to the big city.” She paused. Her words surfed the gasp of breath in the receiver. “Except for my visits, of course.”

“That sounds like Minnie. With all that worry, I should have known there would be a mix-up in the dresses.” Plastic swished and satin rustled. “I suppose no real harm has occurred. You have Paris’s dress and I have yours. It turned out very lovely, by the way. The color will flatter your skin tone and the style is timeless.”

Egypt stuffed the blobs of fabric inside her suitcase. Plastic teeth scraped her flesh. Cold metal bit into the pads of her thumb and index finger. The zipper grumbled along its track then stopped halfway around the corner. The metal tab buttoned the suitcase at a single point, the remaining teeth curled back in a ferocious snarl. A growl rumbled up her throat. She jerked the zipper backwards. Pink silk bubbled around the tab.

“Unbelievable.” Egypt rocketed from her seat and glared at the tapestry luggage. “Stupid, idiotic, overgrown handbag.”

“I beg your pardon.”

“Not you, Mom.” Egypt unclenched one fist and strangled the phone. She stormed across the room, bones rattling with every step. Why did this happen every time she was late? Why couldn’t everything go right just once? Would the universe come to a crashing halt? Would the cure for cancer be postponed? How important could thwarting her every plan be to world

peace? Metal jingled as she yanked open her junk drawer. She scooped up the pliers and stomped back to the mocking baggage. “It’s this stupid luggage. The zipper broke.”

“Is that the Marshalls’ American Tourister or the Andersons’ Fancy French one?”

“The Andersons’.” Egypt shoved the carry-on into a better position and clamped the phone between her ear and shoulder. Maybe if she backed the zipper up it would catch and hold. The pliers clamped onto the pull-tab. Such a method had worked before. Her knee dug into the soft top; fabric extruded out the side. She released the zipper and prodded her clothes back inside the suitcase.

“Well, that did get a bit of wear on their honeymoon. Everyone knows those airport people toss bags around like footballs.” Her mother’s monologue gathered steam. Was her mouth pleased to be released from its prison of wedding talk? Or was it simply a reminder that wedding related misery included more people than just the Starr family? “And then they were stopped not once but three times while they toured Europe for all those weeks. You would think since it was made over there it would have been able to survive the rough handling they put it through. Of course, if Sheila hadn’t been so determined to visit so many countries on their six-week honeymoon...”

Honeymoon. Blood slogged through Egypt’s heart. It was only natural to be a little depressed. All of her friends were pairing up like animals before the Flood. Her plight was no different than any other thirty-year-old spinster, no matter the circumstance of the bride and groom’s meeting.

Sheesh, after thirteen weddings, she should have constructed a better pep talk than that. Silence buzzed in her ear. Had she missed an opportunity to grunt in support?

“Are you all right, dear?”

Egypt’s sigh fluttered her bangs. No missed cue, just the end of her mother’s soliloquy.

“Yeah, I mean, yes, Mom. I’m fine.” She clamped the pliers onto the metal tab and tugged. “I was just thinking if I’d need a jacket.”

“Are you sure that’s what’s bothering you? I mean, you can talk to me about anything. You know that, don’t you, dear?”

“I know, Mom.” The zipper refused to budge. Egypt yanked. Fabric ripped. The zipper closed as the tab retreated. She tugged it in the other direction, and the zipper held.

“Mrs. Houser did remind me this was the sixteenth time.”

Irritation flayed Egypt’s skin. For a seamstress, Mrs. Houser needed help with her math.

“Fourteenth time, Mom. This will be the fourteenth time I’ve been a bridesmaid.”

A rainbow of satin dresses was the consolation prize. Along with her sofa, the rocker, the broken luggage—even her cat and hamster—all were the relics of her friends’ abandoned single life, willed to their good friend Egypt.

“Well, you’re bound to be the bride next time.” False cheer rang hollowly in her mother’s voice. “I mean, you don’t have any more single friends left. Do you, Egypt?”

Did she? There always seemed to be a few hovering close by, vultures waiting for a fresh kill. There were bound to be some disappointed ladies at Paris’s wedding when Egypt appeared solo. However, that was in Dragoon’s Springs, not Phoenix. In Phoenix, she knew only one single woman.

“Well, we did hire a new girl for the holiday season.”

“Surely, that’s not long enough to become good friends.” Margaret Starr squeaked. “All the girls whose...whose weddings you were in, you’d been friends since childhood.”

“I know, Mom. Besides, she has a boyfriend.”

Nutz jumped onto the suitcase. The marmalade cat rolled onto his back and swatted at a patch of pink fluttering on the back of the sofa’s blue slipcover. Egypt tugged a piece of gum out of her pocket. Cinnamon exploded across her tongue. Light sparked off the silver foil as it sailed onto the coffee ta-

ble. She should probably remove the damaged camisole. Should but wouldn't. Gum popped in her mouth. She already had one side zipped. She only had two to go.

"Well, that's a relief. Not that I believe you're cursed or anything, dear."

"No one believes I'm cursed." Egypt yanked the zipper around the corner, tucking clothes inside as she went. "Everyone just comes to me for their husbands."

Nutz jumped onto the sofa back as she slid the baggage off the cushion. She jerked the plastic extension handle up as the carry-on wheels thudded onto the carpet.

Dead air filled the phone connection. "The dress really is lovely. Your sister picked out the turquoise especially to flatter your complexion."

Phase one of bridal pity: a modification of wedding colors to flatter the poor slob whose ex-boyfriend you just happen to be marrying. Phase two: the pairing of said poor slob with an eligible party specifically imported for the occasion. Egypt shuddered as the memories resurrected her dread.

She snapped the bungee cord around her suitcase. If it had been anyone else but her sister she would have bowed out of the wedding. As it was, she must endure the warm-up torture and the coup de grace, phase three. Her favorite. Should phases one or two fail, subject poor slob to endless introductions to single males, including passing waiters and, if necessary, the valet. How long could someone wear a phony smile before the expression became permanent? Hopefully, longer than her sister's wedding and reception.

"Egypt?"

"It's a pretty color."

"And you'll be able to use the dress again." Strain sharpened her mother's voice. "Maybe for that New Year's party you told me about. Not that we wouldn't want you to spend the holiday with us. I understand all about young single girls, liv-

ing in the big city and all. We do get *Sex and the City* up here, you know.”

“Mom.”

“I do hope you are protecting yourself.” Hinges creaked. A door closed. “Sexually, I mean.” Her mother’s voice dropped to a whisper.

“Mom!” Egypt raised her shoulder, pressing the phone closer to her ear. Was her mother’s voice muffled?

“Minnie says they have entire stores devoted to experimentation of a certain sort.” Definitely muffled. Her mother had retreated to the closet, that sanctuary where only the most sacred of subjects were discussed on the phone—divorce, unexpected pregnancies and hurried marriages. “Not that there’s anything wrong with it. You’re young, and you always were the curious one. There is absolutely no cause for embarrassment. In my day, well, really we—”

“Mo-ther!” Emphasis on both syllables. The tone perfected by teenagers everywhere. Egypt cringed. Why did she always revert to a child whenever she talked with her mother?

“Yes, dear?”

Egypt’s chest expanded as she filled her lungs with air. She had flirted with the line in the sand long enough. It was time to commit herself to battle. Utterly. Completely.

“I’m spending New Year’s in Dragoon’s Springs.”

“Really?” Disappointment trimmed the happiness in her mother’s voice.

“Really.” Cowardice beat against her skull. It wasn’t too late. She could still back out. Egypt shored up her courage. No surrender, no prisoners. She would spend a week at home, visiting with friends, catching up with family, being the object of pity and speculation and answering impertinent questions. Small-town America. Is it any wonder she left?

“You’re not still in love with Darrell, are you? He really isn’t right for you.”

Egypt nodded, rubbed at the ache spreading across her chest. None of them had been. But knowing the truth didn't lessen the sting.

"I know, Mom. There were signs. Darrell is obnoxious and controlling, hates pets of any kind, can't dance, despises big band music and would rather buy one front-row ticket to the hockey game than two in the nosebleed seats."

"He's also marrying your sister, dear."

"Yes," Stitches jumped as she lifted his cage. The teddy-bear hamster blinked up at her then scurried up the pink plastic tube to the room above. Metal rattled as she secured it to the carry-on with another bungee cord. "He's perfect for Paris."

"And you are definitely over him?" *Will you make trouble at the wedding?*

The unspoken question hovered like an eavesdropper on the line.

"Yes, Mom. I feel the same about Darrell as I feel for Diego." Exasperated, irritated and not a little perturbed by his existence. "Brotherly feelings, nothing more." Except for the disappointment, not that she'd mention that to her mother.

"Good. Did I tell you we've rounded up four eligible men for the wedding?"

Egypt sighed. Phase two, and she hadn't even left her apartment. New Year's Day seemed very far away.

"Of course, three are divorced, but, well, I suppose that's to be expected. After all, they are in their thirties. Except for Doug—he's forty-one."

Egypt's knees buckled. She bounced twice on the sofa before collapsing into a boneless mass. How had her life come to this? What atrocity had she committed in another life?

"Don't worry, dear. We capped the age at fifty. That would be much too close to your father's age. Minnie says we should take their previously married state as a blessing. I mean, they took the plunge once so they're not liable to be as gun-shy as men in the Big City."

Big City. Egypt struggled against the waves of despondency. She could do this. She had done this before. She liked her single life, preferred living with her hamster and her cat. Men were smelly. They hogged the remote. Her New Year's resolution involved remaining as far away from them as possible. Her reasoning was sound. Her mother's logic was another story.

"Darrell is from a big city, Mom. So were Adam and Brad and Zachary and—"

"I know that, dear."

One-by-one, the men in her past faced her. Wanted posters hovering above tasteful wedding invitations. Other women's husbands. She had never been wanted by any of them. Bitterness welled up inside her.

"Only Todd wasn't. I think the mayor should give me a medal or something. Egypt Starr, the woman personally responsible for introducing new blood to Dragoon's Springs, population twenty-four hundred thirteen. No, make that population twenty-four hundred twenty-seven."

She choked on a ragged breath. This should be easy. Why wasn't this easier? She hugged herself close, half-afraid she'd shatter, half-afraid hers would be the only arms to hold her in the future.

"That's not funny, Egypt." Her mother cleared her throat. "You'll find the right man. He'll come riding to your rescue and knock you right off your feet."

"I don't believe in fairy tales anymore, Mom." Nutz padded across the sofa, rasped his rough tongue over her white knuckles. Despair's grip eased. She would be all right. Her hand slicked down the cat's body. Everything would be all right.

"That's precisely why Fate will send Prince Charming to your rescue."

"I definitely do not need rescuing."

"We'll see."

The omniscient tone grated on Egypt's nerves. She shoved to her feet. At least, the anger could be channeled. She grabbed her sweater and shoved her arm into the sleeve.

"Mother."

"I'm glad you're staying for New Year's, dear. That will give your father time to look at your car."

"My car?" Gum lodged in her throat. She coughed it up and pulverized the tasteless mass. That rat fink Darrell had snitched. He was the one who'd told her to wrap the hoses in duct tape. He was the one who hadn't wanted to waste time while she made the appropriate repairs.

"Darrell mentioned you were having engine troubles, and you know your father."

"My car is fine." Plastic crinkled as she tossed the roll of duct tape and a handful of garbage ties into the grocery bag. It clunked against the cans of cat food and crunched into the hamster seed. Of course, she had continued down the path of madness by wrapping the next hose in the tape, then the next. She had meant to replace them properly. There just never seemed to be any time.

"I'm sure it is, dear. No daughter of mine would make the long drive home without having a properly serviced and maintained car."

"Of course not." Egypt crossed her fingers. If their conversation took any more turns, her fingers might become permanently twisted around each other.

"It was never in question," her mother agreed. "But Darrell mentioned something the other day. And your father just won't let it go until he's satisfied himself. And, really, dear, where's the harm in allowing him a little peek under the hood?"

Out-flanked and out-maneuvered. Surrender loomed. Egypt had one more tactic and that was more whine than winning.

"But if we all agree..."

"We know you're an adult, but you're still our child. We like to feel useful. Growing old isn't very pleasant, dear." Her

mother's sigh undoubtedly bowed telephone lines all across Arizona. "Nowadays, we old folks just get stuck in a retirement village somewhere while you young ones get on with your busy lives. Forgotten. Ignored."

Guilt. The weapon specifically designed to find the chinks in a child's armor. Egypt mentally surrendered. One day, she might actually find her backbone.

"You are not old, Mother. And no one is talking about sticking you or Dad in a retirement home. You're not even retired." She spat her gum into the trash and knotted the grocery sack.

"Will you let your father do this for you? You know Doc Matheson has forbidden him from undertaking any construction projects until his wrist heals."

Her dad and construction projects. It was a standing joke in the community that the walls of the Starr house moved more quickly than an ancient Egyptian booby trap.

"Dad can look at my car, Mom."

"Oh, my goodness. Is that the time? You should have left fifteen minutes ago. Do try to hurry, dear. Paris won't listen to a word of reason until she has that dress in her hands."

Fifteen minutes. The revised schedule that had been faxed twenty-two minutes after she called to let them know she would have to work an extra day. Egypt shuffled toward the phone recharger.

"Bye, Mom. I'll see you at lunch."

"At Granetti's. You do remember where it is, don't you, dear?"

"Yes, Mom. And even if I'd forgotten in the six years I've been living in Phoenix, I'd be able to find it from one of the seven maps you faxed me."

"Leave the attitude in Phoenix, dear. It's not really becoming in a woman your age."

"Bye, Mom." Egypt hung up the phone as the first giggles tickled her tongue. After three decades on this Earth, she had

yet to reach the age where her attitude was becoming. Maybe she was only six hours away from reaching that point.

Then again, maybe not.

“Well, this should be an interesting trip.” The cat sauntered beside her as she dragged the squeaking suitcase into the parking lot. She opened the Volkswagen door and the cat leapt inside. “Make yourself at home. It’s going to be a long drive.”

Nutz blinked his yellow eyes, batted at the silver bell adorning one of her gifts for the happy couple then curled up on the backseat. His tail twitched as she wedged the hamster cage between the passenger’s seat and the dashboard.

Egypt merged onto the freeway just as her brain registered the missing wedding dress. She smacked on the blinker and veered towards the closest exit. Backtracking to her apartment would cost her fifteen minutes tops; forgetting her sister’s wedding dress could prove fatal.

“Please, God, let this is the last thing that goes wrong.”

Chapter II

“The lights are out?” Cade Dugan squinted at the silhouette moving through the brightness of the afternoon sun.

“Just a few bulbs.” Metal rattled. The shadow shifted. Paul Browning, the Mayor of Holly, climbed down the ladder. Colored-glass bulbs dribbled from his fingertips into the garbage can. “Were you expecting something different?”

“Not at all,” Cade answered, rocking back on his heels. He hadn’t paid the lights of Holly much attention lately. Other things had occupied his thoughts.

Blue flashed in the corner of his eye. Pine needles scratched his leather jacket and glass tinkled as he pressed further between the decorated trees lining the town square.

“Season’s almost over.” A horse-drawn omnibus swayed down Main Street. Happy tourists laughed and chattered into the steam rising from the mugs gripped in their mittens. “I’ll be glad not to have to worry about the lights going out.”

Cade peered around the edge of his sanctuary. That obnoxious shade of blue was nowhere in sight. Snow crunched as he stepped forward, tension draining off his shoulders.

“No need to worry about that now.”

“Is that why you cringe every time you see the color blue?”

“The cold has affected your brain.”

“You should have stopped using the townsfolk as inspiration for your figurines when the city council asked.”

Cade snorted. “Two councilmen volunteered to model for me if I agreed to create a companion piece according to their specifications.”

“Life does imitate art.”

“That’s a cliché, not the moral of the story.”

“Even the outsiders have commented on the resemblance between the locals and the featured artwork.” The mayor moved the ladder down the red brick walk and fished fresh bulbs out of the paper bag by his feet. “They don’t realize half the people in the sets didn’t meet until after you created them.”

“The Blue Coats know,” Cade spat.

“Babbette, Sherry and Emma are more than happy to keep the legend alive. Heck, they even leave the pieces up all year round and point them out to everyone.”

“They’re stupid figurines.”

“That you created.” Paul glanced at the string of lights above his head then at Cade. Humor lifted his lips. “If you didn’t want the legend to continue why did you produce another couple? Face it, you want to meet your own soul mate.”

Unease disturbed Cade’s equilibrium. The set had been crafted to destroy the rumors of his artistic matchmaking. If he really were a twisted incarnation of Cupid, a woman would appear wearing a purple scarf and a blue coat. None had; they’d all aped the figurines available to the public—blue scarf and blue coat.

“Wearing a blue coat doesn’t mean a woman is destined to be my lifelong companion.”

“Then, why are you hiding?”

Irritation flayed Cade. His shoulders squared.

“I am not hiding.” He had paused between the trees to catch his breath, not to hide. He scanned the town square. Hiding from the Blue Coats required more finesse than simply stepping between a few scrawny trees.

“I suppose your work has kept you locked in your house.”

“I *work* in my house. It’s where my studio is.” Cade shoved his fists into his pockets. A man understood a harmless bet; being transformed into a walking human punchline was too much. “You do remember my studio—it’s that big addition you labored all summer to build.”

“I thought artists like light. You cower behind drawn curtains and locked doors.”

“I’m not cowering.”

“Cade Dugan, Holly High football captain and debate champ.” Paul carved a marquee in the air. “Afraid of a teeny, tiny woman.”

“Women, not woman. There’s more than one of them.” Cade scanned the square. Length and width. Width and length. Superman had it easy. Every man should have x-ray vision. “They pop up everywhere, like toadstools after the rain.”

“Careful where you step, Cade. You might crush that egg under your tail feathers.”

Cade fisted his hands in his pockets. His gaze landed on the mayor. “I might crush something but it won’t be an egg.”

“Ohhh, I’m so scared.”

Cade stepped forward. A tiny fist thudded against his chest, laughter gurgled in his ears. Irritation dissolved in his growing confusion. He glanced down.

Brown eyes peered at him from under a mop of curly brown hair. A smile forced the concern from Emma Browning’s elfin features. The scent of rosewater mingled with that of baby powder drifting wafting from the infant wiggling in her arms.

“Don’t mind him, Cade.” The mayor’s wife hitched her son higher on her hip, winced as a hank of hair was captured in a chubby fist. “He checks the lights every time someone new arrives in town.” She kissed her son’s hair while extricating her own. “It’s the price we pay for living in a magical town.”

“Enchanted town, dear.” Mayor Browning lifted his son from her arms. “Like the sign says.” Husband and wife glanced towards the crowd huddled in the town square’s gazebo.

Outsiders. The town was flooded with them. They visited Holly from Thanksgiving till New Year’s, wallowed in the charm and quaintness of an old-fashioned Christmas. Applause filled the square, as much for the trio of Victorian carolers as to beat the feeling back into their frozen hands. Hums of appreciation greeted the town’s baker, Babbette, when she arrived with her tray of roasted chestnuts and tiny mince pies.

Pride swelled Cade’s chest. He loved his hometown. He just wished there were a few less people in it today. Not the harried outsiders. They could stay. But the Blue Coats...

Fleece brushed his ears. The Blue Coats had to go. Especially since their numbers continued to swell.

“Someone new arrived in town?”

Paul Browning grinned. “I thought you weren’t concerned about the lights.”

Cade winced. He should never have stopped to talk with the mayor. The slimy politician was bound to mention his interest in the lights. And if he snitched about Cade’s question regarding the newest Blue Coat...

A shudder rippled up his spine. Damn. It’s a good thing he was headed home. This little conversation was going to require major damage control.

“Don’t tease Cade,” Emma chided, picking up the bag of lights from the path and setting it next to the strings of lights on the green park bench. “You were just as nervous when I arrived in town.”

Browning took his son’s fist out of his mouth and glared at his wife.

“I was stunned by your beauty, not scared that the love of my life had arrived.”

“You hid in your house for two days.” Emma winked at Cade and maneuvered the ladder under the next dark bulb. “Straight.”

Cade held the ladder as she climbed up the rungs. Finally, he had an ally. One person sympathetic to his plight. Things were looking up.

“I had the flu. Geez, a guy does his civic duty by staying home when he’s sick and you turn it into a conspiracy.” Browning pinned Cade with a glare. “And we’re not talking about my behavior. We’re talking about the poultry essence wafting off Cade.”

“Poultry essence?” Color left his knuckles as he tightened his grip on the ladder. Browning danced beyond Cade’s reach. Damn manners. He couldn’t allow Emma to fall, even if he intended to make her a widow. Browning’s son grinned up at him. He re-evaluated his plan. Okay, not a widow, just a hospital visitor for the next several weeks.

“If it runs like a chicken...” Browning shrugged.

“Boys, boys.” Emma hopped off the last step of the ladder and stepped between her husband and Cade. “This isn’t helping. Obviously, the newest Blue Coat isn’t Cade’s match. The lights haven’t gone out.” She shoved the ladder a few feet down the path then rummaged through the bag for a red bulb.

Coward, Cade mouthed as the mayor kept his wife and son between them.

Jealous, Browning mouthed back before turning his attention to his wife.

“It doesn’t work that way, love.”

Emma Browning spun on her heel. “You said that when the lights in Holly fall dark someone has met their match. Did you lie to me?” she asked, poking her husband with the bulb.

“No. No, I would never lie to you.”

Cade grinned. Misery was better shared. Especially when someone else got the bigger share. Especially when that someone had been enjoying Cade’s suffering for the last two months.

Yes, sir. This almost made up for those insufferable city council meetings. Almost, but not quite. There was still the matter of the bet.

“You know that, don’t you?” Wheedling infused the Mayor’s question.

Cade cleared his throat. Now, if he could get the rest of the gambling populace in trouble with their spouses...

“I thought I did. I thought that’s why we were checking the lights every day.” Emma cocked an eyebrow at Cade. He blinked then held the ladder steady. “I thought we were checking to see if Cade’s match has arrived. It has to be soon, or they’ll be forced to accept dates in January.”

Another month of betting. Another month of Blue Coats. Bile soured Cade’s tongue. Better to endure another month of Blue Coats than to marry one. A thought popped inside his skull. He glared at Emma’s back.

“Are you part of the betting pool out of Babbette’s?”

“You asked for it.” Browning smirked.

“Don’t mind him.” Emma chucked the burnt-out bulb into the trashcan then snapped her fingers. “Give me a green one. This one is flickering.”

Cade reached in the bag. Glass slid over his fingers. He plucked out two bulbs. Both blue. He was beginning to hate that color. Another dip in the bag; he caught a yellow and a green. He offered Emma her choice.

“I never pay your husband any mind.”

“Paul’s just cranky because he picked the eighteenth.”

“The eighteenth.” Five days ago. Five more losers. Cade smiled. Maybe he’d mention the town’s wagering epidemic to Father Bridges. Surely, the priest would come up with a suitable sermon. After all, gambling was one of the seven deadly sins, wasn’t it?

“Hey, I figured you’d have wised up after a month and a half.” Browning dangled his son above his head. Drool dripped from the giggling infant. “Didn’t figure you for a runner.”

“I’m not a runner,” Cade snapped. He was a survivor. A survivor knew when to retreat.

“You’re avoiding them.” Browning tucked his son next to his chest and swiped at the moisture on his cheek.

“What does it matter?” Emma jumped off the last step and glared at her husband. “The lights haven’t gone out.”

“The lights go out when someone meets their match. Cade hasn’t met half of them. He’s been holed up in his house.”

Cade folded his arms over his chest. Holed up. He wasn’t hiding. He was biding his time. Waiting. “I fixed Babbette’s oven yesterday.” And was grilled while doing it. He hadn’t enjoyed his cinnamon roll, thanks to those Blue Coats. “There were four of them in the bakery.” Four blue-coated women touring Babbette’s small kitchen. How convenient for her oven to malfunction on the very day she selected.

“Four out of what?” Paul shuffled down the path next to his wife. “How many did Charity say are staying at the hotel?”

“Fifteen.”

“Sixteen.” Metal complained as Cade folded the ladder. That made eighteen altogether. Two had given up and gone home. “I took one over this morning.” He resisted the urge to stick out his tongue. It was enough to win and foolish to gloat. Fate always smote those who gloated, and Charity’s Bed and Breakfast only had one unoccupied room.

Emma twirled a lock of hair around her finger. “I hadn’t realized Babbette was so clever. Imagine needing a repair...” Her brown eyes fixed on Cade. “Are you attending the city council meeting tonight?”

“No.” Cade shuddered as rows of Blue Coats filled his mind’s town hall. One-by-one, they would take the microphone and ask him questions. One kid or two? Long honeymoon or short? Boxers or briefs? He’d be dissected in front of his family and friends. Except, he wouldn’t. “The meeting was cancelled on account of the holidays.”

“Did you pick today, wife?” Browning peered at her over their son’s head.

“I most certainly did not.” Emma tugged her jacket over her belly. “I ran into Charity while picking up groceries. She said they’re guzzling cocoa faster than Santa in a blizzard and needed to know if she could bring tea to tonight’s meeting instead of hot chocolate.”

“So, what day did you pick?”

Cade swallowed his groan. The whole town was against him. He wouldn’t be surprised if the damn newspaper started printing the odds.

“I wasn’t going to. But then Marlene added a free highlighting kit to the pot and Janelle added three hours of babysitting.”

“Ha! I knew it.” Browning tossed the baby in the air. “Mommy bet. You know what that means, don’t you? No more preaching and lots of crow eating.” He set the laughing baby on his hip and regarded his wife. “So, if you didn’t pick today, what day did you chose?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Browning smacked his forehead. “Tomorrow’s Christmas Eve. Who’s going to be traveling on Christmas Eve? You should have picked the day after Christmas when people are returning home.”

“There weren’t that many choices left,” Emma sniffed.

Cade’s jaw clicked shut. The sound echoed in his skull. The world had gone mad. And these two were leading the loonies. “I can’t believe you two.”

“Why not?” Browning placed his arm around his wife’s shoulders. “You helped bring us together.”

Cade raked his hand through his hair. What did it take to get through to people?

“*Fate* brought you together. *God* brought you together.” The same lines, a touch more anger. He should have the message recorded for posterity. Hell, he should have it broad-

casted 24/7 on the radio. “If you two had just kept your mouths shut...”

“Babbette talks, and so does Sherry. Between them, they’ve talked to everyone in Holly at least once. And almost everyone in Holly has friends and family in other towns.” Emma crossed her arms and glared at him. “There are three couples as living proof of fate and destiny.”

“Face it, you were doomed when the die was cast.” Browning elbowed his wife. “Get it? Dye cast?”

“Doomed?” Emma shrugged off her husband’s embrace. She snatched her son from his arms. A muscle twitched in her jaw. “He is destined to meet the future Mrs. Dugan, and you say he’s doomed.” Her voice climbed an octave on the last syllable.

“Now, honey, you know I didn’t mean it that way.” Browning flashed his palms at his wife.

“Really?” She raised her chin and marched down the path. “Cade’s suit has certainly put our courtship in a whole new perspective.”

“Thanks a lot, Cade.” Browning tossed a glare over his shoulder as he loped after his wife. “You better meet Miss Right tomorrow, or my wife will never talk to me.”

“Hey, you cast your own dye.”

Browning made an obscene gesture than skidded to a halt. He turned left, cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, “Oh, ladies! If you’re looking for the artist formerly known as Cade Dugan, he’s over here!”

“Son of a—” Cade pivoted about. Bones shuddered under flesh as he aborted his flight.

“Wouldn’t waste your time swearing, boy.” The town’s oldest resident planted himself on the path, as insubstantial as a blade of grass and as firmly rooted as a centuries-old oak. His cane thumped Cade’s boot.

Pain rattled up his shin. Great! Now he’d have a limp. “Mr. Henderson, I didn’t see you there.” Cade glanced through

the tufts of hair on the old man's pink pate. He could still make it to the corner, but he'd have to hurry.

"Wasn't here a moment ago. Just came to see who won."

"Won?" Cade stepped left. The wizened man shadowed his movements.

"Your mama's family is known for their wit, boy. Guess you take after your pa's side."

This time the older man thumped his cane on Cade's chest. Excited chatter disturbed the air behind him. Damn, the Blue Coats were gaining, and Old Man Henderson was settling in for a chat. "I-I—"

"You resemble a fish with your jaw flapping like that." The old man rubbed his hands together. "I'm talking about the bet, boy. The bet. Today's my day, came to see if I could give the odds a little nudge in my favor."

Cade smoothed his furrowed brow. He should have stayed home. He was safe at home. He placed his hands on the human blockade's shoulders. Either the man stayed put, or he'd find himself on the bottom of a game of leapfrog. "I have to go now."

"I understand." Mischief twinkled in Mr. Henderson's rheumy blue eyes. A gnarled hand rested on Cade's forearm. "Just want ya ta know one thing."

"What." The jabber increased in volume. They were closer now. Cade's muscles locked. He refused to look. The hunted always tripped if they looked over their shoulder.

"I'm real sorry."

"Sorry?" Cade snapped his attention back to Mr. Henderson. Was someone actually apologizing for trying to profit from his misery?

"Yep." Gnarled hands gripped the cane.

"For what?"

"This."

The cane moved with the fluid grace of a striking cobra. Its brass knob plunged into Cade's gut, prodded the air out of his lungs. Muscles contracted, folding him over at the waist. Blue filled in his peripheral vision. The lead Blue Coat tackled him, knocking him to the ground, rattling the teeth in his head. Arms and legs tangled around his. Something hard banged into his ankle, added to the cacophony jangling along his nerves. The cool pavement leached his body heat, numbed some of the pain.

A fluffy white cloud scuttled across the blue sky. White. Surrender. Cade shook his head. He might not be able to escape at the moment, but he would never surrender.

He sipped air into his lungs. The pain receded to distant thunder. When he got out of this mess he would need a peek at that betting book. It was the only thing that could tell him who to avoid on what day.

A shadow blocked out the sky. Gradually, his eyes adjusted and a face appeared. A female face.

"Oh." Hands pressed into his chest, pinning him to the ground. "Oh, it's you."

Cade spit the blue scarf out of his mouth then gazed at the string of lights twinkling overhead. She wasn't his mate. Not that he'd actually believed differently. The pairings of local townfolk had been a coincidence, nothing more.

"Darn." A cane tapped the ground beside Cade's head. "I thought she'd be the one."

Cade shoved the Blue Coat off his lap and sat up. Pain stitched up his side. Great, now he'd have to deal with one of them plus some bruised ribs. He glared at Mr. Henderson. Meddlesome old coot. It was past time someone locked up the old fart. He gingerly rose to his feet.

"This is so perfect." A well-manicured hand latched on his forearm. "Look, I'm even wearing pink skates like the figurine."

I bet none of the others wore skates. That just proves I'm your true love."

Cade plucked at the fingers. They wouldn't budge. Damn, now he knew why trapped animals gnawed off their legs to escape. Too bad he needed both of his hands in his line of work.

"I see, Miss—"

"Petrie. Deborah Petrie. I hope you don't mind, but I plan to keep my name after we're married."

"Damn Blue Coats."

"Blue Coat? Is that what you call them?" She flashed her straight teeth at him. "No wonder they're cooped up in the hotel drowning their sorrows with Christmas cookies and hot chocolate. Blue." She shook her head woefully. "The coat is distinctly turquoise, not blue. I took the figurine to the milliners. We matched it perfectly."

"You did?" Colored glass winked at Cade from the bench. Someone had forgotten to put away the extra strings of lights.

"Of course. It will make lovely bridesmaids' dresses, too. We are planning to marry in the spring, aren't we?"

An idea grew in his skull. It might work. He wouldn't know until he tried. He smiled at her. "I think you should sit down."

He gestured to the bench and gallantly scooped the string of lights out of her way. To his surprise, she released her grip and complied. Laughter buoyed his spirits. This was almost too easy.

"Oh, yes. Yes, of course." She hand-pressed her wool coat. "I knew it would be like this."

"You did?" The bulbs clunked together as he looped one end.

"Everyone knows the man proposes on bended knee. It's very romantic."

Cade's thoughts skipped two steps ahead. He'd loop the strand of lights around the back of the bench and tie it off around the opposite end. A small delay that would allow him

to escape. But how to draw them across her without giving away his plan?

“You will propose on bended knee?”

He returned to the moment. “Uh, I hadn’t—”

“Don’t be silly.” She jerked on his coat. “Just bend down. Everyone is expecting it.” A storm brewed in her eyes. She didn’t like being thwarted.

Good thing he wasn’t planning on being caught.

“I’ll get on my knees if you close your eyes, Deborah.”

“Close my eyes?”

“Just for a moment.” Just long enough for him to lash her to the bench. “I want to compose my thoughts. It wouldn’t do to mess this up. It’s too important.” His freedom hung in the balance.

“All right.” Her eyes flickered closed.

Cade waited a few seconds then looped one end of the string of lights around the bench. He winced as the bulbs clacked together. His soon-to-be-captive audience didn’t seem to notice. Guilt nudged his determination. He wasn’t her soul mate. The lights proved it. The scarf proved it. She would be better with someone else. This would simply help her see that.

He threaded the string around the bench seat and tied the ends together. Besides, it wasn’t as if she would be stuck here all night. Someone would rescue her in a few minutes.

“You don’t have to think of anything fancy, Cade. Just ask.”

Cade straightened and backed away. Not one word. His tone could give away his intentions. Another step. Five more and he should be able to break into a run.

“Cade?” Irritation honed her notes. She shifted on the bench.

Two more steps. He pivoted on his heel. Old Man Henderson shook his head then stepped aside.

“I’ll see she gets to Charity’s.”

“Really, Cade, I—” The shrill notes cut through the air as he rounded the corner. “Where did he go?”

“Home would be my guess.” Mr. Henderson answered.

“Home?” Confusion and doubt rippled through the trees.

Cade stopped at the corner as a horse and carriage jingled past. His leg jumped. Two Blue Coats stood on the opposite side of the street. Damn. He couldn’t tie those two up. A sleigh and another omnibus clattered by, and judging by the sound of voices, the latest Blue Coat was free and on the move. He’d have to cut across the park, take the alley behind the courthouse and slip through the Arts and Crafts neighborhood.

“But he can’t. I’m the one he’s waiting for.”

“The lights told him otherwise.”

“Lights?”

“They always go dark when someone’s match arrives.”

“Oh, drat. I should have known Holly would have something like that. So, now what am I supposed to do?”

Blue flashed. He plunged through the trees where the pine needles scratched his cheek. Snow crunched under his feet. He would make it home and not come out until after New Year’s Day.

“Don’t worry. I believe Charity has just made a fresh batch of sugar cookies.”

Chapter III

“Egypt, thank God I didn’t miss you.” Helen Weaver, nee O’Connell, stood on Egypt’s apartment stoop. Her very swollen belly pointed directly at Egypt, blocking the route to the almost-forgotten wedding dress.

“Hello, Helen.” Egypt’s sneakers squealed to a halt. Jangling keys dangled from her fingertips. Her heart slowed to a normal beat. “What brings you here?”

“This. It’s a wedding scrapbook.” She giggled and shoved the gaily wrapped box off her belly and towards Egypt. “I’ve made thirteen of them so far. Well, fourteen, if you count my own. Your sister admired mine so much I made her one.”

Blue ribbon crawled over the silver wrapping paper. A bell tinkled. Egypt balanced the gift on her fingertips.

“I’m certain she’ll love it.”

“You are planning on attending the wedding, aren’t you?” Helen waddled closer; her gaze swept up Egypt’s blue jeans and stopped on the embroidered sweater.

She resisted the urge to squirm. Helen had always been the fashion plate. Even now, every hair lay neatly against her head and her clothes emphasized her trim legs while hugging her ripe belly. Egypt swallowed her inadequacies, tucked the gift under her arm and rammed her key into her lock.

“Of course, I’m going to the wedding. Paris is my sister.”

“And Darrell is your ex-boyfriend, just like Adam.”

Disappointment gripped Egypt’s lungs. She forced air in and out despite the constriction. Today’s reminders were the humidity before the thunderstorm. Once she was in Dragoon’s Springs, they would come faster than water in a cloudburst. “I attended your wedding to Adam and then Brad’s to Marie and Zach’s to—”

“My, you’ve certainly introduced many of us girls to our husbands.” Helen giggled, backing up a step. Her gaze fell on the steps before she looked back at Egypt.

Fourteen girls, to be exact. And her heart had broken every time.

“Maybe you should start your own matchmaking service.” Helen’s laugh was forced, the notes dropping like stones on asphalt.

Egypt strode across her apartment, shoved up the sleeves of her sweater. A studio. One room. Large enough for one person. A hovel compared to Helen’s four-bedroom Arts and Crafts home in Dragoon’s Springs.

Plastic crinkled as she tossed the wedding dress over her shoulder.

“I really need to get on the road.”

“Oh, is someone waiting for you?” Hope flashed on Helen’s round face before fear drew the shutters on her expression. “My sister Karen asked if you were bringing a boyfriend. She just graduated from high school, you know.”

Egypt shooed her old friend outside and faced the door. Karen had been a skinny, scraped-kneed teenager when Egypt left Dragoon’s Springs for college. Now the brat was a young woman prowling for a husband.

“No, I didn’t know.” She hadn’t wanted to put names and relationships to those females awaiting her return. No, not her return home but the arrival of an escort, ripe for the picking. “And no, no one’s waiting for me. I’m fresh out of broken-in boyfriends who make perfect husbands for someone else.”

She turned around in time to see the tears well up in Helen's eyes. A dainty handkerchief dabbed at her pink nose. Guilt lashed Egypt. Great, now she'd made a pregnant woman cry. Where were the puppies she was supposed to kick?

"Helen, I'm sorry. I—"

"Don't worry about it." She sniffed, waving the white cloth. "Stupid hormones. Adam comes home and finds me bawling over Hallmark commercials."

"Still, even an idiot like me could see you two belong together."

She nodded. "Adam would not have made you a good husband, Egypt. He's so practical and you're..." She cleared her throat and tucked her sodden handkerchief in her purse. "You're so..."

"Flighty."

"Whimsical." Helen's perfectly manicured hand slipped around Egypt's and squeezed gently. "You always used to create the most elaborate fairy tales for our Barbies. I guess you were pairing up people even then."

Egypt fidgeted in her skin. Fairy tales. Those words had crept up once too often today.

"I'll give Paris your present."

"I know you will but that's not really why I'm here."

"It's not?"

Helen took a deep breath and caressed her belly.

"We were going to name the baby after you, but then Adam noticed there are already five girls in Dragoon's Springs with your name and so we were hoping you'd be her godmother instead." She released her belly to grab Egypt's hand. "Will you? I mean, she wouldn't even be here if you hadn't brought Adam home that Fourth of July."

That Fourth of July. Egypt's first summer after college. She couldn't wait to show off her cosmopolitan air, not to mention her handsome new boyfriend. She literally ran into Helen at the grocery store, and Adam had ignored his stum-

bling girlfriend in favor of his future wife. It had taken Egypt twenty minutes to realize *she* was the third wheel at the fireworks display and not her grade-school friend. Loneliness threatened to drown her. She missed her friend.

“I’d be honored to be her godmother.”

“Thanks. Egypt. You’re such a sweet person. Be sure to stop by my mom’s house before you leave Dragoon’s Springs—I have something for you.”

“You don’t have to give me anything.”

“It’s just Auntie Jane’s old mirror. We converted the guest bedroom into a nursery and were going to get rid of it when I remembered that summer when we were five and you pretended to be Alice and that mirror was our entrance into Wonderland. Do you remember?”

“Yes. You always wanted to be the Cheshire Cat instead of the White Rabbit.”

“I like cats.” Helen frowned at Egypt. “You’re not taking that jacket, are you? Really, Egypt, you’ve lived in the desert too long. The mountains get cold, even in Arizona.”

She shrugged. The weatherman had predicted clear skies and above-normal temperatures for the next week. If it got too cold she would borrow something from her mother or sister. “It’s the only one I have.”

“What about the blue one from our senior trip? You loved that jacket. The whole class was taking bets whether or not you’d sleep in it.”

Egypt strolled to her car and balanced the gift on the pile in the backseat.

“That’s about how long it’s been since I last wore it.”

“You should find it. Honestly, Egypt, you’re going to need something warmer.”

“I’ll be fine. Really.”

Helen squeezed between Egypt and the door and tapped her foot against the pavement.

“Look, the jacket’s probably still at my mother’s.”

“Nope. I checked. She said she gave it to you when you were up there last Christmas.”

Last Christmas. The day she’d introduced Paris to Darrell. A pinpoint of clarity amidst the haze of memory. Egypt shook off the thoughts.

“You checked?”

“I needed an excuse to see you, all right? I know you haven’t quite forgiven me for stealing Adam. I haven’t forgiven myself for hurting you and...”

“That’s why you haven’t talked to me?” Egypt’s spirits lifted. “I thought you weren’t speaking to me because of what we did to your car?”

“My car? What did you do to my car?” Helen searched the parking lot before her gaze rested on a tan Volvo.

“Uh, I think my jacket is still in the trunk.” Egypt quickly shut the door and walked to the front of the Volkswagen. Either Helen had forgotten about the flat tires on the car or she never found out Egypt had been responsible. Who was she to enlighten her?

With a twist of her wrist, the trunk sprang open. The turquoise jacket lay folded across two smashed boxes. Her mother would kill her if she found out Egypt had been carting around boxes for a whole year.

“It even has the lift ticket.” Helen tugged out a purple scarf from the inside and looped it around Egypt’s shoulders. “Now you’re ready for cold weather.”

Egypt ripped off the ticket and shoved it in the pocket.

“I better be off. I’ve deviated thirty-three minutes from The Plan.”

“Oh, no! The dreaded Plan. I swear that was the first four-letter word I learned. Plan.” Helen shuddered.

Egypt felt herself smile. “You have no idea how many times they’ve had to revise it.” She tossed her jacket onto the passenger seat. Her cat rose from his perch and sauntered over.

“Hey, is that Nutz?”

“Yep.” Nutz sniffed the air before strolling closer.

“Hey, Nutz. Do you remember me? I can’t believe you’re taking him. He absolutely hates the snow.” Helen stroked the cat once before he walked away to lie on the coat. “Wouldn’t go outside for anything. And he couldn’t stay inside because of Adam’s allergies. He looks good.”

Nutz preened under the attention.

“I’m taking good care of him.”

“That’s why I agreed to give him to you. Take care, Egypt.” After a brief, awkward hug Helen walked toward her Volvo. “I’ll see you at your parents’ New Year’s Eve party if this baby ever decides to come.”

“Take care, Helen.”

The VW rocked as Egypt shut the door. That hadn’t been too bad. Perhaps her luck had finally changed.



Cade slammed the deadbolt home and rested his head against the door. Safe. At last. His heart slowed to a normal rhythm. Two of the Blue Coats had almost caught him behind the King house. Almost but not quite. Only longtime residents knew about the break in the hedges. The break that opened onto the alley that cut behind his house.

He shifted his weight to his right leg. Cold metal stung his finger as he separated a few slats of the blinds. They were still there, circling his house like buzzards over a lost desert wanderer. A third joined the set. Damn women. He’d have to run the gauntlet to get his dog. He ripped off his baseball cap and raked his fingers through his hair. He would have to call his mother, make sure Pete could stay the night.

The hair on the back of his neck stood up. Awareness pricked along his skin just as perfume teased his nose.

Someone was in his house.

“Alone at last.”

He spun on his heel and stepped back. His head collided with the door; stars exploded inside his skull. Good God. They were invading his house.

“You are a hard man to get alone, Cade Dugan.”

“I—I am.”

She stalked towards him. Her hips undulated suggestively. Cade blinked. There was something wrong with her clothes.

“Yes, indeed.” Long crimson nails raked the back of his sofa as her green-eyed gaze traveled up and down his body. “But definitely worth waiting for.”

“I feel at a disadvantage.” The doorknob ground into his back. He never should have left Pete at his parents’. No one would have broken into his house with a wolf-dog on duty.

“I’m Maybelle—Maybelle Collins.” She extended her hand. Blue and purple paint stained her palm.

Cade’s heart raced. She wouldn’t. He scrutinized her clothes. Good Lord, the woman had painted on her clothes. If anyone ever found out he had entertained a naked woman in his house...

A shudder scrambled his thoughts.

“What brings you here, Maybelle?” *More important, how can I get you to leave?*

“I thought playing hard-to-get was a woman’s prerogative.”

“That’s okay. I thought choosing whom to court was a man’s.” Cade sidled away from her. Ridding himself of Blue Coats was becoming trickier. He couldn’t toss her naked butt out his front door. This would require more finesse.

“I was tired of waiting at the hotel.” She pouted. “And I missed you at the bakery.”

“I doubt many men missed you looking like that.” Cade reached the kitchen, turned and faced her. She was still there, following him in a stable orbit. Maybe he could shove her out the back door. First, he’d have to find her clothes.

“Do you like it?” Her hands slipped over her blue hips.

A groan slipped past his lips. He had a pulse, didn't he? Cade shook the insanity from his skull. He couldn't encourage her. She wasn't who she wanted to be, even if her curves got him hotter than a NASCAR driver the second before the flag dropped.

"It shows a definite artistic bent." The uniqueness of the canvas was definitely bent. God save him. Where were her clothes? His gaze swept the living room. Nothing. "Did you use my paint?"

She nodded, trailing her hand along the countertop. "I thought this might help me stand out, make you notice who I am."

Great, the nuts grew nuttier just to be noticed. And they were touching his stuff. Even his mother knew better than to touch his stuff. Everything was where it was supposed to be, and she had to go and touch it. No one went into his studio unless he was with them, and she had just sashayed into his house. He tramped down the rising anger.

She had to go.

"It worked," he stated, although not in the way she had wanted.

"You don't think I'm her, do you?" Her gaze flew around the room, alighted briefly on each breakable item before coming to rest on the glass near her hand.

Great. She was a smasher. His house wouldn't be able to withstand her wrath. He had to get her out before she inflicted too much damage.

"I'd say you were the closest one yet."

"Do you mean it?"

"I—" Blue flashed in the foliage outside his dining room window. God save him. More were arriving. Arriving. An idea sparked in his head. He had to try, although it might not be effective on a woman who strolled around a complete stranger's house in nothing but paint and skin. Still, he hadn't come up with anything else. "Good grief, my parents."

“Your parents?” she squeaked. Her hands and arms shifted to cover strategic parts of her anatomy.

“Yes.” Relief. He should have known such a crazy idea would work. “They’re here. You have to get dressed.” He inched towards her. No touching, absolutely no touching. He swept the air in front of him, shooing her backwards.

“Dressed?” Her eyes widened in her chalky face.

“You certainly don’t want to meet my folks dressed like that, do you?”

“No. No, I don’t.” She snatched a towel off the counter and held it in front of her.

“Quickly. Where are your clothes?”

“I...I...They’re in there.” She pointed to the bathroom then glanced at her blue-and-purple palms. “Perhaps I should take a shower.”

“Shower.” Cade exaggerated his grimace and added a shudder for good measure. “No. Definitely not. My parents are very old-fashioned. They once thought my high school sweetheart was fast because we kissed after a month of dating.”

“A month?” She streaked across the room, slipped into the bathroom. Fabric rustled. Grunting drifted out.

Cade fixed his gaze on the landscape above the fireplace.

“Thirty-six days, to be exact.”

“Yes, but we’re meant to be together. I’m sure— ”

“To this day they cross the street when they see her walking towards them.”

“Oh, dear. I can’t find my shoes.” Flesh slapped tile.

Cade shook his head. No excuses. Shoes or no, she had to go. He wouldn’t mind cleaning up after her. With a smile, he pressed his point.

“I could probably explain why you are here without a chaperone. I mean, I know first impressions are so important. I even think Mom’ll forgive you in a couple years.”

The activity picked up. Her panic was palpable. Now all he had to do is spur her to dress more quickly, or she’d grow

suspicious when his parents failed to materialize. “Of course, that might make those first years of living with them a bit awkward.”

She poked her head out the door. The rest of her followed.

“We’re going to live with your parents?”

“Oh, yes. We can’t leave Mom to push Dad’s wheelchair about in the snow. You’re young and healthy. I don’t want you to worry, I’m certain you can learn how to place the leeches just so. I mean, no one wants Dad’s leg to putrefy again. The bathrooms still smells...”

“You know, maybe I should wait on the porch.” She stuffed her feet into her shoes and scooted across the carpet.

“Really?”

“Yes, yes.” Her laces slapped the wood floor. Her hands jammed into her jacket. “I wouldn’t want to get off on the wrong foot.”

“No need to worry about that—Dad only has the one.” Her jaw hung open. Cade smacked his forehead. “Oh, you mean figuratively.” He moved toward her. She held up her hand.

“Yes.”

“Perhaps you’re right. Mom always said women know best. And Mom is never wrong. I’m sure she’ll like you,” He frowned at her. “Given time.”

“I—I’ll be outside.” Metal rattled as she tried to open the door with the deadbolt in place. “Just give me a few minutes then I’ll knock.”

“You’ll knock?”

“Yes, I’ll knock.” She sobbed, twisted the knob and retracted the bolt. “Don’t come looking for me, okay? That way, your mother won’t suspect I’ve been here.”

“Oh, you’re smart. Mom said I should marry a smart one. She’ll be so glad when we walk down the aisle. She has the wedding all planned—she even decorated our new room. I don’t get to live there until after the wedding. Mom insisted.”

“Okay.” She wrenched open the door

“You like blue, don’t you?” Cade stepped after her. She was so frantic to leave she might leave the door open for other Blue Coats. “Of course, you do, you painted yourself with that very color.”

“I’m going to leave now.”

“Leave?”

“Yes, like we planned. I’ll go and...” She stepped onto the porch, pivoted about and faced him. “And this is very important. You stay here until I come back.”

“Right. I forgot.” Cade leaned against the doorjamb. His hand rested on the knob, in case anyone else thought to enter his house. “I’ll be sure to act surprised when you come back.”

“Bye, Cade.”

“Bye, Maybelle.” He waited until she had cleared his driveway before he shut the door. Laughter bounced off the rafters, buoyed his spirit. Who knew revenge could be this satisfying?

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