

A man with a muscular physique is shown from the chest up, wearing a red and black plaid shirt that is unbuttoned at the top, revealing his chest. He is also wearing blue jeans. He is holding a branch of holly with red berries and green leaves. The background is a snowy outdoor scene with a blue sky and falling snow.

MISTLETOE COWBOY

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CAROLYN
BROWN

"Brown's delightful romance keeps readers on their toes."

—*RT Book Reviews*

MISTLETOE COWBOY

CAROLYN
BROWN



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P.O. Box 4410, Naperville, Illinois 60567-4410

(630) 961-3900

FAX: (630) 961-2168

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*To Joanne Kennedy,
my fellow smut peddler*

Chapter 1

“Dammit!”

Sage’s favorite cuss word bounced around inside her van like marbles in a tin can, sounding and resounding in her ears.

She had slowed down to a snail’s pace and was about to drop off the face of the earth into the Pa Duro Canyon when two men dragged sawhorses and a “ROAD CLOSED” sign toward the middle of the road. She stepped on the gas and slid between the sawhorses, slinging wet snow all over the highway workers.

The last things she saw in her rearview mirror were shaking fists and angry faces before the driving snow obliterated them. They could cuss all they wanted and even slap one of those *fines double when workers are present* on her if they wanted. She didn’t have time to fiddle-fart around in Claude waiting for eight to ten inches of snow to fall and then melt. She had urgent business at home that would not wait, and she was going home if she had to crawl through the blowing snow and wind on her hands and knees.

She’d driven all night and barely stayed ahead of the storm’s path until she was twenty miles from Claude and got the first full blast of the blinding snow making a kaleidoscope out of her headlights. If she was going to stop, she would have done so then, but she had to get home and talk her grandmother out of the biggest mistake of her life. With the snowstorm and the closed roads into and out of the canyon, Grand wouldn’t be making her afternoon flight for sure. Maybe that would give Sage time to talk her out of selling the ranch to a complete stranger.

“Dammit!” she swore again and didn’t even feel guilty about it. “And right here at Christmas when it’s supposed to be about family and friends and parties and love. She can’t leave me now. I should have listened to her.”

What was Grand thinking anyway? The Rockin’ C had been in the Presley family since the days of the Alamo. It was one of the first ranches ever staked out in the canyon, and her grandfather would rot over in his grave if he thought Grand was selling it to an outsider. Had the old girl completely lost her mind?

“Merry freakin’ Christmas!” she moaned as she gripped the steering wheel tightly on the downhill grade. The van went into a long greasy slide and she took her foot off the gas pedal and gently tapped the brakes to hold it back. She didn’t have to stay in her lane. The roads were closed and no one with their right mind would be driving in such a frightful mess with zero visibility.

Sage could find her way to the Rockin’ C with her eyes closed, and she might have to prove it because she couldn’t see a damn thing except white. From the inside of her house, it might have been beautiful, but from the inside of her van, it was eerie.

Sage laid her cell phone on the console, pressed the button for speakerphone, and hit the speed dial for the landline at the ranch. Nothing happened, which meant the snow had already knocked out the power for both the landline and the cell towers. Grand kept an old rotary phone that worked when the electricity was out, but if the phone power was gone, nothing worked.

Neither surprised her. The next to go would be the electricity. She just hoped that Grand had listened

to the weather report and hooked up the generator to the well pump so there would be water in the house.

She was crawling along at less than five miles an hour when she turned into the lane leading to the house at the Rockin' C, and the van still slid sideways for a few minutes before it straightened up. She slowed down even further and crept down the dirt lane, the engine growling at the abuse.

"Don't stop now," she said.

The quarter mile had never seemed so long, but if the van stopped she could walk the rest of the way. She'd even ruin her brand new cowboy boots if she had to. A warm house and her own bed were right up ahead and she was meaner than the storm anyway.

She kept telling herself that until she came to a greasy stop in front of the porch. She unbuckled her seat belt and clasped her hands tightly together to make them stop shaking, but nothing seemed to help. The adrenaline rush had brought her almost twenty miles into the canyon and now it was fading, leaving jitters behind.

Sage Presley was not a petite little woman with a weak voice and a sissy giggle, so she shouldn't be sitting there shaking like a ninny in a van fast losing its heat. She was five feet ten inches tall, dark haired and brown eyed, and there wasn't one small thing about her. But Sage didn't feel like a force right then. She felt like a scared little girl.

The small two-bedroom square frame house was barely visible even though it was less than ten feet away when she stepped out. Her feet slipped and she had to grab the van door to keep from falling square on her butt. She found her balance and took short deliberate steps to the porch where she grabbed the railing and hung on as she climbed the three steps one by one.

If the storm really did stall out over the Palo Duro Canyon for three days, it was going to be one helluva job just digging out. It was a good thing she'd blown by those highway workers because Grand was going to need her help. She pulled her key ring from her purse and finally found the right key and got it into the lock. How on earth could anything as white as snow make it so dark that she couldn't even fit a key into a door lock?

Stepping inside was similar to going from an air-conditioned office into a sauna. She dropped her purse and keys on the credenza right inside the door and flipped the light switch.

Nothing happened. The electricity had already gone out.

The only light in the house came from the glowing embers of scrub oak and mesquite logs in the fireplace. She held her hands out to warm them, and the rest of the rush from the drive down the slick winding roads bottomed out, leaving her tired and sleepy.

She rubbed her eyes and vowed she would not cry. Didn't Grand remember that the day she came home from the gallery showings was special? Sage had never cut down a Christmas tree all by herself. She and Grand always went out into the canyon and hauled a nice big cedar back to the house the day after the showing. Then they carried boxes of ornaments and lights from the bunkhouse and decorated the tree, popped the tops on a couple of beers, and sat in the rocking chairs and watched the lights flicker on and off.

She went to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator, but it was pitch-black inside. She fumbled around and there wasn't even a beer in there. She finally located a gallon jar of milk and carried it to the cabinet, poured a glass full, and downed it without coming up for air.

It took some fancy maneuvering to get the jar back inside the refrigerator, but she managed and flipped the light switch as she was leaving.

"Dammit! Bloody dammit!" she said a second time using the British accent from the man who had paid top dollar for one of her paintings.

One good thing about the blizzard was if that crazy cowboy who thought he was buying the Rocking C could see this weather, he'd change his mind in a hurry. As soon as she and Grand got done talking, she'd personally send him an email telling him that the deal had fallen through. But he'd have to wait until they got electricity back to even get that much.

Sage had lived in the house all of her twenty-six years and very little had changed, so she didn't have any problems going from the kitchen, across the living room floor, and to her bedroom without tripping over anything. There had been a couple of new sofas, but they'd always been put right where the old one had been, under the bar and facing the entertainment unit located to the right of the fireplace. The kitchen table was the same one that had been there when Sage and her mother came to live in the canyon. Grand wasn't one much for buying anything new when what was already there was still usable. She made her way down the hall to the bathroom and out of habit tried the light again. It didn't work either.

"That was stupid," she whispered.

The propane heater put out enough heat to keep the bathroom and the bedrooms from freezing, but it meant leaving the doors open a crack. Grand's door was ajar and she wanted to see her so badly that she was on her way to peek when she stopped. If Grand woke up there wouldn't be any deciding about when the fight would take place.

Grand was not a morning person even though she crawled out of bed at six every single day, Sundays included. Sage had learned early on not to approach her until she was working on her second cup of coffee, so there was no way in hell she was going to start the argument right then.

She turned around and went straight to her bedroom, kicked off her boots, and hung her wet shirt and jeans over a recliner in the corner of the room. She pulled an extra quilt from the chest at the end of her bed and tossed it over the top of the down comforter before she slipped into bed wearing nothing but her panties and bra.

She was asleep before her body had time to warm up the sheets.

The wind was still howling like a son-of-a-bitch when Creed awoke at daylight. Why in the hell had he decided to buy a ranch in the middle of the winter? Sure, he'd liked the land when he looked at it a week ago and he'd seen potential for raising Longhorns and growing hay come spring. No sir, it didn't look bad at all at fifty degrees and with the sun shining on the winter wheat.

And God only knew the price was right. Right, nothing! It was a downright steal and he'd felt an inner peace that he hadn't known in a long, long time when the owner had showed him around and made the deal with him. But he hadn't planned on the canyon filling up with snow on his first night in the house.

The weatherman said that the blizzard was going to stall out right above the canyon and wouldn't move on toward the east for at least three more days. That was the last thing he'd seen on the television the night before because the electricity had flickered and then gone out for good.

The phone service had gone out before the electricity. His cell phone's battery would soon be dead and the battery in his laptop would have bit the dust during the night. So there he was all alone in a blinding blizzard with a hundred head of cattle corralled in a feedlot behind the barn.

He wasn't very well acquainted with the house, so he moved slowly when he slung his legs out of the bed and made his way across the bedroom floor. He shivered and opened the door wider to let in more heat. At least he had the little two-bedroom house all to himself until the blizzard came and went and

things thawed out.

He put on three pairs of socks, long underwear, jeans, and a thermal knit shirt. He topped that with a thick flannel shirt and peeked out the window. There was nothing but a chill from cold glass and thick falling snow beyond that. But rain, snow, sandstorms, or heat, cattle had to be fed and taken care of and the lady had said that if he wanted to buy her ranch, he'd have to take good care of it for the next three weeks. She'd be home the day before Christmas to see if he qualified as a buyer. If she liked what he'd done, she'd sell. If she didn't, he'd only wasted three weeks.

Her words, not his!

It was December so he didn't expect eighty-degree weather, but he sure hadn't figured on eight inches of snow coming down in blizzard-strength wind either, and that's what the weatherman predicted. Two inches of snow or sleet crippled folks in Texas as much as two feet so they'd be stuck while digging out from under eight inches for sure. At least he wouldn't have to contend with the granddaughter. No way could she get into the canyon in a storm like this. She could just hole up in her fancy hotel in Denver where the gallery was showing her paintings. *La-tee-da*, as Granny Riley used to say about all things rich and famous.

The stipulation for the sale was that Sage Presley could live on the ranch as long as she wanted. Well, Creed could live with the painter in her own house on the back forty of the Rockin' C to get the ranch for the price Ada Presley quoted. She could play with her finger paints and take them up to Denver and Cheyenne every year. Their paths might cross once in a while and he'd tip his hat to her respectfully. He'd never heard of her, but that didn't mean much. In Creed's world a velvet Elvis wall art and pictures torn out of coloring books held up with magnets graced the front of his mother's refrigerator.

Creed didn't care what Sage did for a living or what she looked like as long as she stayed out of his way. Miz Ada had said that he'd best be prepared for a shit storm as well as the big blizzard because Sage did not want her to sell the ranch. At least the storm had kept her away from the canyon, and by the time she could get to the ranch she would be cooled down.

He made it to the bathroom, illuminated only by the fire in the open-face wall heater, and then down the hall way and halfway across the living room before he stumped his toe on the rung of a rockin' chair.

"Shit!" he muttered.

His coveralls, face mask, and hat were hanging on a rack beside the back door, and his boots waited on a rug right underneath them. He zipped the mustard-colored canvas coveralls all the way to his neck, pulled the face mask over his head, and pushed the bottom behind the collar of the coveralls. Then he stomped his feet down into his work boots and crammed an old felt hat down on his head. It was a tight fit with the knitted mask, but a cowboy didn't even do chores without his hat.

He leaned into the whirling wind on the way to the barn located only a football field's length from the house. He'd run that far lots of times when he was quarterback of the Gold-Burg football team and never even thought about it. But battling against the driving snow sucked the air out of his lungs and by the time he reached the barn he was panting worse than if he'd run a fifty-yard touchdown. The barn door slid on metal rails and they were frozen. At first he thought muscles, force, and cussing wasn't going to do the trick, but finally he was able to open it up enough to wedge his body through.

The air inside wasn't any warmer, but at least it didn't sound like a freight train barreling down the sides of the canyon. He shook off a flurry of white powder, grabbed his gloves from the bale of hay where he'd left them the night before, and pulled them on.

"Won't make that stupid mistake again," he said.

He hiked a hip onto the seat of the smaller of two tractors and planted a long spike implement into a round bale of hay and drove it up close to the double doors at the back of the barn. He got off the seat, opened the doors, and ran back to get the hay out before the cows came inside. They had crowded under the lean-to roof and eaten the last of the bale he'd put out the morning before. It took a lot of hay to keep them from losing weight in the winter. He just hoped he'd hauled enough big round bales from the pasture into the barn to make it through the storm.

The feeding job that should have been done in half an hour took twice that long. The two breed sows holed up in the hog house were so cold that they barely grunted when he poured a bucket of food in their trough. One rooster was brave enough to come out of the henhouse and crow his disapproval before he hurried back inside. When Creed finished feeding, it was time to milk the cow. Glad to be back inside the dry barn, he filled a bucket with grain and gave it to the cow. While she got started on her breakfast, he fetched a three-legged milking stool and a clean bucket from the tack room. His hands were freezing, but he couldn't milk with gloves.

"Sorry about the cold hands, old girl," he apologized to the cow before he started.

When he'd finished that job he headed toward the house. Steam rose up from the top of the warm milk, but it didn't do much to melt the snow coming down even harder than it had been.

"And it's not letting up for three days!" he mumbled.

When he opened the back door into the kitchen, a scraggly mutt raced in ahead of him. Ada hadn't mentioned a dog and he hadn't seen the animal before, but there he was, ugly as sin, shaking snow all over the kitchen floor.

Sage was an early riser so sleeping until eight o'clock had given her a stinging headache. She grabbed her forehead and snuggled back into the covers, but the pain didn't go away. She needed a handful of aspirin and a cup of strong black coffee. She seldom won a fight with Grand when they were playing on an even field. A blasted headache would give her grandmother a real advantage. She jerked on a Christmas sweatshirt printed with Tweety Bird all tangled up in a strand of lights on the front and pulled on a pair of gray sweat bottoms. She finished off the outfit with fluffy red socks from her dresser drawer.

Grand hadn't even stopped long enough to get a fire going. That could wait. Coffee came before warmth. Sage passed the fireplace and went straight to the kitchen. She filled the electric coffee maker, added a filter and two scoops of coffee, and flipped the switch.

"Well, shit!" she exclaimed.

Old habits sure died hard. If the lights wouldn't work, neither would the electric coffeepot. And that left out the washing machine, the clothes dryer, and the electric churn to make butter, too.

The fact that the electricity was out wasn't anything new in Palo Duro Canyon. If the wind blew too hard, and it did real often in the winter, the electricity went out. Grand said that if someone sneezed too loud up in Silverton or in Claude it went out, so no electricity in a blizzard was no big surprise. That's why they heated the house as much as possible with the fireplace and cooked with propane.

Sage opened a cabinet door and removed the old Pyrex percolator, filled it with water, put a filter in the basket, added coffee, and set it on the back burner of the stove. She wasn't as good as Grand about knowing just how long it needed to perk, but it would be coffee in a few minutes even if it might taste like mud from the cow lot.

She found the aspirin bottle to the left of the sink and swallowed four with half a glass of orange

juice. While the coffee perked, she chose several good-sized logs from beside the fireplace and got the big fire going.

“Bless Grand’s heart for bringing in wood to dry,” she said.

She sat down in one of the two rocking chairs pulled up to the fireplace and warmed her hands by the heat. And a sudden pang of guilt twisted its way around her heart. Grand was out doing chores in the godforsaken weather and she was lollygagging around getting warm. She dug her cell phone out of her coat pocket and punched in the speed dial for her grandmother to see what she could do to help and a message popped up immediately saying there was no service available.

Of course there was no service. Damn storm!

At least Grand would come inside to a good fire to warm her cold feet by and a pot of coffee already perked and ready. Poor old girl would be miserable cold and she hadn’t even had one cup of coffee yet. It was going to be a long morning for sure.

At seventy she had no business out in weather like this without any help. If Sage knew exactly where she was in the process, she would suit up and go help. But those pesky hogs wouldn’t tell her they already been fed and neither would the chickens, and starting an argument with Grand already pissed because Sage had wasted chicken scratch or hog feed wasn’t the smartest thing.

The living room soon warmed and the smell of coffee filled the house. Maybe she should whip up some pancakes for breakfast. Grand loved them and that would sweeten her up to see Sage’s point of view. She had just set the mixing bowl on the cabinet when the back door swung open.

“It’s about time you came in from the cold,” she said as she turned.

Her hand flew up to her pounding heart and she backed up against the cabinet.

The abominable snowman pushed his way into the house behind something that was either the ugliest dog on the face of the earth or an alien from a faraway planet. The huge thing set a galvanized bucket of milk on the table and a basket of eggs right beside it before he stomped his feet on the rug under the coatrack. The dog stopped in the middle of the kitchen floor and shook from shoulder to tail sending even more snow flying everywhere in her kitchen. When it melted there would be water everywhere and her socks would be soaked.

“Who the hell are you? Get out of here and take that miserable mutt with you,” Sage said.

Creed removed his old felt cowboy hat and pulled off the face mask. His nose was scarlet and his dark eyelashes dusted with snowflakes. And of all the crazy things, there was a spring of mistletoe stuck in the snow on his shoulder as if it had grown there.

“I’m Creed Riley, ma’am, and I reckon if you want to throw your dog out in the snow that’s your business, but I’m not that mean or cruel to animals. And I’m here to stay since I’m the cowboy who bought this ranch. I guess you’d be Sage Presley. I didn’t think you’d make it home in this blizzard. I heard the roads were closed off.”

He was well over six feet tall because Sage had to look up to him. His brown hair was a bit too long and his mossy green eyes were rimmed with black lashes topped with heavy dark brows. His deep voice held a definite Texas drawl.

She backed up to the cabinet and braced herself against it. “Where is Grand? Is she behind you?”

“No, left a day early since the storm was coming in. I expect she’s in Pennsylvania by now where it’s fifty degrees and sunshiny today. Crazy, ain’t it? We get a blizzard and the East Coast is downright pleasant. At least it was yesterday when she called to tell me that she’d made it fine and to tell you so when you got home. Guess her cell phone’s battery was dead and her sister didn’t have one so she called on a pay phone from the airport.”

Sage rolled her eyes. “You have got to be kiddin’ me!”

“No, ma’am! That’s the truth and that’s really not my dog. I’m bringing my two huntin’ dogs on here soon as we make this sale legal, but this old boy just appeared out of nowhere this morning and rushed right in with me. I figured he belonged on the property. He wasn’t none too pretty when he was covered in snow, but it was covering a multitude of ugly, wasn’t it?”

Sage crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him.

He ignored her and started peeling away layers of clothing, taking the time to hang them on a coatrack just inside the back door. He didn’t stop until he was down to jeans, socks, and a red and black flannel shirt.

What have you done, Grand? she thought.

The blizzard would end. The sun would come out and melt the snow. Electricity would be restored along with power lines and cell phone coverage. And Sage could have talked her out of the sale a hell of a lot easier face to face than over the telephone—if they ever got service back in the canyon.

This was Sage’s home and it wasn’t supposed to be sold to some rank stranger, even if his green eyes were sexy as hell with snow hanging on the lashes like that fake stuff out of a can that she and Grand sprayed on the windows when she was a little girl.

“Coffee smells good. Reckon it’s about ready?” he asked. “Thank goodness for a full propane tank. Miz Ada told me that she has a standing order with the propane company out of Claude. And you can wipe that mean look off your face, lady. We’re stuck here together until this ends. I’m not real happy about being holed up with you either, but it’s the way it is and we might as well make the best of it.”

Her eyes narrowed and her brow wrinkled.

You want your face to freeze with that nasty look on it? Her grandmother’s words came back to haunt her.

“Number one, Mr. Riley, you don’t tell me how to look or what to do. Number two, Mr. Riley, Grand won’t ever sell you this place, so don’t get too comfortable.”

“Rule number one, lady, I speak my mind, so get used to it. Rule number two, I’m settling in and getting comfortable because I think she will sell the ranch to me. The deed will say that you get to live on the ranch as long as you want when the sale is sealed, signed, and finished. And back to rule number one, darlin’, if you want your face to freeze like that, then just hold on to that nasty look. Creed said.

Her face softened, but she wasn’t ready to smile and welcome the damn cowboy. Not yet, probably not ever.

“She wasn’t supposed to leave until today.”

Maybe the blizzard was a blessing. He’d see right quick that life in the canyon was too hard and he’d be ready to get the hell out of the place as soon as he could. Sage didn’t mind doing chores. She hated milking a cow, but she could do that too if the cowboy would ride on out of the canyon as soon as the roads were cleared. Hell, she’d call a helicopter and pay the bill out of her own money if he wanted to get out of the canyon before the snowplow arrived.

“What’s for breakfast?” he asked.

“Whatever you can scrounge up. I didn’t take you to raise,” she said shortly.

He smiled down at her. “Miz Ada said you’d be a handful and you’d come in here mad as a wet hen after a tornado. She was dead on, but darlin’, I am buyin’ this place. You are welcome to live on it. We can be friends, barely acquaintances, or enemies. Your choice and you don’t even have to make it today. But it’s going to be a long three weeks until she comes back and in this storm we’ve got no one but each other, so it can be pleasant or pretty damn miserable. Remember as you drink your coffee that this house ain’t very big and we are stuck in it together.”

The arrogance of the man!

He went on. ~~“She left because of the storm and because her sister needs her, not because she was~~ bit afraid of you. That woman gave me the impression that she could face down the devil and own half of hell before the fight was over. You wouldn't pose much problem.”

“You got her right, but you got me all wrong. I'm every bit as mean as she is. She raised me,” Sage said.

Creed wiped the snow from his cheeks as it melted from his lashes. “I like my eggs scrambled.”

“I like mine easy over.”

Creed raised an eyebrow. “Who's cookin'?”

“Not me,” she told him. She wasn't about to start cooking for him or feeding that dog he'd brought in either.

The ugly mutt looked from one of them to the other. Finally, he ambled toward the fireplace, where he curled up in a ball, covered his nose with his paw, and shut his eyes.

Creed brushed past Sage and poured two cups of coffee. He set hers on the table beside the bucket of milk and leaned against the kitchen side of the bar separating the two rooms.

“You going to strain that and put it in the refrigerator or am I?”

“I'll do it. You probably wouldn't do it right anyway.”

It wasn't his ranch or his cows or his milk. She'd wear Grand down with the sheer volume of her arguments even if she had to whine and pout. Like she had said, he probably wouldn't do the job right anyway.

She went to the huge walk-in pantry, then picked up a gallon jar and a piece of clean cheesecloth. She put the cloth on top of the jar, made an indentation in the top with her fist, and deftly wrapped a rubber band around the edge of the jar. Then she carefully poured the milk through the cloth and into the jar.

When the job was finished she removed the cloth, tossed it into the empty milk bucket, and set the bucket in the kitchen sink. She squirted dish soap into the bucket and ran warm water in it, washed off the cheesecloth, hung it on the dish drainer, and turned the bucket upside down in the drainer.

“You don't waste time or motions. That's good,” he said.

Sage picked up her coffee and carried it to the living room where she curled up in the rocking chair. Creed followed her and she did her dead level best to ignore him. He had no right to be sitting in Grand's rocking chair with his long legs pushed toward the fire that she'd built.

Sage was prettier than the picture of her sitting on the mantel and a lot bigger than he'd imagined she would be. She was almost six feet tall and there wasn't one thing delicate or dainty about her. She looked like she could take down a full grown bull with one hand tied behind her back. And yet, with her black hair floating on her shoulders, eyes the color of milk chocolate, and those full lips, she was sexy as hell. Tall women had never appealed to him but he had to admit, she was a looker, alright.

Hearing that her grandmother had up and sold the ranch had to be the shock of a lifetime. He couldn't imagine what it would feel like if his parents sold the ranch he'd lived on his whole life.

Of all the scenarios he'd imagined, this certainly wasn't the way he intended to meet Sage Presley. Keeping his eyes straight ahead, he stole a sideways glance toward her. She looked at the dog as if she could wish him out of the house. It wouldn't work. If she'd wanted him out of the house, she'd have grabbed him by his wiry fur and throw him out and then she'd better shut the door real fast or else he

beat her back inside.

~~So much for visions of having a friendship with the woman; hell, he'd be lucky if she didn't try murder him in his sleep. He'd have to start locking the bedroom door at night, maybe even putting a chair in front of it for extra protection.~~

He wiggled his toes and said, "Ah, that does feel good."

"When did all this happen?" she asked.

"What? The storm?"

"Hell, no! When did you come here and why did she sell the Rockin' C to you? The first I heard about this was yesterday morning, and I had no idea you were already here. At first I thought she was teasing, but then she made me understand that she was serious so tell me what you did to make her sell to you," she asked coldly.

He stared right into her eyes. "Are you asking or demanding?"

"I'm not asking or demanding. I'm wondering how this all happened so fast." She stared back and it became a battle of wills as to who would blink first.

The dog growled and they both looked down at the same time. Poor old boy was probably fighting off a coyote in his sleep because his eyes were still shut.

"Okay," Creed said. "I can tell you when and what happened. I don't know why she sold to me and not to someone else. You was gone off to your artist thing when I called and asked if I could come to the ranch and talk to her. She showed me around. I liked what I saw and she gave me a price. We shook and I put up the escrow, but she says she won't sign the papers or cash the check until three weeks are up so we both have time to think about it."

The dog whimpered again and he glanced at him before going on, "I went back to Ringgold and got my things. When I arrived yesterday morning, she told me about the storm, showed me where everything was again, including the generator, and one of the neighbors came to take her to the airport in Amarillo. Said she was going to Shade Gap, Pennsylvania, and she'd be back in three weeks, just before Christmas."

Sage sighed. "Aunt Essie is sixteen years older than Grand and she's been trying to get Grand to come out there for years. She has a little place in one of those godforsaken valleys."

Creed stopped the motion of the rocking chair and stared at her wide-eyed. "And what do you call this big hole in the ground? Paradise?"

"I call it home," she smarted off. "I suppose we'd best set up some ground rules. First of all, exactly where are you sleeping?"

"This place only has two bedrooms and one is yours. You do the math."

Her eyes popped open even wider. "In Grand's room!"

He nodded. "She took all her personal things with her. Cleaned out the closet and the drawers. When she comes back she said she'll have a mover take her furniture to her new home in Pennsylvania and I'll make a trip over to Ringgold to get the rest of my stuff."

Sage's face lost all its color and her jaw set firmly. Her eyes went to the shotgun hanging above the mantel and back to him.

Lord, was he going to die on his second day on the ranch?

"It's just a bedroom, for God's sake!" he said.

"It's *her* room."

"I don't have cooties. And it's only for three weeks. And I like Miz Ada right well, but darlin', she ain't God. That place ain't holy."

She shrugged. He could see the gears working in her mind, trying to figure out ways to get rid

him. She could try her damndest, but he wasn't going anywhere.

He smiled. "Glad we got that straight. Are you making breakfast?"

"Hell, no!"

"Well, I am and I'm willing to make enough for two people and one scraggly old mutt. Pancakes a right? There's sausage in the fridge and I make a mean pancake."

She nodded. "That dog really doesn't belong to you? Tell me the truth."

"One thing a Riley does whether it's painful or not is tell the truth. We're honest, hardworking, and we state what's on our mind. The answer is no ma'am. That dog does not belong to me. I'd never see him before he ran around my legs and shot into the house, but I guess he's adopted us."

Us!

There wasn't going to be an *us* no matter what her grandmother said or did. She didn't care if Creed had a halo under that thick brown hair and wings tucked up under his flannel shirt; he was not going to take over the Rockin' C.

The dog whimpered and sat up when he smelled the pancakes cooking in the big cast iron skillet. He stood up, yawned, and rested his head on Sage's knee. She wasn't going to pet the critter, and he was going outside right after breakfast. There was no way that ugly thing was staying in the house, and she was not changing her mind—right up until he looked at her with big brown eyes, whined, and wagged his tail.

She scratched his ears and decided maybe he could stay in the house until the storm passed and the sun came out. Grand had probably arranged for him to appear in the blizzard knowing that Sage couldn't throw him out to freeze. She'd been trying for years to bring a pet into her granddaughter's life. But Sage didn't want anything or anyone that would abandon her again.

She didn't even remember her father, who had been killed in some kind of black ops mission when she was two years old, but there had always been a gaping hole in her heart that wanted a dad. Her mother had moved home to the canyon so that Grand could help with the toddler and then she missed a curve coming home from work one night when Sage was four. The hole got bigger. And now Grand had forsaken her too. She damn sure didn't need a dog or a cat or even a hamster to remind her of just how big that black hole in her soul could get.

Creed piled three pancakes up on a plate and put them on the kitchen table. "Ladies first. I'll fix a couple for the new pet and then make mine."

Sage pushed herself up from the rocking chair and stretched, bending from side to side and ending with a roll of the neck that produced a loud cracking noise. "Thank you, but that miserable excuse for a dog is not my pet."

"Did that hurt?"

"What? Popping my neck?"

Creed grinned and his eyes twinkled. "No, ma'am. That probably felt good. I was talking about hurting to say thank you."

The worst blizzard the canyon had seen in her lifetime looked like it would go on for three days past eternity. She was stuck in a house with no electricity and a cowboy she didn't know and didn't even want to like. And he was sexy as the devil when he grinned.

"Yes, it did. I speak my mind too, Creed," she said.

Grand had been talking about selling the ranch for years, but it had all been a ploy to make her find

husband and settle down, raise a canyon full of kids, and be happy. The old girl could never get through her thick Indian skull that Sage didn't need a man to provide happiness. Her paint palette and easel did that job just fine.

Her cell phone rang as she smeared butter on her pancake. She recognized the ringtone as the one she'd assigned to her grandmother and jumped up so fast that her chair flipped over backwards. She didn't even take the time to set it upright but dived for her purse, which was still on the credenza.

They called it a credenza but it was really the bottom half of an old washstand that had belonged to Grand's grandmother. The bow that held the towel had long since broken off and probably burned in the fireplace, but the rest of the burlled oak washstand was still as sturdy as the day it was made. She fished the phone from her purse and hiked a hip on the edge of the credenza as she answered it.

"Hello, Grand," she said breathlessly.

"Well, you did make it home," her grandmother said through a buzz of steady static. "Looks like the blizzard is messing with the lines. Just wanted to be sure you were safe."

"Grand, what have you done?"

Grand giggled. "I told you I'd sell when I felt like the time and the buyer were right. Well, Creed Riley walked up on the porch and I knew it was time. I could feel it in my bones and it was even a woman that his name starts with a C. He agreed to keep the Rockin' C brand, so that was another good sign. I gave him a good deal and he took it. Live with it or move out here with me."

Sage shouted into the phone, "To Pennsylvania in the mountains! No thank you!"

"I love it. Wasn't sure I would, but it's beautiful. And me and Essie are doing just fine in this big old barn of a house she's got. I'm going to take care of the two old milk cows and we've got this little fruit stand out in front of the house where we'll sell stuff in the summertime. And the neighbors stop in every day to buy what milk we want to sell."

"All that will wear off before long," Sage told her.

"I don't think so. I knew when I looked into Creed's eyes that he was the one. My sense never failed me. And Essie needs me. She's getting feeble, Sage. You are cutting in and out so bad that I'm hanging up now..."

The phone went dead in her hands before she could say good-bye.

Sage redialed but got the no service message again. She picked up the landline and got nothing. It was going to be a long day.

Chapter 2

Sage painted when she was sad. She painted when she was happy. She painted when she was nervous and she painted when she was antsy, like she was that morning.

Her supplies had been stored in the bunkhouse when she finished the last canvas and headed to Denver and Cheyenne to the two showings. There weren't many days in a year when she couldn't paint outside. Sometimes spring rains kept her inside, but that wasn't every single day. And bitter cold didn't last long in the wintertime, but the way the snow kept falling, it looked like it might go on unto eternity.

She finished the pancakes, drank two more cups of coffee, and started toward her bedroom to hang her heavy coveralls out of the closet. She could stoke up a fire in the bunkhouse and do her painting there. She weighed the consequences. If she escaped to the bunkhouse, Creed would think he had run her off. This was her house, not his. Or she could ignore him and show him exactly who the boss of the Rockin' C was.

She might have to share space with him, but that did not mean she had to talk to him. Knowing his name was enough, and she'd have been quite happy not even to know that much. She could have referred to him as "hey, you" or simply "cowboy" for three weeks.

"What are you doing the rest of the day?" he asked.

She turned around in the middle of the living room. "I'm going to get my supplies out of the bunkhouse, take a shower, and then paint until the light fades so much I can't see. And FYI, cowboy, I do not like people to talk to me while I'm painting."

"In cold water?"

Was he stupid or what? An idiot knew you didn't paint in water.

He grinned. "Are you going to take a shower in cold water?"

Dammit! Why couldn't he have one of those big toothy grins that turned a woman off? Oh, no. Grand had to leave her with a cowboy who had a smile so sexy that it lit up the whole universe.

"The hot water tank runs on propane. Grand thinks a total electric house is a joke. The trick to having a hot shower is to keep the generator that runs the well pump filled with gas. That means twice a day and I like hot water enough to do it myself if you don't want to."

If anyone had told her two days ago that she'd be explaining the workings of her home to a complete stranger, she would have thought they were crazy. Never in her wildest dreams did she think Grand would ever go this far in selling the ranch. But it happened and it hurt to admit it, but his green eyes were mesmerizing, his pancakes were good, he was good to the dog, and when he grinned her heart gave a hitch in the beating process. She'd bet dollars to cow patties that if there were kids around they'd flock to him like flies on the kitchen table in the summertime. That must have been what Grand saw in him when he appeared on the porch.

Grand might have enough clout with God to get Him to send the storm to the canyon so Sage would have no choice but to spend days and days with the cowboy, but Ada Presley had met her match. Sage had three whole weeks to fire up her temper and work on her arguments.

"What are you going to do with yourself all day long?" she asked.

“Read until chore time and then afterwards read until bedtime.”

“What are you reading?”

“I got a whole pile of books in my bedroom.”

That is Grand’s bedroom. Like I said before, don’t get too comfortable, Creed Riley.

He stacked the breakfast dishes on the cabinet. “They’ll wait until after lunch and then we’ll run sink full to do dishes.”

“We?” she asked.

“I understand you don’t cook. Some women don’t. But darlin’, you can damn sure help with the dishes. If you don’t know how to do that, I will teach you.”

“Don’t you get all high-handed with me, cowboy.”

He held up his palms and took a deep breath.

“Hey, what do you say that we start over? Hello, Sage Presley. I am Creed Riley. Your grandmother, Ada Presley, is selling me this house. She told me you’d pitch a fit and I realize it’s a shock to you but I will buy it. I can cook. I can take care of a ranch. Looks like we are stuck together in this house for a few days. What do you say we make the best of it?”

“Don’t look like we have much choice. I will try to be civil.”

A mistletoe cowboy and a dog so ugly that its face would stop an eight-day clock—her world had turned totally upside down.

Where in the hell had those words come from about her trying to be civil anyway? She didn’t want to play nice; she wanted to kill something.

The dog crossed the living room and sat down at her feet. “Grand’s wanted me to have a pet for years and I don’t want one. He’ll have to go to the dog pound in Claude soon as this storm lets us out of the canyon.”

The dog whimpered in disagreement and rolled over on his back.

“Do you know what’ll happen to him at the pound? No one will adopt something that looks like that. Can you imagine a little kid coming in and looking at that in the cage? Kid would cry and run the other way. He’d tell his momma that he’d do without a dog before he took that critter home. They won’t even wait the two weeks or however long it is before they put him down. First little kid he scares they’ll shoot him right between the eyes. You want that on your conscience, Sage? And just for the record, it’s not a boy dog. I just didn’t think anything that ugly could be a girl, and there’s more.”

“What?” Sage asked.

“If that dog ain’t pregnant then I’ll eat my socks.”

“Shit!” Sage mumbled. “I couldn’t let them kill a momma dog about to have puppies.”

“All that wiry hair and snow on her made her look like a fat old boy. But it’s a girl and she’s arrived with baggage. Hey, my coveralls are already wet with snow. Ain’t no use in you gettin’ layered up to go back out in the weather. Tell me what you want from the bunkhouse and I’ll bring it in while you shower. Then you can paint the rest of the day.”

“You’d do that?” she asked.

“We started all over. I wouldn’t have a little while ago when I was still mad because you were mean and before we found out we’re going to be grandparents.” He grinned.

“I was not mean! And that dog isn’t...” She stopped abruptly. “Thank you. My easel is in the corner. It folds up. Please bring the big black box beside it and as many stretched canvases as you can carry. It might take two trips.”

“You *were* mean. The dog *is*, and you *are* welcome. I’ll rap on the bathroom door between the trips in case you think of something else.”

The house was so small a cowboy couldn't cuss the pregnant dog without getting a hair in his mouth. And Creed didn't feel like spending his days in so much tension that a machete couldn't cut through it, so making nice was the only other alternative.

He'd been engaged. He knew women could be temperamental, and from what he had heard, artists were the worst of the lot. A trip thirty yards out back to the bunkhouse wasn't too big a price to pay for a nice quiet peaceful afternoon. Besides, when she got over the shock of the whole idea, Sage might be a right good neighbor. She was already coming around. It might take a while before she was ready to roll over on her back like the dog, but hey, a few more pancakes and a miracle or two and who knew what would happen. It was the Christmas season, snow and all. A miracle could happen.

He trudged through wet snow up to his ankles and broke a layer of ice from around the bunkhouse door to get it open. Once inside he located the easel and the black toolbox. He tucked the easel under his arm, picked up the box, and started back toward the house. The temperature kept falling steadily and the snow stung when it hit his face. He should've put the face mask back on, but he'd figured it would be a fast trip.

Sage was standing in the kitchen when he shoved the door open. She wore a chocolate brown sweatshirt with paint smudges all over it. Her hair was still wet and pulled up into a ponytail, and all her makeup had been washed away.

The sweet smell of soap blended with the aroma of burning logs and coffee and he had the sudden urge to bury his face in her dark hair, just to get a better whiff of her shampoo. Tall women had never attracted him and he'd never been particularly drawn to brunettes with brown eyes, but Sage Presley was a beautiful woman. One that probably had no time at all for a rough-edged cowboy who was gun shy when it came to commitments.

He set the paint box on the kitchen table and rested the easel against the wall. "That was a quick shower."

"You don't linger when it takes a generator to keep the hot water coming," she told him. "Thanks for bringing that stuff in for me. I paint outside as often as I can so I can get the light just right."

"And in the winter?"

"In the house mostly, but I store my stuff in the bunkhouse. Like you said, the house is small and it's not that far to go to get what I want. At least it isn't when there's not a blizzard blowing outside. I appreciate you going after my stuff so I can work," she said.

"Does that mean you'll put in a good word with Miz Ada for me?"

"Hell, no! I'm going to do my damndest to talk her out of selling the ranch. Does that mean you won't go get my canvases?"

He shook his head. "It doesn't mean that at all. I said I'd get your things so you can work and I'll do it. A Riley does not go back on his word. You just watch over Miz Chris."

"Miz Chris?" Sage asked.

"You know, our new pet. Chris for Christmas since she came to us during the season and all," he said.

"That's a girl's name, not a dog's name."

"She is a girl. I ain't never seen a boy dog yet with puppies wiggling around in his belly," Creed said. "And both of my dogs have girl names—Reba and Wynonna."

"Noel," she said.

He ran a hand down his cheeks to cover up the victory smile.

He'd forced her to name the animal and now it would belong to her. She could take it and all the puppies to her trailer when Miz Ada had one hauled into the canyon in a few weeks. And his two hunting dogs wouldn't be mad at him for letting another mutt live in the house when they had to stay outside.

Merry Christmas to Sage!

"Noel it is. I like that better than Chris anyway," he said. "I'm getting too warm with all the clothes on inside the house. Easel and paints are here. Now one more trip for canvases. How many and anything else?"

"I'll take as many as you can carry, and bring that gallon of turpentine, please. It's sitting against the far wall beside where the easel was."

Snow blew in as he left, so she grabbed the broom and swept it into the dustpan along with the piece of mistletoe that had fallen off his shoulder earlier. She dumped the icy water into the kitchen sink and turned on the water to flush both dirt and snow down the drain. And there were two sprigs of mistletoe left in the wake.

Grand would find some kind of omen or magic in the fact that Creed had had mistletoe on his shoulder and that he'd tracked even more inside. But it just meant that the wind had blown a bunch from the top of a scrub oak tree and it had stuck to him. There was no reading a happily-ever-after in a couple of sprigs of mistletoe.

She peeled a paper towel from the wooden roller beside the toaster and dabbed at the green leaves and berries before placing the sprigs on the windowsill. If he kept hauling it in with every trip outside she wouldn't have to climb a scrub oak for a bunch to hang up with the holiday decorations.

That turned her thoughts toward putting up the tree, the lights around the barn, and all the other decorations. She'd have the whole house decorated when Grand came home on Christmas Eve. There was no way in hell Grand could sign the ranch over to a stranger when she saw the tree and the sparkling lights. They'd remind her of all the good times that had gone on during Christmas on the ranch and any notion of selling would be gone.

And then there was the three weeks with Aunt Essie. That woman was an old sweetheart, but she could drive a person to whiskey if they had to live in the same house with her. Her house at that! She was so set in her ways that the biggest John Deere tractor on the market couldn't budge her. And Grand was just as set in hers. Aunt Essie's house might be nothing but splinters and chunks of age-old linoleum at the end of three weeks because the two sisters argued and fought about everything. One thing was for sure: when Grand got off that airplane in Amarillo, she would be tearing up anything that she and Creed might have signed before she left. And Sage would never hear any bullshit about selling the ranch again.

Creed took so long that she went to the kitchen window and squinted, but the snow blew so hard against the window that she couldn't see a blessed thing. Then a bright red cardinal flew up and sat on the windowsill. It stared through the glass pane as if begging for just a little bit of the warmth to take the chill off his fluffed-up feathers.

"Can't do it, bird. The dog forced her way in, but you'd be really unhappy in the house," she said.

The cardinal took flight and the snow swallowed him up. She looked at the clock. If Creed wasn't back in five more minutes she was going to suit up in her coveralls and go find him. He could have slipped and fallen. He could be lying out there halfway from the bunkhouse to the kitchen door with a broken leg, freezing to death.

Well, that would definitely solve the dilemma of selling the ranch.

Grand's whisper was so clear that she jumped and looked around the kitchen. In that instant, Sage

convinced herself that Grand hadn't left at all, but there was no one there.

"I don't want him dead. I just don't want things to change," she said aloud.

The kitchen door swung open and the room filled up with Creed Riley. Cowboy, attitude, and force all combined together to make the whole house seem smaller. Snow drifted in behind him before he could shut the door with the heel of his boot. He set the turpentine on the table and lined the canvas up on the floor with their backs to the wall.

"That enough?" he asked. "Speak now or forever hold your peace because once I take these covers off I don't plan on putting them back on until time to feed this evening."

She counted eight in various sizes. "More than enough. That should keep me busy for weeks."

He hung up his hat, brushed the snow from his face, and unzipped his coveralls. When they were removed for the second time that day, he kicked off his boots and left them on the rug beneath the coatrack.

"Well, let's hope the weather lets up before you get them all painted or we'll be covered up in it. It turned even wetter; it's coming down so hard that you can't see your hand in front of your face and the wind is bitter cold." He talked as he peeled out of the outer clothing yet again. "I'm worried about the cattle, and I'm very glad that your grandmother had the foresight to bring them all into the feedlot right behind the barn before the storm hit."

"She's smart that way. She says it's her Indian blood. We don't get this kind of weather very often but Grandpa got prepared for it. That's why there's a row of cedar trees on each side of the feedlot. They break the wind and the snow coming from the north in the winter and the hard south winds in the summer. If we get as much as the weatherman is saying we will, there'll only be a couple of inches on the feedlot and the cattle will tromp that down pretty quick. They'll be cold, but they won't be standing in it up to their udders," Sage laughed.

Her face lit up like a Christmas tree when she smiled, but her laughter wasn't a girl's giggles. It was a full-fledged woman's laugh that echoed through the whole house and sounded even prettier than any good country music song.

"And that is funny why?"

"I love my grandmother, but she excuses everything by saying it's her Indian voodoo. She can smell a storm on the way, and if it doesn't arrive, then it bypassed us, but it didn't mean that she couldn't smell it. That kind of thing," she said.

"Well, whatever voodoo she has, I'm glad she's got the cows in one small enclosure and that they can huddle up under the shed roof on the back of the barn for a little protection." He kicked another piece of mistletoe with his toe as he started through the kitchen.

He picked it up and she reached for it. "I'll take that."

It was twice as big as the other pieces. Grand would say that was because she wasn't being mean anymore.

"Where are you going to set up to paint?" he asked.

She pointed. "Right there in front of the living room window to the left of the fireplace."

"What are you going to paint?"

She shrugged. After that comment about Indian voodoo she couldn't tell him her deepest painting secret. That she depended on her painting gods to give her inspiration and that she respected them enough to paint what they offered.

"I'm going to paint a picture of that kitchen window with a bright red cardinal on the outside ledge looking in. While you were gone one lit there and looked like he wanted to come inside."

"Smart bird. It's terrible out there. How in the world did you ever get home? The last report I g

before the electricity went out was that all roads into the canyon were going to be closed.”

“They were just putting up the sawhorses and signs when I drove up. I shimmied around them and kept on driving. The men weren’t real happy with me, but I wanted to be home, not holed up in a motel somewhere. I didn’t have to worry about oncoming traffic.”

“It was stupid! You were lucky to get here.”

“I’m a damn good driver.”

“Didn’t say that. I said that driving down that twisting steep incline wasn’t too smart.”

The dog raised her head and yipped.

“Guess she don’t want us to fight,” Creed said.

“Guess she don’t get to make the calls,” Sage shot back.

“I’ll put a pot of soup on for lunch and then I’m going to have a hot shower to warm up my bones.”

“You are changing the subject. Besides, the meat is frozen and the microwave runs on electricity so you can’t thaw anything out that way,” she reminded him.

“I took hamburger out of the freezer yesterday when I heard about the storm moving in. And you ma’am, I am changing the subject. I don’t like to argue and fight. I got plenty of that growing up with a house full of brothers.”

“Why do you cook?” she asked.

“Why don’t you?” he fired back at her.

She frowned. “Because Grand does a good job of it and I didn’t need to learn. Your turn.”

“Because Momma said so. Seven boys make for a lot of work. So she made us all learn to cook and we had to do our own laundry and ironing after our twelfth birthday.”

“Seven!” She carried the easel to the living room and set it up close to the window beside the fireplace.

He sat down in the rocking chair nearest the fire and shoved his feet toward the warmth. “You hear me right and I didn’t stutter. Seven boys. She really wanted a daughter, you see. But she got three boys in about four years right after she and Daddy married. She waited a few years and tried again and got another boy, Ace. Waited a few more years and decided to give it another try. And got three more boys for her efforts. Me, Dalton, and Blake. She spoils her daughters-in-law and her granddaughters these days.”

“I always wanted a brother or sister,” she said.

The words were out and she couldn’t put them back, but she wished she hadn’t said them. She didn’t want to share anything with Creed. That just led down a pathway that only ended in pain.

She chose a sixteen-by-twenty-inch stretched canvas. That would be the perfect size for a window painting. She looked at the kitchen window and her gods smiled on her that morning. For the briefest moment the snow blew in circles creating an angel in the upper part of the window.

Sage was known for her Western paintings that portrayed hidden animals in the rock formations of the canyon. She painted in earthy tones of umber, sienna, and ocher. But today she’d been given a new path: an angel looking down on a little red cardinal who studied three pieces of mistletoe lying on the sill just inside the window. She wanted to capture the cold and the way the bird eyed the mistletoe. She could hardly contain the excitement of something new and original as she set up the canvas and unlocked the paint box.

“What did you see?” Creed asked.

“What makes you think I saw anything?”

“You looked at the window and something changed in your face. All I saw was snow and mistletoe but you saw something more,” he said.

"I saw a cardinal," she said.

~~It was the truth. She had seen a cardinal earlier.~~

"Must've blinked at the wrong time. I didn't see it."

Sage could feel his eyes on her as she sketched and it created an itchy feeling like she'd been too close to poison ivy. She knew the very minute that he went to sleep. Trusting soul, he was, sleeping when she could easily get to the shotgun hanging over the fireplace or to the knives in the kitchen drawer.

The picture she was about to paint was etched firmly in her mind and she'd sketched in the beginning lines. So she stopped, sat down in the chair next to Creed, and stared at him.

Know thy enemy, is it? Grand's voice whispered.

She whipped around to look behind her and set the rocking chair in motion. She expected the squeaking rocker to wake Creed, but he didn't move.

That's right. I'll get to know him and find the very weakness that will run him off this ranch. You will not go through with this deal, Grand, she argued.

Thick dark lashes fanned out on his angular cheeks that sported a day's worth of black scruff. He was one of those men who had to shave every day and twice if he was going somewhere that night. He reminded her of her friend, Lawton Pierce, who owned the biggest spread in the whole canyon. Like Creed, Lawton had dark hair and long lashes and a beard. They could have easily been cousins, but Sage didn't give a rat's ass if he was Lawton's long lost younger brother and they'd been cut from the same tanned leather cowhide. She still wasn't going to like him.

Creed wiggled and sighed. She sure didn't want him to catch her staring at him, so she stood up so fast that she got a head rush. Her chair sounded like a bird chirping as it flipped back and forth several times. But then he settled back into a deep sleep and she sat back down. She had the strangest urge to run her fingers through all that dark hair and see if it was as soft as it looked. Would he be a tender lover or a demanding one? Would his kisses build a fire in her or would they turn her completely off?

Now where did that come from? I've only just met him and I'm determined that he won't be here more than three weeks, so there will be no kisses or sex. Besides, Grand would have a pure old hissy if she found out I'd slept with a man in this house, she thought.

"I couldn't face her," she whispered.

"You talkin' to me or the dog?" he asked without opening his eyes.

"I was just muttering while I decide how to paint that picture over there," she said.

His eyes opened slowly and he sat up straight. "Guess I'd best put the soup on if it's going to be done by dinnertime. That and a skillet of corn bread should do for dinner and supper both, right?"

"I'll make the corn bread," she said.

"You don't cook," he reminded her.

"I lied. I can cook. I just don't enjoy it. Grand made me learn enough to survive and I make a mean skillet of corn bread and the best Christmas sugar cookies in the whole canyon."

"You lied! What else did you lie about?"

Dammit! Was it a real lie if a person just omitted details?

"I saw the cardinal, but it was earlier in the day," she said.

"That all?"

She squinted at him and set her mouth in a firm line. "Did you tell any lies this morning? About the dog, maybe?"

"I did not. Your grandmother didn't say a word about a dog on the place and mine are registered redbone hounds. Two of them, Reba and Wynonna. They sure don't look like that mutt. So one more

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