



A Haunting Story of Forbidden Love

NOCTURNE



SYRIE JAMES

*Bestselling Author of *The Lost Memoirs of Jane Austen**



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Praise for the work of SYRIE JAMES

Dracula, My Love

“This tale about a fierce, forbidden romance will appeal to even the most jaded romance fan.”

—*Library Journal*

“A truly remarkable love story that keeps the reader glued to every page.”

—*Feathered Quill*

“Very romantic . . . powerfully sensuous . . . masterfully told.”

—*Single Title Reviews*

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“James takes the biography of Brontë and sketches it into a work of art. A can’t-miss novel for Brontë fans and historical fiction buffs alike.”

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—*Wichita Falls Times Record Review*

ALSO BY SYRIE JAMES:

Dracula, My Love:
The Secret Journals of Mina Harker
The Secret Diaries of Charlotte Brontë
The Lost Memoirs of Jane Austen

NOCTURNE



SYRIE JAMES

 Vanguard Press
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*I dedicate this book to
all my readers—every single one of you.
Thank you for your support,
the blogs and reviews you write,
and the wonderful messages you send me,
sharing all the ways in which my novels
have touched you.
It means the world to me,
and inspires me more than I can say.*

CHAPTER 1



IT BEGAN SNOWING AT NINE. Delicate flakes were still sifting down two hours later as Nicole Whitcomb reluctantly loaded her carry-on suitcase and small backpack into her rental car and slammed the trunk. She took one last second to appreciate the hushed descent of the gentle white flakes against the iron gray sky and to drink in the picturesque view of the snow-capped hotel against the backdrop of the ski slopes and surrounding forest.

I wish I could live here, Nicole thought for the hundredth time, as she inhaled deeply the crisp, pine-scented mountain air. She hated to leave all this beauty to go back to the city, and to the stress and tedium of her job. After brushing off the accumulation of snow from her front and back windshield, she unlocked the car, slipped behind the wheel, knocked the snow off her fur-lined boots, and started the engine.

Nicole knew she had to hurry. The weather report had said a big storm was coming in to the Steamboat Springs area. When she'd called the Denver airport, however, they said it was sunny and clear, and assured her that her flight to San Jose was departing as scheduled. She figured it shouldn't take more than forty-five minutes up the mountain road to reach Rabbit Ears Pass, the first of seven summits en route. All the roads were open, so after that it should be an easy three-hour drive to Denver.

It was cold inside the car and Nicole shivered as she turned on the windshield wipers, heater, and defroster. Leaving on her fuzzy light blue scarf and hat, she strapped on her seat belt, exited the parking lot, and drove through the quaint Steamboat Springs ski village. There was a good two feet of snow on the ground in the uncleared areas, but so far only a light dusting on the road. Even so, as she turned onto Highway 40 and headed south, she carefully moderated her speed. It had been awhile since she'd driven in these conditions.

It was her first time in Colorado, a place she'd always longed to visit—and it was as beautiful as she'd imagined it would be. She'd always loved the snow. During the years she'd lived in Seattle, she'd had been a hop, skip, and jump to the nearest ski area, and she couldn't count how many delightful hours she'd spent on the slopes with her friends. Since she moved back to California three years ago, however, she'd given up all that.

At the thought of that move and the reason behind it, Nicole's stomach knotted with anxiety. The memory of that awful day and all that happened afterward still filled her with self-recrimination and doubt. Would she ever be able to forget?

Nicole frowned, shoving the thought away, determined not to let it spoil her mood. She'd just spent a wonderful long weekend with dear friends she hadn't seen in years. When her best friend, Chloe, had announced her intention to have a ski resort wedding, Nicole had laughed at first—the idea had

seemed ludicrous and impractical—but in the end it had been fabulous.

~~The wedding had taken place high atop a ski slope at Steamboat Springs, with the bridal party in formal wear and everyone on skis. After the ceremony, most of the people had ridden the chairlift back down, but Nicole—on a dare from one of the groomsmen—had blithely skied down the mountain. It had involved tucking her long bridesmaid's dress into her thermal leggings, which Chloe had laughingly insisted was scandalous and beneath the dignity of a twenty-nine-year-old woman. But Nicole hadn't cared; she couldn't resist the challenge.~~

The newlyweds and most of the other guests had left after two days, but Nicole stayed one more day to go skiing on her own—and what a blast it had been! Sailing down a white mountain with the crisp air in her face always felt like heaven. She couldn't wait to show the pictures to her coworkers and the kids at the museum and the library that weekend.

The car had warmed up now. Nicole removed her hat and gloves, glancing briefly in the rearview mirror to smooth back her long, wavy, reddish-gold hair. She'd left the town of Steamboat Springs far behind. The snow was falling faster. Nicole increased the speed of the windshield wipers, focusing her attention on the road. For the first time, she began to wonder if she'd made a mistake in staying the extra day. The drive back to Denver would have been so much easier yesterday, when the weather had been clear.

The road began to climb through a wooded area now. Nicole had read that the highway gained an incredible 2,500 feet in about seven miles during this stretch, as it made its way up the side of the Gore Range through Routt National Forest toward the pass. The view here should be expansive, but instead it was obscured by low, dark clouds.

Nicole felt another stab of worry as she crept along. She'd been lucky to rent a car with four-wheel drive, but it wouldn't help if she encountered black ice. Worse yet, it was becoming more and more difficult to see. The storm had come in way faster than she'd expected. The wind howled. There had been a couple of cars behind her at the beginning, but they'd long since disappeared from view, and she'd only passed a few cars coming the other way.

Should I turn back? Nicole wondered. She didn't want to get stuck on this road in the middle of a blizzard—but she couldn't miss her flight. She'd already been gone five days, and she'd left a ton of work on her desk. She had to relieve the neighbor taking care of her cat. She didn't want to pay for another night's lodging or go through the hassle of changing her airline ticket. No, she decided; she'd press on. The hotel desk clerk had been confident that she'd be over the pass and out of this weather system before she knew it.

On the drive up, Nicole had made a point of looking for the sign marking the summit of Rabbit Ear Pass at 9,426 feet, announcing the precise location of the Continental Divide—the line that ran from northwestern Canada along the crest of the Rocky Mountains all the way to Mexico, and divided the flow of water between the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. Nicole remembered smiling when she'd caught sight of the gray rock formation on a forested peak to the north, for which the pass was named. When viewed from a certain angle, the formation did sort of resemble the ears of a rabbit. But she knew that the summit was still more than a dozen miles ahead. At the rate she was crawling, it could take almost an hour to reach it.

Nicole used the snowbank at the right side of the highway as her guide, staying just a few feet inside it. At a sharp crook in the road she reduced her speed even further, carefully navigating around the bend. Through the swirling flakes in the air, the steep, snow-covered slope on the north side of the road was partially visible.

Suddenly a loud crack erupted from above, followed by a low hissing sound. *What on earth was*

that? Nicole wondered, alarmed, instinctively pressing on the accelerator and speeding forward. The hissing behind her grew louder, turning into an ominous, growing rumble. Glancing into the rearview mirror, Nicole was shocked to see an enormous slab of snow slide off the mountainside in a great rushing torrent and cover the entire road behind her.

An avalanche! she thought in terror. If she'd been driving any more slowly, it would have buried her.

There was no turning back now, Nicole realized, even if she'd wanted to. With her heart in her throat, she continued up the road, crawling on for what seemed like a century. The highway soon leveled off. The harsh wind stirred up snow from the drifts below that mingled in a frenzy with the flakes falling from the sky. Snow was smacking against the windshield at such a furious rate that the wiper blades couldn't keep up. Nicole struggled to see through a gathering veil of white.

The highway was covered by at least six inches of snow now, and it was growing deeper by the minute. She had to get over the pass—and soon—before this turned into a total whiteout. She pressed harder on the gas and forged on, holding tight to the wheel.

The accident happened so quickly. One minute, Nicole was driving along under perfect control; the next instant, the road was slipping out from under her and the car was spinning into a terrifying right-hand slide. In a panic, she jammed on the brakes and jerked the wheel to the left, even as her brain shouted, *No, stupid, that's the wrong thing to do* and to her horror, it only made things worse.

The car skidded and then hurled itself off the road into the embankment. A scream tore from Nicole's throat as the entire world turned upside down. A shattering pain spiraled through her head as it slammed against something hard. There was a jarring crunch, an explosion of glass, another crunch, and then the rolling stopped and the world righted itself again.

Nicole sat unmoving, dazed and confused, her head pounding. She struggled to get her bearings. She was still seat-belted and sitting upright. A bitterly cold wind blew in through her shattered side windows. Her lap and the interior of the car were strewn with small, scattered fragments of glass. The windshield was still intact but heavily damaged with a spider web of cracks, and the view was obscured by snow and pine branches. From what she could make out, the car had landed beneath a tree.

Okay, she told herself. It's not as bad as it looks. You ran off the road, but you're still alive.

There were no cuts on her hands, but she felt an oozing from the left side of her throbbing temple and touched it. Her fingers came away smeared with blood. *Blood*. Panic spiraled through her and she gasped aloud, extending her hand as far as humanly possible from her face. *Blood*. She couldn't look at it. The sight made her stomach churn. The pounding in her skull increased, as the horror came flooding back. *Blood. Blood everywhere. Blood pouring onto the bed and covering the floor . . . She was bleeding. From the head. Stop the blood. Stop it. Now!*

Glancing around frantically for her purse and a tissue, she gave up and grabbed her neck scarf instead, pressing it firmly against her forehead. *What should I do?* she wondered, fighting down the panic, struggling to think despite the throbbing in her head. *Call 911?* Woozily, she retrieved her cell phone one-handed from her coat pocket and cursed. No signal.

The faint hum of a car engine made her tense with anticipation : was someone coming? No, she decided, disappointed; it was just her own motor idling. She snapped on her flashers but couldn't see any evidence that they were working. She tried to open her car door, but it wouldn't budge. Peering out through her broken side window, she realized that the car had sunk so deeply into the snowbank that it was half buried. The only way to get out was through the window. But—did she *want* to get out? Her head was bleeding. There was no way she could dig the car out and get it back on the road.

And where would she go on foot? She was in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by a nation forest. As far as she knew, no one lived here; it was all government-owned land. The road behind her was blocked by an avalanche. Who knew how many miles it was to the pass up ahead, much less to the next town? She couldn't recall seeing any call boxes on the road, and even if she could find one, how long would she last out in the blizzard? Visibility was poor and getting worse. She wasn't sure she could properly judge distance or direction; she might walk off the road and become hopelessly lost.

Better to stay in the car, she decided, and pray that someone would come along—however unlikely that might be. She gave the horn a few sharp blasts, and then leaned on it long and hard, but the sound was muffled by the roar of the wind. With a sigh, she gave up. What was the point? Who was going to hear a horn out here?

Nicole shivered. She considered leaving the engine running to keep the heater on, but realized she could never keep the car warm with snow blowing in through the open windows. She turned off the ignition, leaving the key in place, knowing that it was going to get very cold, very fast. Why did she feel so light-headed?

Still pressing the scarf against her forehead, Nicole leaned back against the seat and closed her eyes against the excruciating pain. Her thoughts drifted. She was dizzy. So dizzy. Disconnected images flitted through her mind: the blue-green gleam of her tabby cat's eyes; the potted red Anthurium on her apartment windowsill; her friends' laughing faces over nachos and frosty margaritas; building a sand castle on a sunny beach with her darling nieces; the giddy, gap-toothed grin of a little Native Alaskan girl.

No, Nicole thought desperately, *stay awake. Stay conscious.* Her last thought, as she felt her hand drop uselessly to her side, was:

Is this it? Am I going to die?

CHAPTER 2



HE WAS ABOUT A QUARTER MILE above the main highway, plowing his private road to keep ahead of the storm, when he heard the approaching vehicle. Through the methodical *whap whap whap* of the truck's windshield wipers, he stared down through the snowy gloom, waiting for the car to appear below. Who the hell was idiotic enough to drive in these conditions?

With a squeal of brakes, a small white sport utility vehicle sped around the curve of the highway and into view. It looked brand-new—perhaps a rental—an out of townner from the ski resort, no doubt. To his dismay, the car suddenly fishtailed into a perilous slide, skidded off the white ribbon of highway, then rolled over and crunched faceup against a tree in the snowy embankment.

Bollocks, he thought, staring down through the swirling storm at the half-buried car. The distance and heavy snowfall made it impossible for even his keen eyes to ascertain who was behind the wheel or how many people were in the vehicle, but he could see that the impact had damaged the roof and windshield and had blown out the driver's side window.

He forged ahead with his plow, shoving snow off to the side of his road as he drove down the hill toward the highway. The snow was so deep around the stranded SUV that there was no way its occupants could open the doors. He watched to see if anyone would try to get out through the windows, but there was no sign of movement. Was the driver unconscious? Or dead?

The car's horn beeped a few times, followed by a long retort.

Okay. Not dead. Trapped? Injured? Staying inside to keep warm?

As he urged his truck down the hill, irritation prickled within him. It certainly wasn't the first time there'd been an accident on this stretch of road in winter, but in the past, emergency services had come along and saved the day. That wasn't going to happen this time. From the look of things, the storm was going to be a nightmare. He'd just heard about an avalanche on the road to the west on the police scanner. The car must have just gotten through. They were closing the pass in the other direction due to heavy snowfall. It could be days before the storm ended and the county got around to clearing the roads. That car would be stuck there the entire time.

He told himself that it wasn't his problem. If he went down there, he'd have to invite up whoever was in that car—and *he'd* be stuck with them for days. It was the last thing he wanted. He'd never had a visitor in his home, if you didn't count Jhania—but he always made himself scarce on the days she came by. He'd worked hard to maintain his anonymity and his distance. He'd never met the people he did business with, and had no desire to. He was alone, as alone as it was possible to be—if you didn't count the two souls in the barn—and he liked it that way.

He had absolutely no wish to open his house to strangers. It might well be like opening Pandora's box. His sense of privacy and tranquility would be shattered, possibly forever. He wasn't equipped

host, much less feed, anyone. And more to the point, he thought bitterly, their safety would be in question every minute.

Could he exist with a person or persons in the house for days on end? Did he dare take that chance?

On the other hand, did he have any choice? It was only noon, but the temperature was already well below freezing and dropping fast. The entire car would be buried in snow in no time. Whoever was inside it would freeze to death.

With a disgusted sigh, he jammed down on the gas pedal, moving forward at a faster clip. At the end of his road he drove across the highway, clearing away the snow in front of him in an arc and pulling to a halt not far from the stranded vehicle.

Donning his hat and gloves, he yanked open the cab door to the howling wind and snow. He planted one booted foot down onto the black ice, then stepped out carefully. Grabbing his snow shovel from the back of the truck, he made his way to the edge of the road.

The snow in the embankment was waist high at least. He plunged down into the deep accumulation and waded through it, an exercise which no doubt would exhaust a normal person but merely irked him. The roof and hood of the half-submerged car was already shrouded in a quarter inch of new snow. He bent down by the driver's shattered window and peered inside.

A young woman sat behind the wheel, held upright by her seat belt, her head slumped to one side. The left half of her face was drenched in blood, which had left a crimson trail across her light blue scarf and was dripping onto her parka. The sight made him tense with alarm. He knocked sharply on the roof of the car and called out, but she didn't budge. She had just pressed the horn a few minutes before. Had she passed out? Or was she. . . ?

Working very rapidly with the shovel, he cleared away the snow from around the driver's door, yanked it open, and leaned inside, steeling himself against the heady scent of fresh blood which invaded his nostrils. A quick survey of the vehicle's interior confirmed that the woman was alone. The air bags had not deployed, no doubt because the car had rolled sideways in the accident instead of hitting something head-on.

He laid a hand on the woman's shoulder. "Miss? Miss?" he said urgently. "I'm . . . here to help you."

She didn't respond. He instinctively took her wrist and felt for a pulse—something he hadn't done on a human, he realized, in a very long time. He was surprised by the relief he felt when he found a steady beat. She wasn't wearing a wedding ring, he noticed. He heard and saw her regular and even respiration, and visually assessed her status. She probably had a concussion. Did she have a bleed inside her head? The only other things obviously wrong were a contusion on her left cheek and the blood flowing from the temple above it.

At the sight of all that blood he frowned in annoyance, fighting back the dark feelings it stirred within him. Quickly he withdrew a handkerchief from his pocket. Pressing it firmly against the wound, he studied her face. Even with blood splattered across half of it, she was pretty; beautiful, in fact, with a pale complexion and long, reddish-gold hair. She was young, perhaps in her mid-twenties. Who was she? Where was she from? What was her name?

Gazing at her, he was suddenly aware of a very different kind of attraction and desire, a sensation that startled him. It had been so long since he'd spent any real time around a woman, so long since he'd allowed himself to even remotely care about anyone for that matter, that he'd almost forgotten what it felt like. *Forget it*, he told himself. *It isn't going to happen.*

He briefly removed his handkerchief from her forehead and studied the wound: a small gash just below her hairline. Head wounds, no matter how tiny, always bled profusely, more so than any other

and this one was no exception. He could heal her cut rapidly and permanently right now, without leaving a mark, but how would he explain that away when—if—she awakened? No, he decided, he had to stick to traditional doctoring methods.

He uncoiled the scarf from her neck and tied it around her forehead to hold the handkerchief in place over the wound. The wind continued to howl, blowing in snow through the open car door. He had to get her out of this weather. Spotting the key in the ignition, he removed it and pocketed it. Unbuckling her seat belt, he brushed off the litter of safety glass from her lap, carefully lifted her out of the car, and carried her to his truck, blinking his eyes to keep out the wind-driven snow. Her weight was trivial. Despite her bulky parka, he could tell that she was slender and probably stood at about five feet eight.

He belted her into the passenger seat of the truck cab, then retrieved all the belongings he could find in her car. He'd only cleared half of his winding road so far, and he used that side to drive back up to the top of the hill.

Once inside the house, he removed her parka and laid her down on the sofa before the hearth in the great room, spreading a towel beneath her head and propping it with a pillow. Moving fast, he added more fuel to the fire, retrieved a clean T-shirt and a few other items he kept on hand, and returned to her side.

He unwrapped the blood-spattered scarf from her forehead. To his satisfaction the wound was staunch. After disinfecting the site, he placed a small butterfly bandage over it, then cut a long strip from the T-shirt and used it to tie a compress to her head. That should take care of it, he thought. Still, he was worried about possible internal bleeding.

He withdrew the penlight from his pocket, opened her eyes with his fingertips, and shone the light into them. Her eyes were a lovely shade of green. Her pupils were equal, round, and reactive. Good. No severe intracranial issues. He took her pulse again. Its strong beat and the color in her cheeks reassured him that there was no worry of internal bleeding anywhere else. She seemed stable. If all went well, she'd wake up soon with nothing more serious than a headache.

He went to fetch a bowl of warm water and a soft wash cloth. Crouching down beside her, he gently cleansed the blood from her face. He liked the subtle spray of freckles across her small, straight nose, the shape of her ears, and the gentle curve of her light red eyebrows. Her long, wavy hair spread out like a reddish-gold cape across the pillow beneath her, and invited his touch. She wasn't wearing any makeup and looked even prettier because of it.

As he worked—his body in such proximity to hers, his fingers grazing her warm flesh, the cloth soaking up her blood—the act felt very intimate. His eyes lingered on her mouth before moving to her throat. In the quiet of the room, the sound of her heartbeat thudded tantalizingly in his ears. Despite himself, his eyes traveled down her body. She was wearing a royal blue, V-neck sweater over a striped cotton shirt, tucked and belted into tight-fitting blue jeans that hugged her shapely figure. Her long legs, which disappeared into tall, insulated boots, were slender and perfectly proportioned.

Once again, a stirring welled within him, the pull of a physical attraction so powerful it made his nerve endings tingle. He silently cursed himself and stood up, exasperated, resisting the urge to slam the bloody bowl of water onto an end table. This was going to be even more difficult than he'd imagined. What happened to the sense of professional distance he'd once been so adept at? He was far too long out of practice.

Drawing a blanket up to her chin, he made a mental note to keep a careful distance between them while she was here, or the consequences might not be pretty.

CHAPTER 3



NICOLE'S HEAD THROBBED. She heard and smelled a crackling fire and could feel its warmth, but she couldn't see any flames. What had happened to her? It was dark, so dark that she couldn't see her hand in front of her face. Was she in a cave? A warm liquid oozed down her cheek. She was bleeding. No, she thought with equal horror, someone—or something—was bending over her, washing her face.

Nicole's heart began to pound in cadence with the violent drumming inside her skull. The dark figure moved away, but she could still hear it breathing, could sense its feral presence. It was a Thing. A beast. A monster. Terror snaked through her, setting her every nerve on edge. She wanted to move but she was paralyzed. She wanted to scream, but she couldn't make a sound. She was a fly caught in a spider's web. The Thing was going to kill her. She had to get away!

Nicole awoke with a start, her heart and head still pounding. Opening her eyes, she saw to her great relief that she was not in a dark cave, but gazing up at a light-filled, open beam, vaulted ceiling lined with a pale-colored wood. Turning her head, she discovered that she was lying on a comfortable leather couch, covered by a soft blanket, in someone's very spacious living room. *What a strange dream*, she thought in groggy confusion as she silently took in her surroundings. Where was she?

The room was decorated with a masculine flair. Assorted leather easy chairs were grouped around an oak coffee table with curved legs and an eclectic mix of hardwood tables that looked antique. A expensive-looking area rug stretched out atop a shining hardwood floor. On one side of the room stood a black grand piano, its shiny surface gleaming beneath a strategically placed lamp. On the other side was a gigantic flat screen TV. The rest of that wall was taken up by a massive stone fireplace. A fire burned brightly within, giving off a comforting heat. The entire place looked scrupulously clean and neat as a pin.

A man was bent over the fireplace, his back to her. He wore a dark green, long-sleeve shirt. Who was he?

Muted daylight shone in through a row of tall windows that reached the peaked, vaulted ceiling. A blizzard raged outside.

Then she remembered. The storm. The accident. *The blood.*

Nicole's hand went to her left temple. Her fingers encountered a strip of fabric wrapped and tied around her forehead. Some kind of bandage? She slowly sat up, an action that caused her head to throb even more painfully and the man to whip around in her direction.

"Don't touch that," he said abruptly.

His tone was so sharp that Nicole immediately dropped her hand to her lap. To her surprise he spoke with a refined British accent.

“My head hurts,” Nicole said, staring at the man’s scarred, brown leather boots, which peeked out from beneath his dark blue jeans.

“That’s to be expected.” Although his deep voice revealed concern, it seemed tempered by wariness and reserve. He stood a good eight feet away and made no move to come closer. “You received a rather nasty blow.”

Nicole looked up at the man’s face for the first time. An unexpected fluttering began in her stomach. He had lovely blue eyes and was extremely handsome—so good-looking, in fact, that Nicole couldn’t help but stare. He appeared to be in his mid-thirties and was about five feet ten, a couple inches taller than she was, with a lean, athletic build. His light brown hair was of medium length and combed back loosely from his forehead. The silver buckle that adorned his leather belt looked like an antique or something a cowboy might wear. But cowboys didn’t have British accents—did they? And they were always deeply tanned. This man’s complexion was fair.

“How long was I out?” Nicole asked.

“A couple of hours.”

“Oh my God, really?” She glanced at her watch and saw that it was after three. There was no way she’d make her flight now, unless she could teleport to Denver. “Is this your house?”

“Yes. What’s your name?”

“Nicole Whitcomb.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-nine.”

“Do you know what day it is?”

An odd question, she thought. “Monday, March 4th.” She touched her left cheek. It was tender but clean. *Had he washed her face and bandaged her?* The thought brought another flutter to her stomach. *If so, this gorgeous man was hardly a monster.* “Where are we, exactly? How did I get here?”

“Do you remember what happened to you?”

She recognized the intent of his questioning now, realized he was testing her to see if she was fully coherent. “Yes. One minute, I was in complete control of my car, and the next I was sliding off the road and flipping over. It was terrifying.”

He nodded as if her answers satisfied him. “Four-wheel drive doesn’t mean four-wheel stop. Black ice is a dangerous hazard, even if you have years of experience driving in these conditions. The accident happened on the highway just below my house. I saw it when I was out clearing my road.”

There was a captivating elegance to his speech and mannerisms that felt a little old-fashioned for a man so young. At the same time he seemed tense and aloof, as if for some reason he was deliberately holding himself in check, forcing himself to be polite.

“Clearing your road?” she asked. “How far is it down to the highway?”

“About a half mile.”

“Wow. That must take a pretty big shovel.”

He darted a glance at her, as if trying to decide whether or not she was kidding. “I hang a blade of snow from the front of my truck. Otherwise, I’d be snowed in all winter.”

“I figured.”

“Anyway, I found you. You’d passed out. I dug you out, brought you up here, and cleaned you up a little. Your scarf and parka are in the wash.” He stepped away with unhurried grace and lowered himself into an easy chair across the room—as far off, she noticed, as it was humanly possible to sit, although there were plenty of closer chairs.

“Thank you.” Nicole felt a jumble of contradictory emotions : a rush of gratitude to this tot

stranger who had saved her life; the light tingle of her attraction to him; and an overwhelming feeling of awkwardness. Although his words seemed to convey an interest in her well-being, his voice and body language implied otherwise. Whoever he was, despite all he'd done for her, she felt instinctively that he didn't want her here, that she was imposing on his privacy, that he'd rescued her against his will.

She wished she could leave immediately. But how? Her car was buried in a snowbank and it was blizzarding outside.

He studied her from where he sat. "Are you thirsty? Would you like a glass of water?"

"I'm okay, thanks."

"Do you feel dizzy? Nauseous? Any abdominal pain?"

"No. Just a headache."

"How bad is the headache? Moderate or severe?"

"Moderate. Are you a doctor?"

He hesitated. "No. But I've . . . studied first aid. Can you stand up? Touch your hand to your nose like this?"

She stood and mimicked the requested movement.

"Good. You appear to be fine. The headache should go away in a couple of hours."

She sat down, still ill at ease. "Thank you again for rescuing me and everything you've done to take care of me. I'm really sorry to be in your way, but—" She paused, hoping he would contradict her, but he didn't. "I'm very grateful. What kind of injury do I have? As I recall, my head was a bloody mess."

Her statement brought a brief, dark glimmer to his eyes that sent an unexpected chill up Nicole's spine. *What's that about?* she wondered. She had no reason to be afraid of this man. Did she?

"A small cut on your temple—nothing severe," he answered, his features resuming their prior complacency as he glanced away.

Nicole's heart began to beat erratically. She'd heard scary things about mountain men who'd lived too long in isolated places. Who was this guy? He seemed cultured and spoke very formally, as if he belonged in the Queen's court or in a palace surrounded by servants. What was an Englishman doing in this remote corner of the Colorado mountains, unless he was hiding from something? But if he was a killer, surely he would have murdered her already, instead of carefully tending to her wound. Wouldn't he?

"You haven't told me your name," she said, straining to keep her voice even.

"Haven't I? I beg your pardon. Michael Tyler."

"How is it that you live up here? I thought this was national forest land."

"It is. But there are pockets of private land scattered throughout. This property has been in my family since the 1860s, when my great-great-great grandfather homesteaded it, more than forty years before Theodore Roosevelt established the national forest."

"I see. But your accent. Aren't you from England?"

"I grew up in England."

"And you moved here...?"

"About twenty years ago, when I inherited the property."

"Twenty years ago?" He looked no older than thirty-five at most. Which meant he must have inherited the place when he was fifteen. "To emigrate all the way from England to this remote spot at such a young age—that's very brave and unusual."

"I wasn't so young," he said testily. "I was nineteen and ready for a change."

Okay, so he was older than he looked. "Do you live here all year long?"

“I do.”

“By yourself, or . . .”

“I live alone.”

Her questions seemed to annoy him. He stood up and Nicole sensed that he was about to leave the room. In an effort to lighten the mood—or maybe just to put herself more at ease—she glanced at the grand piano and said with a forced smile, “So I take it it’s either you who plays that piano, or the resident ghost?”

A surprised twinkle lit his blue eyes. He sat back down in his chair with the first hint of a smile. “Definitely the ghost. Watch out for her. She plays at the oddest hours and has been known to leave candles burning in the most unlikely places.”

“She?”

“A raven-haired beauty. From her clothing and hairstyle, I deduce that she’s from the previous century. Which is strange when you consider that I only built the house ten years ago.”

Nicole laughed. His smile was charming and only enhanced his good looks. His accent was so lovely, she could listen to it all day long. Maybe there was nothing to be afraid of after all; maybe he just wasn’t used to being around other people. “What do you do for a living out here, Michael?”

“Various things.”

“Such as?”

“I write, I make things.”

Clearly he didn’t want to share any details. “Well, you must be very successful. This is a beautiful house.”

“Thank you.” He seemed to relax a bit as he studied her from his chair. “Where are you from?”

“San Jose, California. I was here for my best friend’s ski wedding. She got married at Steamboat Springs.”

“A ski wedding?” His eyebrows lifted in amusement.

“It was great—a perfect, beautiful day, the ceremony on a mountaintop. My best friends from college were there. I hadn’t seen them in a while and it was fun to catch up. Just now, I was on my way to the Denver airport to fly home. I thought I could make it over the pass before the weather got too bad.”

“You won’t be flying anywhere today, I’m afraid. The pass is closed.”

“Closed?”

“And according to the radio, an avalanche was reported in the other direction, to the west.”

“I saw it! It happened a few seconds after I drove by. It covered the entire road.”

“You’re very lucky to be alive.”

“I know. And I probably wouldn’t be, if not for you. So again: thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

Nicole stood, crossed to the picture windows, and looked outside. From what she could see, the house was a modern chalet style with stained wood siding and a wide wraparound wooden deck, the front of which was sheltered by an extension of the high, peaked roof. They were nestled in a pine forest. The air was so alive with swirling snow that she couldn’t see more than fifty feet or so in any direction.

“How long do you think this storm will last?”

“A good long while. The weather report said it won’t blow itself out until tomorrow night at the earliest or perhaps the day after. And I’d guess it’ll take a good two days after that before the county clears the roads.”

Nicole stared at him, stunned. “Are you kidding? Is there any other way out? Do you have a snowmobile?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Could I walk out? I mean, two days from now, after the storm is over?”

“On an unplowed road? No.” He stood, shoving his hands in his jeans pockets. “Steamboat Springs is more than twenty miles away and blocked by the avalanche. My closest neighbor is twenty miles the other direction, and it’s a good fifteen miles beyond that to Kremmling, the nearest town. Even with snowshoes, that’d be an impossible trek.”

“What am I going to do?” Nicole said, distraught. “I have to get home and back to my job. And my cat—”

“I’m sorry. You seem to be stuck here.” His tone and expression made it crystal clear that he wasn’t any happier about the prospect than she was.

“But four days! I can’t expect you to put me up all that time.”

“It seems that we have no alternative, Miss Whitcomb.”

Miss Whitcomb? Nicole couldn’t remember anyone ever calling her that in her entire life. Before she could comment, he went on:

“It’s awkward, I admit. You don’t know me and I don’t know you—and I’m not accustomed to having guests. But I’ll do my best to stay out of your way. And don’t worry,” he added, with a dark glimmer in his eyes and a surprisingly playful smile, “I promise I won’t bite.”

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