

“What was that all about?”

“What?” Ford asked blandly.

“What was my mother saying to you before I got back here?”

“Just sharing a little advice.”

“About?”

“Life.”

“That’s a broad topic. Care to narrow it down?”

“I don’t think so. I don’t want to give away any of her tricks.”

Emma frowned. “Don’t you start conspiring with my mother,” she warned.

“What would we have to conspire about?” he asked, all innocence.

“Me, for starters.”

Ford reached for her hand and tugged her closer. “Give me a little credit. When it comes to you, I think I can handle things on my own.”

“We’ll see,” Emma murmured just before his lips claimed hers.

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Class of '91

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Prologue

The only light on in the kitchen was coming from inside the well-stocked refrigerator. Emma stood on the tiled floor in her stockings feet, still clad in the designer suit and simple gold jewelry she'd worn to court hours ago, and ate strawberry-cheesecake yogurt from its plastic container.

"Welcome to my glamorous life," she muttered as she spooned the food into her mouth without really tasting it.

It was ten o'clock at night. She'd left her high-priced Cherry Creek home that morning at six-thirty. She'd managed to snag a piece of toast on her way out the door and a tuna on rye at the courthouse at lunchtime. This yogurt was dinner. Unfortunately, it was all too typical of her daily diet, all too typical of her nonstop schedule.

It had been weeks since she'd been able to sit down at the table with her six-year-old daughter for a leisurely meal. Caitlyn was so accustomed to eating with the housekeeper that when she and Emma talked on the phone during the day, she rarely ever asked if her mother was coming home. A part of Emma was relieved not to have to deal with the added pressure of Caitlyn's disappointment, but another part of her knew that she ought to be appalled by the lack of time she and her daughter shared and—even worse—Caitlyn's resigned acceptance of that lack.

Emma's ex-husband hadn't been as forgiving. Kit Rogers had married her while Emma was still in law school. In one of those inexplicable failed-birth-control flukes, she had gotten pregnant before graduation. For some reason, Kit had assumed that she would become a traditional stay-at-home wife once Caitlyn was born. His own law career was well established, his income well into six figures. Emma hadn't needed to work for financial reasons.

But Emma refused to cooperate. She hadn't excelled in law school only to give it all up. Her determined pursuit of a career with a top-notch, demanding Denver law firm had turned from an annoyance into a full-fledged bone of contention in their marriage.

As her star at the firm had risen, the arguments had increased in intensity. His manipulative efforts to sabotage her career had escalated. When nothing—not even the worst kind of betrayal, so painful that even now she couldn't bear to think about it—had worked, he'd walked out, threatening to sue for custody of Caitlyn. The clash in court, complete with the city's best legal talent on opposing sides, had promised to be the stuff of headlines. Emma had actually begun to relish the challenge.

That should have been a wake-up call about her driven lifestyle and her misplaced priorities, but it hadn't turned out that way. Kit had met someone else almost immediately after their separation and had backed off on his threats. Emma had won without going to court and without having to change. In the end it had been a hollow victory. Now Kit saw even less of Caitlyn than Emma did. Her daughter was resigned to that, too.

In fact, Caitlyn had been forced to accept too darned much, Emma concluded as she angrily tossed the yogurt container into the trash and shut the refrigerator door. There had been too many canceled plans and broken promises.

After switching on the overhead light, she reached for the invitation that had come in that day's mail. Her high school reunion was coming up in a few weeks in Winding River, Wyoming. Caitlyn's private school would be out by then. It would be a chance for Emma to spend some quality time with her daughter, a chance for Caitlyn to see her grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins—extended family she needed more than ever now that her father was pretty much out of their lives. Caitlyn deserved th

trip. They both did. Visits to Wyoming had been too rare thanks to Emma's demanding schedule. It had been two years. The time had just slipped by.

Emma picked up her datebook and thumbed through the pages. Appointments and court appearances jammed every page. She took out a pen—not a pencil that could be erased when second thoughts set in—and circled the weekend of the reunion. She made a note by tomorrow's date to have her secretary cancel everything for that Wednesday through Sunday. Even though the Fourth of July holiday was only a few days later, she couldn't quite bring herself to take an entire week off. Well, five days was better than nothing...and considerably more than the occasional day she snatched for herself.

Five whole days away from her job, away from Denver. The thought boggled her mind. Best of all, she would get to see her dearest friends, the indomitable Calamity Janes—so named for their penchant for trouble and heartache—who could make her laugh and remind her of who she'd been before work had become an obsession. It would be good to get some perspective—some balance—back into her life. If anyone could help her accomplish that, Lauren, Karen, Cassie and Gina could.

It was ironic, really, that five women could be so different and yet have so much in common. Lauren was now a Hollywood superstar, Karen a rancher. Cassie was a struggling single mom, Gina a gourmet chef with her own restaurant in New York. Yet they shared a history, a friendship that had weathered time and separation. The last time they had all been together had been at Emma's law school graduation. Since then, they'd stayed in touch through occasional phone calls, e-mails and hastily jotted notes on Christmas cards.

But even if the contact had been sporadic, the depth of the bond had never suffered, Emma reflected. These women were her best friends and, though she sometimes neglected them, she treasured the friendships. Lauren, twice-divorced herself, had listened endlessly when Emma had gone through her divorce. Cassie had provided a shoulder to lean on as Emma had struggled with the guilt of not having enough time for Caitlyn. Happily married Karen had been steady as a rock, offering nonjudgmental advice whenever Emma had sought it. And ever since the divorce, Gina had sent periodic care packages of gourmet baked goods to cheer both Emma and Caitlyn.

But even as anticipation of seeing them began to stir inside her, Emma sighed as she thought of the work that would be waiting for her on the following Monday. For once, though, she couldn't let that matter. The truth was that the work could wait. She was not indispensable. She had more money than she had time to spend it. So did the partners at her firm. A few less billable hours would hardly ruin her fast-track career.

Who knew when a chance like this would come along again? The prospect of seeing the Calamity Janes was too good to pass up. The usual dread of listening to her mother grumble that she hadn't been eating right actually brought a smile to Emma's lips for once. And knowing that her father would likely remind her that she was brilliant and beautiful and worth loving...well, that was something she'd been needing to hear ever since her divorce. Even though the breakup had been for the best, even though Kit had proved himself to be a world-class jerk, the divorce had been a blow to Emma's self-esteem. A high achiever from grade school on, she'd never expected to fail at anything.

Pleased with her resolve to take a much-needed break, she could hardly wait to tell Caitlyn. She could already imagine the rare, shy smile that would light up her daughter's face. Unfortunately, she could also envision the child's hesitancy, her reluctance to believe that the trip would actually happen.

"I won't let you down, baby," she vowed as she flipped off the light and headed for her home office, where she had another hour's worth of paperwork to get through before bedtime. "Not this time."

This trip was going to be all about relaxation, laughter, family and friends. Nothing was going to interfere with that, nothing at all.

Chapter 1

Ford Hamilton stared at the computer screen on which the front page of the weekly *Winding River News* was laid out. There was a big gap where his lead story should be. Because it was the paper's first edition since he'd taken over ownership, he'd wanted something splashy to fill that space, something to make the locals sit up and take notice.

"So, boss, want me to go out and interview the people planning their class reunion about who's coming and what will be happening?" Teddy Taylor asked. Teddy was eighteen and intended to major in photojournalism. He was enthusiastically interning with Ford for the summer and itching for a page-one photo or byline. On a paper just starting out on Ford's shoestring budget he was doing everything. Even an intern's inexpert help was welcome.

Ford sighed. A class reunion was not the sort of local news he envisioned for his front page. He'd been trained in hard news in big cities, where the stories competing for page-one headlines were about politics and corruption and crime. There wasn't much of any of those things in Winding River, Wyoming. It was a sleepy, quiet town where very little happened—which, he reminded himself, was precisely the reason he'd chosen it. He was tired of chasing bad guys all the time, to say nothing of arguing with editors about how a story should be played in the paper. Now he was in charge, and maybe, just maybe, he could put out a paper that would actually make a difference in the community.

Unfortunately, the very things that had drawn him here—the peace and quiet—were thwarting his plans to make a big impression with this first edition. He was just waking up to the true meaning of the term "slow news day." He had a feeling that he'd just gone through what was destined to be a slow news week, if not a slow news year.

Still, that did not mean he had to resort to filling prime front-page space with puff pieces about a class reunion, even if it was all anyone could talk about around town. He'd list the scheduled events the week before the event, then send a photographer when the time came. A picture spread inside was enough coverage for a non-news event.

That still left an empty hole on page one for this week's edition, and time was rapidly running out. He couldn't count on an accident or even a little cattle rustling happening before his deadline. After twenty minutes spent skimming through a half-dozen press releases for community events, Ford resigned himself to going with the most exciting thing he had—that blasted rinky-dink reunion. Maybe there was an angle that would work, give the story a little substance to justify placing it on the front page.

"Teddy, how about going over and interviewing the sheriff?" he suggested. "Ask him what the plans are for security, especially since I hear that actress is coming in for the weekend. Is the county paying overtime for extra help in case there are any problems with crowd control?"

Teddy's mouth gaped. "Crowd control? In Winding River?"

"Lauren Winters is pretty hot since she won her Academy Award this spring," Ford explained, regretting that his predecessor had announced her attendance. *That* could have been his big story. "If word leaks out that she's going to be here, every tabloid from around the globe will be sending in a photographer. While you're at it, check to see if all of the hotel rooms are booked. The paparazzi get testy if they can't stay close by. If nothing's available, they'll be sleeping in their cars on her front lawn or wherever it is she's staying. Ask Ryan if he's prepared to deal with that."

Teddy's expression brightened. "Are you serious? You'll let me interview the sheriff?"

Ford barely contained a grin at the boy's eagerness, especially since the sheriff was his uncle. Chances were real good that Ryan Taylor would dictate the story just the way he wanted to see it in the paper. Normally Ford wouldn't leave the interview to an unseasoned reporter, but Teddy needed to get his feet wet, and this was as good a story as any.

"Go for it. You have two hours to talk to him, write up the article and get it in. I want this edition on the street on time. The old owner tended to play fast and loose with deadlines and distribution. I'm not going to."

"Got it," Teddy said, and raced out, tape recorder in hand.

Ford sighed again. Had he ever been that young, that energetic? Not that he was exactly dragging at thirty-two, but after just a month he was already adapting to the slower pace of Winding River. He no longer got up at dawn, no longer worked twelve-hour days. He lingered over coffee at Stella's for a chance to chat with the locals.

At first he'd welcomed the change from the lightning-fast speed of things in Atlanta and then Chicago. Slowing down had been one of the reasons he'd sought out a paper to buy and a place to settle and build a life for himself before stress leveled him with a premature heart attack. Eventually he hoped to marry, maybe have a couple of kids. He wanted more than a career. He wanted a life.

He'd spent a couple of years using vacation time to look for a community that was growing, one where a solid newspaper could make a difference, where his editorials and news stories might really have an impact on a way of life. He'd been drawn to Wyoming because of the rugged beauty of the landscape and because of the changes that were happening every single day now that it had been discovered by big name celebrities. Development was bound to follow in their wake, which promised challenges to the environment and to a way of life.

Everything had come together the minute he'd visited Winding River and talked to the paper's prior owner. They'd made the deal on a handshake over the winter, and now, just a few months later, he was in business, publishing his own weekly paper, albeit with very limited resources for the moment.

He knew enough about small towns to recognize that he had to move cautiously. Change was always viewed with suspicion. Ironically that had been one of the reasons Ford had left his hometown in Georgia and settled in Atlanta after college. He'd seen how resistant people back home were to change of any kind.

Unfortunately, he'd realized belatedly that things weren't that much better in a big city, especially when he had to fight his own newspaper bureaucracy before getting some of his tougher pieces in print. Chicago had been more of the same, a constant battle between the pressures of the advertising department and editorial independence. Years ago the separation would have been a given, but these days, with tough economic times for newspapers, the suits were having more of an impact on the journalists.

Ford was still finding his way in Winding River, getting to know the movers and shakers, listening to anyone and everyone who had something to say about the way the town was run or the way it ought to be.

Change was on the horizon. The downtown was testament to that. A chic boutique had moved in just down the block from a western wear store. There were Range Rovers parked alongside pickups hauling horse trailers. High-priced gifts were being sold next door to the feed-and-grain store. And fancy corporate jets sat on the airstrip next to crop dusters.

The previous owner of the paper, Ronald Haggerty, had stayed on long enough to introduce Ford around, give him a slap on the back and a hearty recommendation to the various civic organizations. Then he'd retired and moved to Arizona. Ford was on his own now.

He was already beginning to formulate some opinions that he was eager to get into print, but it

was too soon. He needed to wait for the right opening, the right story to show everyone that the *Winding River News* and its new owner intended to participate in every aspect of life in Winding River. A big, splashy, controversial front-page story, that's what he needed.

So far in life, Ford Hamilton had found the odds were usually in his favor. And if his luck held, he'd have that front-page story very soon.

"Am I really going to learn to ride a horse?" Caitlyn asked for the tenth time as she and Emma made the drive from Denver on Wednesday.

"Grandpa said he'd teach you, didn't he?"

Emma nodded, curls bouncing. "I am sooo excited. I never rode a horse before."

"So you've mentioned," Emma said wryly.

"And how many cousins do I have?"

"Five. You met some of them last time we were here."

"But I was just a baby then. I was only four," Caitlyn said. "I forgot."

"Okay, there's Jessie—"

"How old is Jessie?"

"She's six, the same as you."

"Do you think she can ride a horse already?" Caitlyn asked worriedly. "Will she make fun of me?"

"I don't know if she can ride, but Grandpa won't let her make fun of you."

Caitlyn nodded, evidently satisfied. "Who else?"

"There's Davey, and Rob, and Jeb and Pete."

"They're all boys," she said, clearly disappointed. "And they're all littler than me, right?"

"That's right."

"But me and Jessie will be friends, right?"

"I'm sure you will be," Emma reassured her. "You had a wonderful time together the last time you were here for a visit. You had tea parties for your dolls and played games with Grandma and baked cookies."

Caitlyn's eyes shone with excitement. "How soon will we be there?"

"A half hour, maybe less."

"What time is that?"

"Twelve-thirty."

Caitlyn touched a finger to the clock on the dash. "When the big hand is here and the little hand is down here, right?"

"Exactly."

A worried frown puckered her brow again. "I thought Grandma said we'd have lunch at twelve. Will they eat without us?"

"No, baby, I don't think they'll eat without us. I called to let Grandma know we got a late start, remember?"

"'Cause you had to go to the office," Caitlyn said. "Even though we're on vacation."

"That's it till Monday," Emma promised.

"Then how come your phone keeps ringing?"

Emma sighed. It kept ringing because she hadn't cut it off. Getting away from the office was one thing. Deactivating her cell phone was something else entirely. There could be emergencies, questions from her paralegals...all sorts of crises that simply couldn't wait.

“Don’t worry,” she told her daughter. “It won’t ring all that often. I won’t let it interfere with our plans.”

As if to prove her wrong, the cell phone promptly rang. With an apologetic look at Caitlyn, Emma answered. “Rogers.”

“Is this the famous Denver lawyer who only handles the most challenging cases in the universe?”

Emma grinned. “Lauren? Where are you?”

“I’m sitting at a table with your family, waiting for you to get here. We are growing impatient. I’m for one, am starved, and they won’t let me eat till you show your face. Where *are* you?”

“Just outside of town, about a mile from the ranch now. Tell Mom to put the food on the table and pour the iced tea.”

“Already done. I helped.”

“Was the family impressed that a glamorous actress was fixing lunch?”

Lauren chuckled. “Not that I noticed. Rob has smeared strained peas all over my designer blouse but he’s only a baby, so I’ve forgiven him.”

“Good thing. I don’t think Rob’s daddy can afford to pay for a replacement. It probably cost more than he makes in a month.”

“Pretty close,” Lauren agreed. “I told him *you’d* replace it. You can afford it.”

“I guess it’s a good thing that I’m about to turn into the driveway, so I can protect my interests,” Emma said.

Even as she made the turn, she could hear the squeals announcing that the kids had spotted her car. As they neared the house, she glanced over at Caitlyn and saw her eyes widen as all of her cousins except the baby tumbled out of the house, followed by Emma’s younger brothers and their wives, the Lauren—still holding the portable phone—and then her grandparents.

Suddenly shy, Caitlyn held back when her grandmother opened the car door and reached for her. Not permitting even the tiniest hint of the hurt she must have felt, Emma’s mother gently touched Caitlyn’s cheek.

“I am so glad you’ve come to visit,” she said quietly. “Your grandpa and I have missed you.”

“Really?” Caitlyn said, looking surprised.

“You bet. Would you like to come with me to see the surprise he got you? It’s down at the barn.”

Caitlyn turned to Emma. “Can I, Mommy?”

“I thought everybody was anxious to eat,” Emma said, casting a pointed look at Lauren.

“That’s okay. I’m sure I won’t starve,” her friend said with an exaggerated pout.

Emma grinned at her. “Nice acting.” She released Caitlyn’s hand. “Of course you can go.” She glanced at her mother. “What’s the big surprise?”

“You’ll see,” her mother teased. “I’m not giving away a thing.”

As the two of them went off hand in hand, trailed by the cousins, Emma turned to her brothers, who enveloped her in bear hugs even as they chided her for staying away too long.

“Leave her alone,” her sister-in-law Martha said. “She’s here now. That’s what counts. And we’re going to make the most of every minute of it.”

“That we are,” Lauren said, stepping forward for her own hug. “You look tired.”

“It was a long drive.”

“Not that long,” Lauren chided, leading her inside where the dining room table had been set for celebration, complete with her mom’s best dishes. “And dark circles like that don’t happen overnight. I ought to know. I’m an expert on what lack of sleep can do to a person’s face. Lucky for you, I am also an expert on makeup tricks that will disguise it. By the time we go to the reunion dance on Saturday, you’ll look like a million bucks. Men will fall at your feet.”

“I’m here to see my friends, not to nab a man for myself,” Emma scolded. “Besides, with you

around, no one will be looking at me.”

“Wait till I get through fixing you up,” Lauren retorted. “You can’t take a chance that you’ll bump into the perfect man. You don’t want to scare him to death.”

“I don’t think we need to worry about that. There are very few perfect men in Winding River.” She glanced at her brothers and grinned. “Present company excluded, of course. That was one of the reasons we left, remember?”

“I’m an optimist,” Lauren declared cheerfully. “A lot can change in ten years. For one thing, acne usually clears up.” She poked an elbow into Matt’s ribs. “Right?”

Matt frowned and ignored her.

“Absolutely,” Martha said to cover her husband’s silence. “Not only that, we can even get cappuccino or a latte on Main Street now. Of course, the locals pretty much go to Stella’s the same as always. The gourmet stuff is for the tourists.”

Emma stared at her in surprise. “We have *tourists* now? What do they come to see?”

“The real west,” her brother Wayne reported dryly. “Of course, while coming to gawk at the genuine article, they can’t do it without a few of the frills from back East, but what the heck, it’s pumping a few dollars into the economy.”

“It’s going to destroy us in the end, you mark my words,” her brother Matt chimed in, his expression dire. “And that new newspaper editor is going to be leading the charge.”

“Ford Hamilton’s not such a bad guy,” Martha chided her husband. “Give him a chance.”

“To do what? Ruin the place with his fancy, big-city ideas?” Matt countered.

“How do you know he has big-city ideas?” Martha demanded. “You won’t even talk to him!”

“He’s from Chicago, isn’t he?” Matt grumbled. “I guarantee you he’s going to be the first one to call for opening up the land to all kinds of greedy developers. We’ll have subdivisions all the way from here to Laramie if we’re not careful.”

Emma’s mother held up her hand. “Okay, Matt, enough. Let your sister at least get something to eat before you start all this doom-and-gloom stuff over the fate of Winding River. That kind of thing is bad for the digestion.”

Nevertheless, over lunch Emma got an earful on the changes in the town in the past few years—none of them good, to hear Matt tell it. She also heard quite a lot about this man, Ford Hamilton, whose first two editions of the paper had been the talk of Winding River.

“Took out the local columns that Ron had been running for years,” Matt grouched.

“Everybody around here already knew what everybody else was doing,” Martha argued. “We didn’t need to read about it in the paper.” She regarded her husband defiantly. “Besides, I think he’s gorgeous. It’s about time somebody exciting and available moved into town.”

“Why do *you* care? You’re married to *me*,” Matt reminded her.

Martha rolled her eyes. “That doesn’t mean I’m dead. Besides, a man like Ford Hamilton could be just what it takes to persuade Emma to move back here.”

Emma held up a hand. “*Whoa!* Don’t even go there. I am *not* looking for a man and I am *not* coming back here. Don’t go getting any crazy ideas on that score, Martha—or any of the rest of you, either.”

“Well, we can all dream,” her mother said. “I, for one, think it would be wonderful if you’d at least give the idea some thought.”

“Don’t push the girl,” her father said. “She just walked in the door.”

“Oh, be still. You’re just as anxious to have her back here as I am,” her mother retorted. “That’s what that pony is all about.”

Emma stared at them. “What pony?”

“That was the surprise,” Caitlyn said, her eyes glowing. “Grandpa got me a pony.”

Emma's father grinned at her. "That was supposed to be a secret till after lunch, cupcake."

Caitlyn's face fell. "Oh, yeah. I forgot."

"That's okay, sweetie. *Somebody* needed to tell me," Emma said, giving her hand a squeeze, even as she shot a reproachful look at her father.

"You had one when you were her age," her father pointed out.

"But I *lived* here," she retorted, then let the subject drop. She was not going to ruin lunch by getting into an argument at the table.

"Let's get back to Ford Hamilton," Martha suggested diplomatically.

"Yes, let's," Lauren agreed. "If Emma's not interested in a gorgeous, available newspaper editor, maybe *I'll* check him out."

"Right," Wayne scoffed. "As if you'd ever come back here to stay."

"You never know," Lauren said so seriously that it drew stares from every adult at the table.

"Lauren?" Emma said, regarding her curiously. This was the first she'd heard of any disenchantment Lauren felt with her glamorous lifestyle.

"Oh, don't mind me," Lauren said, pushing back from the table. "I've got to run. I promised Karen I'd drive over to the ranch this afternoon and help with the horses."

"Now *there's* a picture the tabloids would pay to have," Emma's father teased. "Millie, where's my camera? I could probably make enough from this shot to pay for a couple of new bulls."

"You don't want to do that, Dad," Emma warned. "I'd have to advise Lauren to sue you."

"As if I could ever sue my favorite surrogate dad," Lauren said, pressing a kiss to his cheek that made him blush.

He shook his head. "Who knew that one of Emma's friends would grow up to become one of the most famous beauties in the world? I remember when you wore your hair in pigtails and made mud pies in my backyard."

"Now *that* is a picture the tabloids would love," Wayne said. "And I think I know where one is."

"In the scrapbook," Matt said, grinning for the first time since Emma had arrived. "Shall I get it? We can split the profits."

"You do and you're a dead man," Emma warned. "I'm in that picture, too. If Lauren doesn't kill you, I will."

She glanced across the table to see tears in her mother's eyes. "Mom? What's wrong?"

"I'm just so happy to have all of you around this table again, squabbling the way you used to. You, too, Lauren. I can't tell you how much I've missed having my whole family under one roof."

Guilt spread through Emma. "I'll get home more often, Mom. I promise."

"You say that now, but once you're back in Denver, you'll be deluged with clients, and the next thing you know another two years will have slipped by."

"I won't let that happen," Emma vowed.

But, of course, it would. She was powerless to stop it. Her career defined her. Being the best and brightest in her class had challenged her to become the best and brightest in the firm. She wanted to be the first lawyer people thought of when there was a high-profile case in Denver. She'd failed at marriage. She was a neglectful, if loving, mom and daughter. But she would be somebody when it came to her profession. Men made sacrifices for their careers all the time, and no one thought any less of them. Why should it be different for a woman? And at least she was setting an example for Caitlyn that a woman could achieve whatever she wanted to in a man's world.

But at what cost? some would ask. Emma even asked herself that from time to time in the dark of night. So far, though, she hadn't come up with a satisfactory answer. She wondered if she ever would

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