

## Prologue

“Well, Vanessa, me and the boys are making a pretty good go of this here matchmaking business.” Ozzie Peyton gazed at the portrait of his late wife, which held a place of honor over the stone fireplace. He still discussed every little thing with his sweet Vanessa—though he didn’t like to spread that around. Some folks just didn’t understand.

The “boys” were Lloyd, Henry and Vern, the four of them affectionately known as the geezers. Ozzie didn’t mind the term; in fact, he kind of liked it.

They were on an important mission, had taken matters into their own hands when they’d realized their small Montana town of Shotgun Ridge was in danger of dying out due to an overabundance of men and not enough women and children. Why, the good Lord intended for men and women to pair off in twos, fall in love, get married and procreate, you bet.

But the darn bachelors here in town were a stubborn lot—clearly in need of a nudge here and there.

“Now don’t go to fussin’” he said to Vanessa’s portrait. “You know my mind’s slippin’ a bit of late and these old hands aren’t quite what they used to be. Why, a mixup in address numbers is an honest-enough mistake.” He gazed into Vanessa’s timeless eyes, the eyes of a schoolteacher who could reprimand with a single look. He placed a hand over his heart, duly repentant.

“Okay, okay, it was pure-dee deliberate. But Cheyenne Bodine was always close to your heart, darlin’. Why, if it weren’t for you, that boy would never have turned out so fine. And Emily Vincent—you remember her, don’t you, love? A little scrapper, that one, and a bit of a jinx if you recall, but wait till you hear what she’s gone and done now.” Ozzie rubbed his hands together, couldn’t contain the smile that spread across his face. It was a smile Vanessa loved—she always told him his eyes twinkled.

“It’s all in the family, you see. And if ever there was the perfect lady for Cheyenne Bodine, it’s Emily Vincent. So we—me and the boys—figured it’d be best for everyone concerned if we got them under the same roof. Neither one of those kids knows a lick about babies—yet.” He winked at Vanessa and was certain her lovely lips curved in response.

### Chapter 1

Sheriff Cheyenne Bodine got a bad feeling when he came home to his modest five-acre mustang ranch to find a snazzy Mercedes parked in the driveway, its front tires resting in the grass as though the brakes had been a little faulty. Or else the driver was under the influence of a controlled substance.

A three-quarter moon lit the cold October sky, illuminating his four-bedroom house. The fact that this all belonged to him chased away the loneliness he’d been feeling lately. Well, *some* of it.

Still, loneliness aside, he hadn’t expected company. In the small town of Shotgun Ridge, Montana, Cheyenne knew the make, model and owner of just about every vehicle, and this one wasn’t familiar.

The pretentious car with Washington plates stuck out like a prissy lady in a bawdy bordello.

Suspicious by nature—compliments of his job—he slid out of the four-wheel-drive Bronco, his dog hopping to the ground beside him. The smell of fall air, hay and horses wrapped around him like a familiar blanket, yet something appeared amiss in his neat world.

He cautiously pushed open the front door of his house. A blast of warmth from the furnace made his cold cheeks burn.

“Heel, Blue,” he said quietly to the Siberian husky who was never far from his side.

Brows drawn together in a frown, he followed the trail of luggage and female articles through the front hall to his bedroom.

Great, he thought, picking up a snakeskin boot and a white parka that smelled ultrafeminine, some wise guy had gotten him a stripper. He sniffed again. The innocent scent of vanilla emanating from the downy fabric didn’t jibe with that image.

When he reached the open bedroom door, his booted feet froze and his mouth dropped open.

A woman was sound asleep in his bed.

And this high-class Goldilocks was pregnant as all get-out.

He moved closer to the bed, his cold fingers clenching around the soft leather boot he still held.

Emily Vincent.

His heart thudded as memories flashed. She’d lived in Shotgun Ridge for a while, but her family had moved during her senior year in high school. Her departure had left a hole in Cheyenne’s life.

Although he’d mostly watched her from afar, she’d been full of spit and vinegar, and he’d been half in love with her. She’d had a penchant for being in the wrong place at the wrong time and had more than once been the center of scandal, her reputation suffering, even though he’d suspected she’d been innocent.

It was the darnedest thing, as though trouble came knocking at her door.

And once again Emily Vincent appeared to be in the wrong place.

In his bed.

And if she knew the thoughts he was thinking about her as she slept—scratch that, if the townsfolk knew what he was thinking, her reputation would once again be the subject of discussion.

Blue bumped his cold nose against Cheyenne’s hand. He gave the dog a pat to let him know there wasn’t any immediate physical danger.

Now, mental danger was a whole different matter....

Easing into a chair beside the bed, not bothering to remove the sheepskin jacket that covered the sheriff’s star pinned to the front of his uniform shirt, Cheyenne settled in to give his fantasies an all-expense-paid spree.

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A DETERMINED LITTLE FOOT lodged under her ribs and Emily groaned, stretching out to get more comfortable. The

last weeks of pregnancy were worse than she'd anticipated.

She moaned softly and opened her eyes.

The sight of the man and dog sitting beside her bed sent adrenaline straight to her head, making her dizzy, forcing a scream that came out more like a squeak.

Scrambling for the covers, she snatched them to her chin.

"No need for modesty. Aside from the boots, the rest of your clothes are still on you, though the skirt's hiked up a bit."

"Cheyenne?" She jerked at the hem of her wool maternity skirt. It had only ridden up to midthigh, thank goodness.

"One and the same, trouble."

*Trouble.* He'd been the only one to call her that and make it sound like an endearment rather than a judgment.

Emily released her death grip on the blankets, and placed a protective hand over her stomach. *Everything will be okay, now.*

"So," he drawled, his tone exceedingly pleasant, "mind telling me what you're doing in my bed?"

Still groggy, heart pumping, it was a moment before Emily's confused brain kicked in.

And when it did, relief was washed away by the flood of all-too-familiar emotions. The fear. The sorrow. The reason she was here. The sheer terror of what lay ahead.

But why was Cheyenne Bodine telling her she was in *his* bed?

And oh, Lord, time had been *very* nice to this sexy man. The last time she'd seen him, she'd been seventeen and he'd been twenty.

That had been fifteen years ago.

Dark hair brushed the collar of his sheepskin jacket, and deep-brown eyes focused on her with an intensity that made her want to fidget. He was a tall man, with the strong bone structure of his Cheyenne ancestors.

Silent and watchful, he emanated danger and oozed sex appeal.

Her palms were damp and her insides trembled.

She struggled to sit up, uncomfortable with their respective positions—she in the bed, him watching her like a polite panther, full of self-confidence and patience.

He immediately reached out to help her, the perfect gentleman even though his gaze was still a bit wary.

"Thanks. I feel like one of those children's toys, you know? The ones that wobble but don't fall down? Problem is, I wobble and roll and have a devil of a time getting vertical."

His piercing gaze slipped to her hugely rounded tummy, then to the naked ring finger of her left hand. Though his lips didn't curve, amusement shimmered briefly in his eyes. "When are you due?"

"In about three weeks."

"And you've come home for a visit?"

His tone clearly stated he was still waiting for an explanation. Well, he wasn't the only one. Shotgun Ridge was a friendly little town, but for heaven's sake, the man was standing in her bedroom!

"Yes, I'm here for a visit, sort of. But what are you doing here?"

"I live here. That's my bed. And I'm dying to know why you're in it."

She frowned. Was he teasing her? "Look, I think there's been some kind of mistake. Unless we've both leased this house, there's obviously a question over who, exactly, has dibs on this bed."

"Leased it, huh? From whom?"

"Ozzie Peyton."

His grin was slow and incendiary. "I might have known those old geezers were involved. I don't know what they were thinking, but I assure you the house—and that bed—belong to me. Although giving you 'dibs' on it has a certain appeal."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, I'm as big as a moose!"

"I have a good imagination."

His voice was incredibly soft, incredibly thrilling. Dear Lord, he was quick. And apparently very serious.

She didn't want to expand on this conversation. Truthfully, she was horribly out of practice with the flirting routine.

Cheyenne Bodine was a sexual man, always had been. But she wasn't here for sex. And as huge and uncomfortable as she was, that should have been the last thing on her mind.

*Should* have been.

Just went to show the potency of one Cheyenne Bodine!

Flustered, nervous, she reached for her leather attaché case and rooted around for the lease agreement she'd been sent by the mayor. "I have the paper right here. And I checked the house numbers before I came in."

He took the form from her and lazily scanned it as though he had all the time in the world and nothing at all was amiss.

"Easy-enough mistake. The numbers are off by one digit. This address is for the place next door."

"Oh, Lord, I'm sorry. It was dark—I thought I checked the numbers. I'm so embarrassed." She tightened her hand around the leather satchel, holding it in front of her like a shield—which wasn't easy, given the size of her stomach.

"I haven't unpacked yet. It'll just take me a minute to clear out and move next door." She was rambling, talking fast, but she couldn't help it. His watchful silence was making her a nervous wreck.

And just as when she'd been young, she'd made another mistake. What was it about this town? She'd been jinxed the entire time she'd lived here, star-crossed and accident-prone until the day she'd moved away.

"Now there's where you're going to run into a bit of a problem."

"Why? I asked Ozzie Peyton for something close to you. Do you object to me being your neighbor?"

"I probably wouldn't if it were a possibility. The place next door burned down several years back. The house was on my property, I used to rent it out, but after the fire, I couldn't see any sense in rebuilding."

No wonder Ozzie Peyton had told her the house she'd thought she'd leased was furnished. Of course it was—with Cheyenne's furniture.

She was starting to feel thoroughly ungrounded. She'd been so tired when she'd come in that she'd just fallen into the bed, never looking around to see what was what. Now she did peruse her surroundings.

Masculine, definitely, decorated with touches of his Native American heritage. She saw a photograph on the dresser of a man and woman, the woman's hair as dark as a raven's wing, the man's as bright as the sun. And standing beside the couple were two little boys—one with the dark, striking features of his mother, the other as fair as the father.

Cheyenne and Jimmy Bodine.

Brothers who'd been estranged from each other over pride and a stupid mistake.

Tears stung her eyes and throat.

Jimmy had displayed that same photograph in his bedroom.

"Hey, trouble." Cheyenne leaned forward and touched her cheek, his thumb gentle as he caressed the fragile skin beneath her eyes. "No need to get upset. We'll work something out."

She shook her head. "I'm sorry. It's been a trying time for me lately." She reached for his hands and held them in hers. "It's not just baby hormones making me emotional. I'm afraid I have some bad news." She squeezed his hands, said as gently as possible, "Jimmy's dead."

His fingers tightened against hers, nearly crushing her bones. His eyes flared, his head shaking in denial. "No..."

"I'm sorry."

"How? When?"

"An accident on the highway. Two weeks ago. A semi hit a patch of black ice and caused a pileup."

She saw his throat work on a swallow, his gaze slipping to her pregnant stomach.

"Why wasn't I notified?"

"I'm sorry. That was my fault. I was so stunned, in a fog." Tears slipped down her cheeks. "I'm sorry," she whispered again, the words horribly inadequate. "Jimmy was so excited about..." She couldn't go on, simply pressed her hand to her stomach.

"You're carrying Jimmy's baby?"

She nodded. Her world was in a mess. She was grieving and terrified and very mixed up. She'd run the gamut of emotions lately—some that even shamed her. A good deed, prompted out of deep, unconditional love had come to a tragic end and altered the steady course she'd chosen for herself—and oh, God, she was so selfish to even think about that now.

Cheyenne shrugged out of his coat and moved to sit on the side of the bed. "Blue, stay," he said when the dog started to follow.

The mattress dipped under his weight. He put his arms around Emily and held her, as much for his own comfort as for hers. His heart felt as though it was ripping in two.

But he'd learned at a young age to shield his emotions. If the dirt-poor half-breed had dared to show any vulnerability, he'd been fair game for ridicule and trouble.

Because of his distinctive features, he'd fared better on the reservation than Jimmy, with his buttery hair, had. But in the Anglo world, it had been different. Always the butt of a joke or sneer. Children could be so cruel.

Perhaps that was why he'd tried so hard to fit in, to make something of himself, to show everyone he wasn't a dirty Indian whose father hadn't stuck around and whose mother had taken her own life after her husband had divorced her and taken her youngest son with him.

And because of his desperate need to fit in, to prove himself, he'd pulled away from Jimmy, his own brother, his flesh and blood. He'd been so pompous and unbending, so caught up in honor that he'd turned his back on his brother when trouble had come knocking that last time, had allowed the estrangement to continue long after the rift should have been repaired.

And now there were no second chances. That knowledge settled like a burning rock in his gut.

Jaw tight, he held Emily to his heart. She'd obviously had a part of Jimmy—a very big part of him, he realized as the baby shifted in her womb, pressing against his side. Her heartache would be as great as his. Perhaps even greater.

"He was your husband?"

She shook her head, her silky hair brushing his chin. He frowned, his gut clenching.

"He didn't honor you with marriage when you learned of the pregnancy?"

She leaned back in his arms, gazed up at him. "Oh, no. You misunderstand. Jimmy was married to my sister, Debbie."

"Ah, hell."

"Stop it, Cheyenne." She pulled back, sniffed and swiped at the tears that had slid down the curve of her jaw. "I'd think by now you'd have learned not to jump to conclusions. The wrong conclusions."

Her tone was testy, a mother hen sticking up for her chicks. In this case, the chick was his brother. But Emily Vincent had always been that way. She was a champion of the underdog. Probably because she'd been a bit of an underdog herself. An underdog who, by the look of her clothes and car, had come out on top.

"I'm pretty confused here."

Emily sighed, annoyance vanishing like a cloud whisked away by a swift moving breeze. "Of course you are. And that's my fault. The babies are a product of a surrogate agreement between the three of us—Debbie, Jimmy and me."

"Babies?"

“Twins.”

“Oh, man.”

The masculine terror in his tone nearly made her smile. Nearly. Because she felt that terror herself. Every time she thought about the enormous responsibility that lay ahead of her, she broke out in a cold sweat.

Especially now that she was alone.

It wasn't supposed to be this way.

“For health reasons that are still a little complicated for me to try and explain, Debbie couldn't carry a baby full-term. They wanted their own family so badly I agreed to help them out.”

“That's a hell of a sacrifice. An incredible gift.”

She shrugged. “It was only nine months out of my life. Or was.”

He stroked her hair, sat with her in silence for several minutes.

“You lost your sister in the accident, too, didn't you?” he asked quietly.

She nodded, trying to battle back the overwhelming grief.

His hand stroked her back, caressed her shoulder. “God, I'm sorry, Em. How long were they married?”

“Three very happy years—aside from the sadness of several traumatic miscarriages. This was their dream, Cheyenne. They were thrilled about the babies. We all were. Every step of the way, every change in my body, the first fluttery kick, the tests—we went through it together.” What she didn't mention was that the farther the pregnancy progressed, the more the babies had felt like a part of *her*—that she was more than merely an incubator.

The strength of those feelings had frightened her. She loved her sister, knew how desperately Debbie had wanted that child—these children. Emily had even dreamed of having her sister offer to let her keep one of the babies.

But in her saner moments, she knew that was ridiculous, that her hormones were simply playing tricks on her. She didn't know the first thing about parenting, didn't *want* to know. She was a career woman, for heaven's sake. Her life was full and happy and that was that.

Then, in the blink of an eye, Debbie and Jimmy were gone. And Emily had been faced with choices. A few of them—the ones she'd guiltily considered in the deepest, darkest part of the night—were too awful to even think about.

She shivered and Cheyenne rubbed her arms. “Want me to start a fire?”

“I'm okay. I'm sorry I didn't contact you about the funeral. It was all handled so fast. I didn't stop to think that you might have wanted to make different burial arrangements...because of your heritage.”

“Jimmy was more white than Cheyenne. He didn't embrace the principles or covenants of our people.”

“But you do.”

“In my heart. Not always in practice.”

“I had them buried side by side in Washington.”

“That's as it should be.” He stood and went to gaze out the window. So silent. So still.

She knew he was battling emotions over his brother's death. It was horrible enough for her, but she'd had a few weeks for the numbness to wear off, to try to adjust. And she counted her blessings every day that she'd had these last years with Debbie and Jimmy.

Cheyenne hadn't. That had to be tearing him up.

She moved up behind him, placed her palm gently against his rigid back. He didn't stiffen or try to evade her touch, but neither did he react.

The three-quarter moon glowed like a misshapen yellow ball, somehow both sad and eerie. An image of a lone wolf, baying its heartache, sprang to her mind.

Oh, God, she hurt for him. He was like that imaginary wolf. Alone. Isolating himself the way he'd done as a boy. Internalizing his pain and facing life with a spit-in-your-eye facade.

But she saw past the shield—there had always been an uncanny, inexplicable connection between them, even though they'd barely known each other. She felt his pain as though it were a living breathing entity in the room with them.

“Did you eat?” he asked quietly, and she nearly jumped.

“No, but—”

“I'll go fix us something.”

“That's not—”

He turned then, and the agony in his obsidian eyes tore at her heart, made her throat ache. She would have put her arms around him, but he stepped away.

“I need a few minutes,” he said softly, hesitating only long enough to brush her cheek in compassion and apology before he walked out of the room, the gray husky following like a silent, trusted friend.

Emily swallowed hard, her heart a stinging mass of sorrow—for herself, as well as Cheyenne. She imagined he needed more than a few minutes, but knew that was all he'd allow himself. Physically there wasn't a trace of the boy left in him, but she remembered what he'd been like all those years ago.

A proud warrior suffering in silence.