

Prologue

Ozzie Peyton laid out his journal as he did every night, preparing to record his thoughts and feelings, but he hesitated before picking up his pen.

The logs in the fireplace crackled merrily. Above the mantel, he gazed at the portrait of his beautiful Vanessa. Each day he missed her even more. She was his rock, his conscience, his best friend and confidante—that she'd crossed over to the hereafter didn't change any of those facts.

Perhaps he was a crazy old man, but the bond between them seemed to grow stronger each day—not that he was about to admit that to anyone. Folks might start whispering about him losing his faculties, you bet. And that simply wasn't the case.

Now, his late friend, Ben Marshall, well, there was a shocking leave of absence from the senses, you bet.

He picked up his pen at last and began to write:

I must say, I never dreamed my conversation with my old buddy, Ben Marshall, would set such an unorthodox plan into action. Heck, when Ben called several months back, asking about Pastor Dan Lucas and what type of a man he'd turned into, I'd been only too happy to expound on the boy's attributes. Maybe I shouldn't have been so puffed-up and shootin' my mouth off about this here matchmakin' venture me and the boys—that's Lloyd, Henry, Vern and me—have gotten into. So far, we're doing right well, even if I do say so myself. Woman and babies and happy families. Love is in the air, and that's as it should be.

Still, I like to have a little more control over matters, and my boasting just might have watered a seed that was planted years ago—watered it a little too good, is what I'm thinking. There are sure to be plenty of raised eyebrows in a few days' time.

He gazed up at his sweet Vanessa, then looked away to the inky blackness of a clear star-studded night beyond the window. Vanessa would probably have a thing or two to say on the subject of meddling in the preacher's life. Not that Ozzie himself had precisely been the one to meddle—more's the pity he hadn't thought of it first.

Then again, it was risky business taking credit for the events that were already set in motion. The ramifications of it backfiring were huge.

Ozzie licked the tip of his Bic pen and set it to the paper again.

I tell you, I could hardly sit still in the sermon this morning at church. It's clear as day that Dan Lucas considers himself safe from matchmaking, but preachers need love and happily-ever-after, too, you bet. After all, the boy is always insisting he's simply a man—albeit a man with a message to tell and a gift for gab and showmanship.

Still, I never imagined my old buddy, Ben, would up and die on us suddenly, or that he'd wave that fool betrothal agreement in everyone's faces this way. Why it was a boyhood pact, for goodness' sake, a lark, easily forgotten.

Matchmaking and being on hand to watch the fireworks is one thing. Doing it from the grave is quite another. I figure me and the boys'll need to keep a close eye on this here shebang. I just hope like heck my buddy, Ben, didn't make a big mistake.

Chapter 1

It wasn't often that Dan Lucas found himself with time on his hands. As the minister in the small town of Shotgun Ridge, Montana, his days were constantly filled with people. Oh, he enjoyed it. Immensely. He wouldn't trade his life here for anything.

Each day brought changes and new challenges. He derived great satisfaction from seeing his friends find what they were searching for in life—Wyatt, Ethan, Stony, Cheyenne and Chance had all married and started families within the past year or so. Dan had gone to school with all of them, raised some Cain and gotten into his fair share of trouble with them, too, before he'd settled into his own calling.

They had a history, he and these people of Shotgun Ridge. A bond. More than a few people had been surprised when he'd decided to follow his father into the ministry.

He supposed getting a DUI citation while driving old man Grisby's tractor might have fueled that surprise.

Most days Dan considered himself content. More than content. Then others, he felt a pang. He didn't spend a lot of time questioning or worrying, though. The future wasn't in his hands.

The afternoon, however, was. Amazingly, he was free for the next six hours.

He looked out the back window of the medical clinic to the empty parking lot beyond. The patient he'd stopped in to see had left, and so had the doctors, Kelly and Chance Hammond. Needing to make a couple of phone calls, he'd made use of the clinic's phone rather than walk back across the street to the church office, and promised to lock up on his way out. As a rule, folks didn't lock their doors here in Shotgun Ridge, but since the clinic housed drugs, it was the exception.

Before he shut the blinds, he gave a wave to Eddie Housen, who was riding around in his snowplow, looking for stray patches of snow to scrape. Eddie had gotten a new scoop for the front of his two-ton pickup and, like a kid on Christmas morning, was itching to use it. Too bad the weather wasn't cooperating. Bits of snow still clung to the ground and piled in muddy mounds of slush along the roadside, but they hadn't had any new snowfall in over a week.

Dan laughed out loud at the forlorn look on the man's face. Nothing worse than having a new piece of machinery and not being able to have any fun with it. If there'd been icy snow on the ground, Dan might have been tempted to hitch a ride with Eddie and see if the guy would let him have a turn at the wheel.

But he had other plans. Anticipating a much-needed date with a certain chestnut gelding in the stable across the road at his ranch house behind the church, Dan closed the door of the back office and started down the hall. He could already imagine the brisk winter air on his cheeks, biting at his ears beneath his Stetson, sneaking beneath the cuffs of his leather gloves.

Montana in the winter was misery to some, but Dan loved it.

The sound of paper crinkling and a chair scraping across the floor alerted him that he was no longer alone in the clinic. He thought maybe Kelly and Chance had forgotten something. Since they weren't expecting any more patients, they'd gone over to Brewer's Saloon for a late lunch.

Curious, he headed toward the front of the clinic. The smell of antiseptic and alcohol permeated the air, a far cry from the

scents of aged wood and lemon oil associated with the church. Different, yet still familiar since he'd spent many, many hours in clinics and hospitals comforting the sick and dying—or their families.

When he didn't see anyone waiting in the reception area, he glanced into one of the examining rooms he passed, and nearly tripped over his own boots.

He'd heard his pals talking about being poleaxed by the sight of a woman.

He'd never understood the term until just now.

She wore laced-up hiking boots, jeans that were frayed at the hem from scraping against the heel, a white T-shirt tucked in at the waist with a man's flannel shirt unbuttoned and hanging loose over it. A cloud of rich dark hair brushed her shoulders with the gleaming chestnut highlights that put him in mind of his gelding's healthy shining coat.

In contrast to her casual clothing, her flawless skin and killer bone structure made him think of a fashion model. She was the kind of woman whose striking features would turn heads and cause any red-blooded man to develop a stutter, even if she were wearing a burlap feed sack.

The thought that ran through his head was a cliché for sure, but he couldn't get past it.

She was simply the most beautiful woman he'd come across in ages.

"Can I help you?" Thank God, he didn't have a stuttering problem.

She jumped at the sound of his voice. Her eyes went liquid with tears, yet her chin jutted out. Overwhelmed, he surmised, yet fighting it. He'd counseled enough people to recognize the signs.

"There was no nurse outside, and I was feeling faint, so I just came in here to wait. I hope that's all right."

Her accent signaled she was from the Deep South, Georgia or Tennessee, he guessed. "Sure...the nurse, uh, stepped out." Actually, Kelly Hammond was a doctor, rather than a nurse. "You said you were feeling faint—?"

Before he could finish his sentence, or put a plan of action together to get some help over here, she nodded and launched into speech.

"It's probably nothing that a firing squad aimed at my grandfather wouldn't cure. If he hadn't just passed on, he'd be fearing for his health at my hands, that's for darn sure."

"I'm sorry for your loss," Dan murmured. Although genuine pain shadowed her expressive green eyes, she appeared not to hear him.

"I swear I've had it up to here." Her hand made a slicing motion at the level of her brow. "I don't know what's wrong with me lately—well, I probably do, but that's beside the point. Then again, you're a doctor, so maybe it's not really beside the point."

Uh-oh.

"I think my brain's on overload. Life has simply thrown me too many curves in too short of a time. I haven't been eating like I should, I know. Maybe it's hormones. Between you and me, doc to patient, I haven't had sex in longer than I can remember. I mean, who has time with all the stuff I've had to deal with?" She rambled on without stopping, her hands keeping time with her words and punctuating her sentences like a distraught mime playing to an audience of critics.

Dan knew he should probably interrupt. Under the circumstances, it would be polite.

He opened his mouth to do so but wasn't quick enough.

"And if that doesn't make me feel low enough to jump off a dime, *now* I've been shooed off to a town I've never even heard of, where I'm supposed to propose marriage to the *preacher!*"

Dan nearly swallowed his tongue. He was a man rarely at a loss for words. For the life of him, he couldn't seem to form the ones needed to head off the disaster playing out before him.

"Can you *imagine?* No wonder I'm feeling dizzy. Do you think it's hormonal? Does that cause you to feel light-headed?"

Well...hmm. This was tricky. He cleared his throat, leaned a shoulder against the wall, tried like crazy not to smile—or choke. He was actually sweating and it was a cool sixty-five degrees in the clinic.

"Um, I can't honestly say...since I'm not the doctor. I'm the preacher."

Her eyes widened as though she'd just seen Martha Stewart drop-kick a salmon.

"*You're* the preacher?"

"Fraid so."

"Of *this* town?"

"Mmm-hmm."

"The *only* one?"

"Guilty."

She leaped down off the examining table, snatched up her oversize backpack purse and clutched it to her chest like a shield. "How could you just stand there and let me run off at the mouth that way?"

"You didn't give me much opportunity to do otherwise."

"I thought you were the doctor. My God, I told you I hadn't had sex!"

Yes, and he shouldn't have found that quite so interesting. "You wouldn't be the first to confide such a detail."

Amy Marshall covered her face with one hand. She was mortified. That's all there was to it. It was bad enough that she was on this ridiculously unorthodox mission in the first place. And because she felt embarrassed, that made her mad.

Vulnerability and feeling helpless were emotions she did her level best to avoid.

She swore, then cut off the word in mid-syllable when she belatedly realized who she'd just cursed at. The day was going from bad to worse.

Unable to think of a smart comeback, she leveled him with a mutinous look. Talk about feeling faint. Heat coursed

through her body, her heart was beating fast, and vertigo was really trying to get the better of her now.

Her only thought was to flee. Regroup. She wasn't prepared. She needed time to plan her words, present her case in a reasonable, logical manner.

If such a thing were even possible.

Good Lord. She'd been willing to undress before this man, tell him every intimate detail. That's what one did in a doctor's office. There was a certain expected, unquestioned trust involved in entering a medical establishment.

Usually.

"Being celibate's not such a terrible thing, is it?" he asked, the corners of his lips curving ever so slightly.

"For you, maybe." She slammed her mouth shut before she dug herself into a deeper mess. Admitting to a preacher that she was sexually frustrated was simply too much for her overwhelmed brain to handle.

The very preacher she was here to propose to.

Gripping her backpack that held a small fortune in camera equipment she never went anywhere without, she tried to storm past him.

He reached out and gently touched her arm, his smile gone, his features concerned. A blinding burst of heat shot through her like the brilliant strobe of her Nikon speed-light flash.

That upset her even more.

She stiffened and he immediately dropped his hands.

"Maybe we should introduce ourselves?"

She merely stared at him. She'd never been so horrified in her entire life. *Of course* they should introduce themselves. That's what she was here for—well, not here at this exact moment, but still. She'd come to find him. A polite, civilized exchange of names was in order.

Instead, she wished fervently for a nice hole to gape open in the drab tile floor and swallow her up.

She'd rambled on like a person who didn't have sense enough to pour rainwater out of a boot. And heaven above, this man was gorgeous. He was nothing like she'd expected, nothing like she'd pictured.

She'd expected him to be, oh...nerdy, perhaps. He was as far from nerdy as a Kodak Instamatic was from a Nikon F5. This man topped her five-foot-six height by a good eight inches, had shoulders better suited to a linebacker, and could give *People Magazine's Sexiest Man Alive* a run for his money in the sex appeal department.

Cryin' all night, he looked like a mouthwatering cowboy in those pointy-toed boots, faded jeans and a Stetson clutched loosely in one hand.

Where the heck was his clerical collar? A robe? Something. Anything to give her a clue he was a minister and not just a guy in Western clothes with more than his fair share of good looks?

And darn it all, he had no business being *her* preacher!

"Why don't we start over. My name's Dan Lucas."

"I know that *now*."

"Then you have me at a disadvantage."

"Maybe I like it that way." She wasn't normally given to petulance. At the moment it was nearly impossible to suppress the emotion.

He laughed. The sound reverberated around the room, wrapped around the corners, invaded her insides, invited participation.

She wasn't going to get suckered in. But she couldn't stand here and not reciprocate introductions. It was time to take control.

"Amy Marshall." If he expected her to hold out her hand and indulge in another of those lightning flashes of heat at the touch of their skin, he'd have to think again.

Oh, for heaven's sake, Amy. The man's a minister. He's not thinking about sex.

She waited to see if her name drew a spark of recognition, but he didn't respond, merely watched her, quietly, carefully, gently.

"Doesn't ring any bells?"

"I'm sorry. I have a feeling it should since you say you're here to...um, propose. Maybe you could give me a few more details and we can go from there?"

Oh, she had plenty of details, murky and outrageous as they were. But a streak of cowardice shot straight up her spine. "Later, okay? Right now, I need some time to regroup." She ducked her head, tried to inch past him.

"Amy." He stepped into her path, stopping her. On any other man, the action could have been construed as threatening.

His wide shoulders were within touching distance. She could smell the crisp scent of winter on his clothes, the lingering trace of shampoo in his hair. Scents that would alert an animal in the wild to the presence of a human, and possibly danger—reasons Amy herself never wore perfume.

She felt those danger flags now, as though she were the cornered animal, unsure whether to choose flight or fight.

"Look, I'm more embarrassed than you can imagine right now."

"There's no need. I'm as much to blame—even more. I should have told you I wasn't the doctor right away."

She could tell he genuinely felt bad and decided to give him a break. "As you so aptly pointed out, I didn't give you much chance. It's a failing of mine. I tend to go at mach speed, and I don't stop to think."

"All the more reason you should wait for the doctor. You ought to let Chance Hammond check you over. He and his wife Kelly are the doctors here in town. They'll be back in a few minutes."

“Forget it. After this mortifying experience, there’s no telling what I’ll say or do.”

“There has to be a reason for feeling faint. I’m no doctor—”

She raised her brows, and his answering smile gave her a swift, tingling punch in the solar plexus.

“I’d still feel better if you’d wait.”

But she wouldn’t. Her nerves were jumping like a frog in a frying pan and her brain was screaming for action. They were instincts she’d relied on all her life to keep her on track. She was no southern belle damsel-in-distress. Control, drive and determination would keep her self-reliant.

Unlike her mother.

Though she loved her mother dearly, she refused to fall into the same trap Chandra Marshall had. Without skills, dependent upon others.

That was probably the biggest rub in this whole ridiculous mission. Amy, herself, had no control. Her mother’s future lay squarely in the hands of the preacher facing her.

He was still watching her in that quiet way of his, steadily, intensely, a look that made her heart pump and her palms go damp. It was a ridiculous reaction. He was simply concerned.

When in the world had she begun seeing sensuality in compassion? she asked herself.

Ten minutes ago, was the answer. The instant she’d laid eyes on this man. The man who could alter her entire future with a simple word. *Yes* or *no*.

Had there been a divine hand in all this? *Oh, for heaven’s sake*. The good Lord above didn’t go around smiting women with dizzy spells so they’d bump into preachers they were supposed to propose to.

“I feel fine now, Dan. More than likely I just need to eat something. I’ve been on the road for almost a week, and I haven’t stopped regularly for meals.”

“I can help you there.” He went to his jacket, pulled a candy bar out of the pocket and handed it to her. “I keep it for the kids.”

She pounced on the chocolate like a greedy child at a backyard picnic.

He chuckled. “Maybe you’ll let me buy you something more substantial over at Brewer’s?”

“Mmm.” She licked her fingers. Now that her taste buds were fully awake, she realized that she was actually starving. “I’d kill for a greasy hamburger right about now. I didn’t notice any local fast-food joints.”

“You’re in luck. Brewer’s serves the best burgers this side of heaven.”

She couldn’t help but give him a cocky smile. “Coming from an authority like you, they must be good. Just point me in the right direction.”

“I’m going that way. Why don’t I buy?”

“I don’t need you to buy me a meal.”

“Oh, you just need me to marry you.”

The words dropped neatly into a pocket of silence. She choked on the last swallow of candy.

His laughter rang out again. “Sorry, I couldn’t resist. I confess, I’m highly intrigued when a beautiful woman comes to town claiming a need to propose to me. My curiosity’s going to keep me up. Maybe we should talk?”

He wasn’t taking her seriously, and she fully understood why. Who could blame him? She wished to heaven this was all a big joke.

But it wasn’t. And she couldn’t give in to the cowardly instincts begging her to stall. Sooner or later they’d have to talk. Might as well be now.

“Fine. My Jeep’s out front. Want me to drive?”

“Sure you’re up to it? I don’t want you passing out and running us in a ditch.”

“How far are we going?”

“Half a block.”

“I think I can manage to keep us on the road for half a block.”

* * *

BREWER’S SALOON WAS a cozy diner, with a bar off to one side, vinyl booths and tables topped with red-checked cloths, and a jukebox playing a lively country-and-western tune.

Dan leaned down close to her ear. “The doc and his wife are sitting right over there. Sure you don’t want to go have a talk with them?”

She turned her head, dismayed to find her lips practically touching his. “Food is all I need, thank you.”

And a husband for ninety days.

“Right. A greasy burger. I’m thinking you’re the kind of woman who goes for the fully loaded variety, onions and all.”

“And what do you base that on?”

“Your self-proclaimed tendencies to go at mach speed. Type-A personality, curious, adventurous. Am I close?”

Entirely *too* close. Both in his assessment and in his proximity. “I had no idea preachers were smug.”

He laughed and the sound drew heads around, along with answering smiles and waves. Besides the doctor and his wife, there were only two other customers in the diner, as well as an older woman behind the bar and another serving food.

Amy could feel their curiosity as though she was freeze-framed in the focus of a high-powered zoom lens. It wasn’t an uncomfortable awareness. It was just...there.

Dan waved back, called a few hellos, then led her into the back room through a set of swinging doors where a group of older men were playing billiards and watching each other’s shots like hustlers who’d managed to slip past the tournament rules.

“It’s actually more private back here,” he said, obviously feeling the need to explain why they’d bypassed the open booths out front. “And I can indulge in a cigar now and again without Iris Brewer pitching a fit.”

Amy’s jaw dropped at that piece of news, but her attention was snagged when the white-haired man with the cue stick scratched his shot, causing the three other old fellows to whoop and jest.

As though a signal had passed silently between the four men, they all looked up and over at Dan and Amy.

“Afternoon, Pastor Dan,” the apparent leader of the bunch said, his vivid blue eyes homing in on Amy.

Dan laughed, a sound that was still jolting, yet becoming familiar.

“Ozzie,” Dan acknowledged. With a hand at Amy’s back, he urged her over toward the pool table. “You boys betting again?”

“Durn straight,” Ozzie said, clearly unrepentant in the presence of the preacher. “And I’m paddin’ my retirement fund right nicely, even if I do say so myself. You bet. Who’ve we got here?”

“Amy Marshall,” Dan introduced. “Meet Ozzie Peyton, our esteemed mayor and general all-around meddler. His sidekicks here are Lloyd Brewer—he owns this place—Vern Tillis from the general store and Henry Jenkins, who keeps our livestock and crops fed and healthy.”

Ozzie laid aside his cue stick and took one of Amy’s hands in both of his, his striking blues eyes filled with compassion and something more.

“I knew your grandfather. We served together in the war. He was a good man, always had the best of intentions, you bet. I’m mighty sorry over his passing.”

Automatically she nodded her thanks. *Always had the best of intentions*, he’d said.

Amy was a trained watcher. She had to be to wait out skittish or difficult photography subjects, wait until the right moment, the right atmosphere to get a perfect shot. She didn’t miss the slight shift in the older man’s gaze as he took in both her and Dan at the same time.

Did he know about the will?

Then his name clicked in her mind. The attorney had mentioned Ozzie Peyton when he’d been giving her instructions along with directions to Shotgun Ridge.

She remembered shutting down about that time, too overwhelmed at the chaos of her life to pay much attention, too stunned that she’d actually been maneuvered into taking this step in the first place, agreeing to the crazy terms of the well-meaning, obviously nutty man she’d loved dearly.

She felt Dan’s hand slide around her waist, a clear gesture of support, and sensed him watching her. She gave him a smile to let him know she wasn’t in danger of fainting, even if her insides were trembling like a quiet brook rippled by a gusty breeze.

“If you boys’ll excuse us, Amy’s had a long drive and is in need of sustenance.”

“Of course. You bet. Lloyd’ll go run down Maedean and get her in here to take your orders.”

“Just tell her to bring out two burger specials with the works,” Dan said, leading Amy to a booth.

A woman came through the swinging doors with a pitcher of water and two glasses. “I’ll take care of it, dear,” she said to Lloyd.

As Amy slid into the booth, the woman set the glasses and pitcher on the table, then wiped her hand on her apron and held it out. “I’m Iris Brewer. Part owner of this joint, wife to that old coot over there and all-around grandma to the little ones in town.”

Amy smiled. She liked this woman in an instant. Friendly, motherly, *capable*. Iris’s hand was small but surprisingly strong in Amy’s grip.

“Amy Marshall,” she said.

“You’re new...” She laughed. “Well, of course you are. Silly of me to point out the obvious. Will you be staying long?”

Heat crept up Amy’s face. She didn’t blush often. In her secondary line of work, she’d gotten over that trait in the first week.

Before she could think of a good answer, Iris backtracked. “Oh, that was rude of me. You’re probably starving half to death and here I go with twenty questions. You kids just get settled in, and I’ll go rustle up those hamburgers. That’ll put you right and at ease in no time at all.”

She bustled away, and Amy felt acutely embarrassed. Dan was watching her and her nerves were screaming. All this over a silly, telltale blush.

She took a sip of water, then looked across the table at Dan. The older men had gone back to their pool game, and Amy felt comfortable that their conversation would indeed remain private.

“I have no idea where to start.”

“Anywhere’s fine. I’m pretty adept at jumping in at most any point and keeping up.”

“I suppose you get a lot of people telling you their troubles?”

“A few. Are you going to tell me your troubles?”

“It’d be the kind thing to do since you’re a big part of them. Oh, that didn’t come out right. But the mess I’m in could affect you, too.”

He leaned back in the booth, gave her his attention. “I’m all yours.”

Oh, buddy, you have no idea how those words are about to bite you in the butt.

“Though we’ve obviously never met,” she said, “I guess the two of us have somewhat of a past.”

He raised a brow, and she lost her train of thought. The man poured more sex appeal into a simple gesture than most men could manage in an entire, well thought out seduction. The blood hummed in her veins and her hands trembled.

This was going to be much more difficult than she'd imagined. And she'd already imagined a great deal of difficulty.

"A past?" he prompted.

"Our fathers went to college together at Georgia Tech and for some crazy reason, they made a betrothal pact to marry off their firstborn kids."

Dan chuckled. "Amy, my dad's a minister. I can't imagine him doing something like that. And besides, a boyhood pact isn't a legally binding document."

She glared at him. She'd had the same flippant, dismissing attitude herself; disbelieving, brushing the idea off as ludicrous, not worthy of a second thought.

All that had changed when Gramps's attorney had forcibly sat her down, made her listen, heaped a responsibility on her shoulders she wanted nothing to do with.

"I'm only telling you what I know. I didn't say it was sane. Do you want to hear this or not?"

With obvious skepticism, he nodded. "I'm listening."