

Chapter 1

SOMEONE LEFT a dead canary in Abbe Shea's mailbox.

She didn't need three guesses to figure out its meaning. The lifeless yellow bird—a *baby* bird—was the Mafia's way of warning her what happens to the children of people who "sing."

Forty-eight hours later, she was still trembling like an addict who needed a fix.

Damn it, she'd kept her silence for five months now. She hadn't told a soul that she'd witnessed her fiancé's murder—or that she could identify the shooter.

Shouldn't that prove something? Did these people actually think she'd risk her daughter's life?

In addition to front-page newspaper headlines, every television station in the country carried hourly reports on the Texas Rangers' apprehension and arrest of Lucca Ziggmorelli, a key member of a Las Vegas crime family. The charges were drug trafficking and money laundering.

Abbe knew he was guilty of much, much more.

And that made her a liability—to the Ziggmorellis and, worse, to her own daughter.

She took a final walk through her grandmother's house, where she'd been living for the past five months, her gaze touching items that brought both good memories and ones that made her cringe. She was leaving so much behind. But it couldn't be helped. Grandma Jane and Mama were gone now—Grandma taken home to Jesus, and Mama... well, that was a mystery. Abbe had no idea if her mother was alive or dead, and her regret was keen. There were so many things she wanted to say to her, to apologize for.

How had life become such a mess? Abbe had thought she could start over here in Hope Valley, Texas. It was the sort of place where acceptance was unconditional and people actually spoke to one another when they passed on the street.

She should have known better.

She should have known that one of the first places they would look for her was her mother's hometown.

"Jolie?" she called. "Sweetie babe, we need to hurry up now. It's time to go."

Jolene, her three-year-old, streaked through the living room, short blond pigtails bouncing, a fluffy white puppy hopping at her heels. The teacup Maltese, Harley, skidded on the hardwood floor and tumbled onto the rug.

"I gots to find Lambie-pie!" Jolene wailed. "Her's lost."

Abbe breathed deeply, trying to still the nerves clawing at her stomach. Jolene hardly made a move without her stuffed lamb, so how could it be lost?

"The last time I saw her, she was sitting on your potty chair."

Jolene's jaw dropped, and her eyes went round. "Oh! I forgot. Her had to go tee-tee." With that announcement, Jolene dashed toward the bathroom. Neon-pink lights flashed from the soles of her tiny sneakers each time they connected with the cabbage-rose-patterned area rug. The puppy raced after her, clearly delighted with the blinking shoes.

Jolene had taken the news of their pending trip in stride. She was a happy, agreeable child, always ready for an adventure. Abbe couldn't bear the thought of anything happening to her little girl. The energetic cherub was her absolute heart.

Now, realizing that the Ziggmorelli family had found them so easily, especially the manner in which they'd let that be known, Abbe was totally spooked.

And that meant they needed to disappear. Go somewhere safe. To someone who could help *keep* them safe.

Her hands shook as she retrieved a manila file folder from the bottom drawer of her grandmother's Bombay chest and stuck it in her suitcase. The information in that file was something she didn't want falling into the wrong hands.

Compiled by a private investigator over a period of thirty years, it was a detailed dossier on Grant Callahan, his home-town of Shotgun Ridge, Montana, and the people who lived there. Reading through the mountain of papers five months ago, she'd gleaned that the small community of Shotgun Ridge was as far removed from the dirty hands of organized crime as possible.

And ever since she'd found the file on her father's computer and read it, she hadn't been able to get Grant Callahan out of her mind. According to the report, he was retired from the U.S. Army's Special Forces and dedicated himself to the horse-breeding farm he owned with his two brothers, but he still accepted assignments on occasion.

She'd made a call yesterday from a pay phone in town to the mayor of Shotgun Ridge, Ozzie Peyton. He'd come through for her just as the dossier had promised. As for Grant Callahan, if the man could infiltrate terrorist groups in foreign countries and rescue kidnapped executives, he could surely help her.

At least she hoped so. She'd been naive in the past, so trusting and gullible, accepting all the nice things money could buy, and never questioning where that money came from.

God, she'd made mistakes. She'd floated through life as though it were her own personal fairy tale, fallen in love, given birth to a beautiful little girl. Then, in a single day, all the security she'd ever known had been yanked out from under her in the most hideous, terrifying way—and she'd had to grow up in a hurry.

Looking back, she realized she'd been taken care of most of her life—first by her mom, then by her adoptive father, Stewart Shea, then by her fiancé, Tommy Donato.

Now she was on her own, and all the scary decisions rested solely on her shoulders.

Abbe hoped to God she was making the right ones.

Because her daughter's life was at stake.

With urgency pressing her chest, she loaded the rest of their suitcases into the car, put Harley into his pet carrier, then corralled Jolie and Lambie-pie, and strapped them into the car seat. They were traveling light—two cases each, plus a box of Jolie's toys, and some photo albums. The amount of baggage they could take was limited, due to the weight restrictions of the

plane. She'd gone to the airfield earlier that day and calculated her fuel based on what she'd packed. She'd also gone over the aircraft inch by inch, sweeping it for signs of tampering or a tracking device, praying she'd know one if she saw it.

Jolene fell asleep before they even reached the main highway, and Abbe appreciated the silence. Her stomach was knotted with tension, her nerves were frayed, and somehow she had to pretend that nothing was amiss. Moms were supposed to be strong, to never let their children see their fears. Most moms, anyway. Her own had been just the opposite.

Abbe took the turnoff for Hope Field, the county airstrip where she kept her Beechcraft Baron B58. She was glad she hadn't let pride persuade her not to keep the plane—a gift from her father. After pulling her Jeep next to the Baron, she took her sleeping daughter out of the car seat and transferred her to the one in the back seat of the airplane. She left the cockpit door open while she went back for the puppy, then loaded their luggage into the cargo hold.

The cell phone in her purse rang, and a rush of adrenaline shot straight to her head. Annoyed with herself, she checked the caller ID.

Her father.

Her *adoptive* father.

She'd been waiting for him to return her phone call, but now she felt nervous about it. She hadn't spoken to him since she'd left Las Vegas in January—five months ago.

"Hello, Pop." Her voice was flat, with just the barest hint of a tremble.

"I got your message," Stewart Shea said in a deceptively gentle voice, one that revealed a slight trace of his Irish roots. "I suppose you've seen the news?"

"Who hasn't? The local stations here in Texas are liable to wear out the footage from playing it so often." She speared her fingers through her hair, surprised when her hand hit bare skin at her nape. She still wasn't used to the trendy short style Donetta Presley-Carmichael had given her two weeks ago.

"We need to talk about—"

"I received a special delivery from the Ziggmorellis," Abbe interrupted. "And it wasn't pretty." The image of that morbid calling card in her mailbox made her skin crawl. "Tell those bastards Jolie is innocent. She's only a baby—she didn't see anything. She can't hurt them. Baby birds don't sing!"

Stewart swore. "They left a dead canary on your doorstep? A baby one?"

She'd known he would understand exactly what she was talking about. "In my mailbox. Call them off, Pop."

"Abbe, Gil Ziggmorelli runs his organization different—"

"I don't care if he dances naked on the supper table. I just want him to rein in his henchmen and leave me and Jolene alone. Can you tell him that, Pop?" She felt weary and scared, caught up in something she hadn't chosen, didn't want any part of. "Gil and his family have nothing to fear from me. Does he honestly think I'd admit to even *knowing* any of those Mafioso goons?" Too late, she realized her words had insulted.

Pop was one of those goons.

Or had been. He'd recently retired—so he'd said. She wasn't sure if she believed him, was no longer even sure she knew who he was. A lump of pain and betrayal formed in her throat. He'd lied to her all her life, letting her believe his work was top-level security in some government agency when all along...

The sounds of traffic and honking horns filtered through the phone line. How many times had she seen Pop walk a short distance down the Vegas Strip and conduct business over his portable phone? She heard the snick of a lighter now, the deep inhalation of breath.

"I thought you quit smoking." Her voice was sharper than she'd intended.

"Tough habit to break."

"You went three years!" He'd supposedly thrown away his last pack of Camels the day Jolene was born.

"Listen to me, Abbe. If you hadn't called, I would have made the first move. You need to lay low for a while."

"I'm way ahead of you," she said. "Pop? Can I trust you?" Odd thing for a daughter to ask. Deep down she thought she could trust him—but a cynical voice inside, one created by the recent hard facts of her life, told her to be wary. And this inability to trust the one person she'd been closest to for so many years was like flying through fog with no instruments or landing gear.

"You ought to know that you can, punkin."

The anguish in his voice sounded so sincere. She nearly told him where she was going, what she planned to do, but at the last minute she changed her mind.

Maybe she *could* trust Pop. But she couldn't trust the people around him—people who kept the firearms, wiretap and tracking-device manufacturers in business.

"Just call someone, Pops, and relay my message, okay?"

"Oh, you better believe I will." The ice in his voice frightened her. She'd only heard him use that tone once before in her life—when she was barely into her teens and had pressed him to tell her about his secret spy work. He'd evaded her questions, but when she'd persisted, his temper had erupted. She'd never asked again.

"Regardless of what's happened between us, Abbe, you're my girl. Gil Ziggmorelli will know I raised you right. And if he doesn't, I've got enough clout and respect to make that known."

She wondered if that was still true. When she'd left Vegas, there'd been some muscle-flexing going on between the Ziggmorelli and Shea families.

Which was partly the reason Lucca Ziggmorelli had murdered Tommy.

"Tell me where you're going," Stewart said, gently now.

"I—I can't take the chance, Pop." Oh, God, she wanted to. Despite the breach in their relationship, she still loved him. He wasn't blood family, but he was the only family she had—or, at least, the only family whose whereabouts she knew. "If I could grant...grant you a wish, Pop, what would it be?"

He was silent for a moment, and she gripped the small cell phone, wondering if he'd picked up on her clue, or if he thought she'd lost her mind. She didn't know if a cellular telephone could be tapped, but she wasn't going to take the chance.

"I've got a shotgun load of wishes, punkin. The most important one is that you be safe and happy. I think I know my kid, though, which means I don't need wishes. You'll be okay."

He understood. Was he surprised? she wondered. That she'd chosen Grant Callahan and Shotgun Ridge to run to?

She checked her watch. Time was ticking away and she was standing out here in the open.

"Okay, Pop. I gotta go now. Take care."

"You, too, punkin."

Abbe pressed the end button on her cell phone, stared at it for a moment, then walked a few feet and tossed it into the trash barrel that rested in the patchy grass at the edge of the asphalt. Her body shuddered, despite the heat radiating from the pavement. She imagined this was probably what a fox experienced when he heard the distant bay of hunting dogs.

Shaking off the eerie sensation, she closed the Baron's cargo hold, glanced up to make sure Jolene was still asleep, then did another thorough walk-around inspection of the plane's exterior, looking for any skin cracks, corrosion on the trim tabs, loose bolts or anything out of the ordinary. She checked the engine oil, tested her fuel mixture, then turned and shaded her eyes as the AVGAS truck pulled alongside the plane. She'd told Dooley earlier that she'd be needing fuel, but hadn't wanted to get it then. She wanted to witness the fuel going into the tanks, wasn't taking any chances that someone could mess with it—as it went in or after it was in.

Her heart bumped when she saw Sheriff Storm Carmichael in the passenger seat of the fuel truck. He hopped down, strode over to the garbage bin, and retrieved her cell phone.

Abbe crossed her arms to disguise their trembling.

"Mornin', Sheriff. Are you moonlighting? Or did you lose the reelection vote?"

"Neither," Storm said with a grin. "I saw you pitch this." He held up her cell phone. "Since my wife's been known to accidentally toss away her hair-cutting scissors when she gets in a hurry, I figured I'd run out here and see if you were afflicted with the same problem. Dooley said you needed fuel, so I saved myself a few steps and hitched a ride with him."

"Fill her up?" Dooley asked.

"Yes, please." She glanced back at the phone in Storm's hand and stepped farther away from the wing as Dooley began pumping fuel.

"This is your phone, isn't it?" Storm asked.

"Yes. I'm, uh, leaving town and won't be needing it."

"You could get one heck of a forwarding bill if someone fishes this out of the dump and decides to connect with long-lost relatives overseas."

"The service is scheduled for shutoff by five o'clock tonight. Um, maybe you could sort of keep it in custody until then?"

He nodded. "I could do that. Is anyone likely to come looking for it?"

Her head jerked up. That was a strange question. Storm Carmichael had once been a Texas Ranger. Injured in an undercover sting that had gone bad, he'd come back to his home-town, been elected Hope Valley Sheriff and married his sister's best friend, Donetta Presley.

Did he know about her connection to Lucca Ziggmorelli?

She hated all this distrust. It simply wasn't her nature. And Storm, after all, was one of the good guys.

Smiling, she said, "Well, if someone does come looking, won't they be surprised to find that my phone's been sent to jail?"

"Where you headed off to?" he asked as he slid the cell phone into his shirt pocket.

"Is it necessary for you to know?" She spoke as gently as she could, not wanting to sound rude.

He studied her, his cop's eyes shrewd and serious. "No," he said at last. "Just curious. I like to have an idea who's coming and going in town and for how long. And Donetta grills me something fierce over people's whereabouts. If you're planning an extended absence, she'll no doubt notice and I'll be the one she hounds for answers."

Abbe licked her lips. "I have a hair appointment booked for next month. I don't think I'll be back for it. Can you tell her for me?" She liked Donetta, liked most of the people here in Hope Valley, and would miss them.

"I can. But *you* could call and tell her."

When she didn't answer, he studied her some more. Abbe appreciated that he didn't pry for details, that he trusted her to know what she was doing. Before he could speak, Dooley interjected with "All topped off, Miss Abbe."

She handed Dooley her credit card. "You haven't seen anyone hanging around my plane since I was here this morning, have you?"

"I been here since before dawn, and you're the only one who's come around at all. And I kept a sharp eye out, just like you asked."

She smiled at the old man. "You're the best, Dooley." She watched as he went back to the fuel truck to write up the ticket and run the credit slip.

"Abbe, if you're in trouble," Storm said, "you know you can count on me to help."

She shook her head. "It's just best if I don't stay in Hope Valley." From her pocket, she retrieved the keys to her Jeep and handed them to Storm. "I wouldn't mind if my Jeep was incarcerated along with the cell phone." That was one thing she hadn't really thought about. What to do with her vehicle.

“Maybe you could keep an eye on my grandmother’s house, too? I can’t really tell you more, because I just don’t know when, or even *if* I’ll be back to deal with things.”

Dooley walked up with her credit card. She signed the slip. “Thanks, Dooley.”

“Anytime, Miss Abbe.” He looked back at Storm. “You ridin’ back with me, Sheriff?”

“You go on ahead. I’ll move Abbe’s Jeep for her.”

Dooley tipped his grease-stained cowboy hat and went back to the fuel truck.

Storm nodded toward the credit-card slip she held in her hand. “You know things like that are the equivalent of leaving a trail of bread crumbs. Assuming you’re concerned about someone who might be interested in your whereabouts...”

“Yes, I realize that. I also filed a flight plan. To Jamestown, North Dakota. From there, it’ll be anyone’s guess which direction I might have headed.” She gazed at Storm, waited a moment for her meaning to sink in. “This is a big country, and I’m an experienced pilot.”

Storm nodded and reached out to shake her hand. “I hope we see you again, Abbe Shea. Meanwhile, take care of yourself and that little girl.” He withdrew a card from his pocket and passed it to her. “If you ever need anything, don’t hesitate to call. You have friends in Hope Valley.”

Abbe had to get out of here before she embarrassed herself and bawled like a baby. She *did* know she had friends here. “Thanks. Give Donetta a hug for me.”

Although she’d been there for the fueling of her plane, she drained a small amount from the tank into a glass vial and rechecked the color and clarity to make sure the gas was the proper grade and didn’t contain any contaminants. Satisfied, she stepped onto the wing and climbed into the cockpit. Jolie was still fast asleep, and the puppy, curled up in his small crate next to the seat, was, too.

She’d filed a flight plan from Texas to North Dakota because she *wanted* to leave a trail—but only up to a point. Flying IFR—instrument flight rules—meant that air traffic control would monitor her journey, know her coordinates. Not only would she be easily traceable, but with Jolie on board, being followed by radar was the safest way to travel. From Jamestown, she would refuel, have a short rest and something to eat, then take off again, this time flying VFR—visual flight rules—for the shorter hop to Montana. She just prayed that the weather remained clear.

As always, when she started the Baron’s twin engines, she felt a rush of excitement behind her breastbone. Flying was one of her passions. In the air she was free, with plenty of time and space to think and to dream.

With her feet firmly on the brakes, she did the prerequisite “run up” before takeoff, pushing the engines up to 1,700 rpm as she studied the gauges. Magneto, fuel flow, temperature and pressure all checked out, and with butterflies winging in her stomach, she taxied onto the short runway.

“Here we go,” she whispered. Since there was no tower at the airport, she visually swept the cloudless blue sky for air traffic, then keyed the mike. “77Foxtrot is departing Hope Field on runway one-eight with a left turn to the east,” she announced into the blind, letting any other aircraft in the area know she was taking off.

Pushing the throttles all the way forward, she watched the ground disappear rapidly beneath her. Sixty knots. Seventy. Eighty...eighty-five. She pulled back on the yoke, felt her stomach dip, watched the Baron’s nose rise as the tires left solid ground, and the aircraft began its climb.

She was leaving behind the familiar and flying toward the unknown. At one time in her life, the adventure would have thrilled her. Now, however, she felt anxious. She needed to figure out exactly how she was going to present herself to the people of Shotgun Ridge, Montana—and more specifically, to Grant Callahan.

Being open and honest wasn’t an option—at least not until she knew whom she could trust.

Chapter 2

THE AIR IN THE STABLES was ripe with the smell of antiseptic solution, animal, and sexual anticipation. As many times as Grant Callahan had witnessed the sometimes violent act of equine mating, he still felt a tug of arousal himself at the fury and beauty of it all.

“Easy does it, War Party. Let’s show the lady a good time.” The muscles in his arms burned as he held firm to the powerful stallion’s lead shank. Ethan and Clay, Grant’s brothers and partners in Callahan and Sons Farms, quickly readied Irish Maiden in the breeding chute.

As a rule, War Party behaved like a gentleman when it came to “covering” the various mares in what he considered his personal harem. Irish Maiden was a little haughtier and more aloof than some of the other mares, but her behavior when the chestnut stallion curled his lip and screamed his mating call proved that the two magnificent champions were sweet on each other. Irish immediately urinated, enticing the stallion with both her scent and her readiness.

“Hussy,” he murmured to Irish with a soft chuckle, and slackened his hold on War Party’s lead. “Hold her head up and still,” he said to Ethan while Clay pulled the mare’s wrapped tail out of the way. “This girl’s ready. Better let him at her while she’s hot.”

The stallion jumped a bit too eagerly and Grant swore, shoving his shoulder against the horse’s flank to help get him in position. The clumsy mounting might have spelled disaster with a less experienced stallion or handling team.

But Grant and his brothers had learned the business of breeding horses when they were mere boys, taught by their father, Fred Callahan, who’d shown up at a farm in Idaho one day to purchase quarter horses and ended up buying three little boys from their abusive foster parents, who believed children were good for slave work and little else. Not many bachelors would enlist the help of an entire town in adopting hard-luck kids who, at eight, six and five, had already developed attitudes, but Fred Callahan had been an exceptional man among men.

It was times like right now that Grant missed his dad the most. Fred Callahan had always delighted in being part of the process when excellent bloodlines were about to be mixed. But pancreatic cancer had claimed him several years ago, and Grant's heart still ached.

War Party's tail began to flag and Grant brought his concentration back where it belonged. Ten or fifteen seconds was all it took for the stallion to ejaculate. Irish Maiden didn't seem to mind the slam-bam-thank-you-ma'am style of the event.

Deeming the covering successful, Grant nodded to Ethan and Clay, and Irish Maiden was released and led away in the opposite direction from War Party.

"Hey, Grant!" He heard Manny Davis, his stable manager, call. "Phone for you."

Grant transferred War Party's lead into Clay's capable hands. The stallion would need to be washed and cooled down before being turned out to graze.

He removed his gloves and was heading for the phone in the barn when he heard a low-flying airplane buzz the area. It was the second time in the past few minutes. "Take a message, will ya, Manny?"

Grant stepped outside, shading his eyes against the mid-afternoon sun, and saw the twin-engine Baron circling their private landing strip. Shotgun Ridge was a small town and he knew every aircraft and pilot in the area who might be paying him a neighborly call. He didn't recognize this one.

He listened for sounds of engine distress, indicating a need for a forced landing, and didn't hear any, but it sure looked like that pilot was aiming for a place to set down. Knowing his brothers were handling the remainder of the breeding chores, he jumped into his truck and reached for the keys that always dangled from the ignition switch.

That was what he loved about this town—the lack of crime and ugliness. God knows he'd seen enough ugliness to last him a lifetime.

For a bare instant, a small boy's lifeless eyes flashed in his mind. Sweat dampened his spine, and his gut twisted. Slamming that mental door shut, he hit the gas and headed out across his large breeding farm, where million-dollar horses grazed in verdant pastures.

It took only a couple of minutes to reach the private airstrip. His hat brushed the windshield as he leaned forward, watching the twin-engine, B58 Baron's tires kiss the asphalt with barely a chirp. He took a moment to appreciate the pilot's skill, then stopped the truck and got out, surprised when the plane taxied right up to the hangar as though the pilot had mistaken his spread for a bed-and-breakfast with hangar parking included.

Not that he didn't have room for another aircraft. Containing only the Bell Ranger helicopter and his two Cessnas, his twelve-thousand-square-foot hangar echoed.

He watched as the Baron pivoted, the right wing pointing in his direction. The first thing he saw was an itty-bitty girl with her nose pressed to the back window, her little arm waving like crazy. Over her blond pigtails, she wore a tiny headset with a boom mike.

Grant chuckled. He couldn't see the pilot, but the pint-size passenger, with her wide smile, sure seemed happy enough. She looked to be close to his niece's age—Katie was nearly three and had her uncle Grant wrapped around her pinkie.

The right door opened and the pilot stepped out onto the wing.

A woman. Damn, he was a sucker for damsels in distress. Assuming this one was in distress.

She straightened and gave him a friendly wave before she flipped the seat's back forward to unstrap the child.

Appreciation jumped in his stomach in a way he hadn't felt in a long time as he walked toward her and stopped at the base of the wing. She had short blond hair and sun-kissed skin, which the cotton-candy-pink tank top over hip-hugging jeans set off to perfection.

"Need any help?" he called.

She ducked back out of the cockpit and looked over her shoulder, her smile as warm as the child's—but affecting him in a totally different way.

"Hey," she said in greeting. "I'm looking for Grant Callahan. Have I put down on the right strip?"

His surprise, and his hesitation, were only slight. She had a soft Southern drawl. Man, that got him every time. "You've found him."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that. I'm Abbe Shea, your new tenant and the schoolteacher come fall." She reached into the back seat and emerged with the toddler, who promptly waved at him again.

Grant's muscles tensed and his senses went on alert. His tenant? Since when? He had an unoccupied guest house, yes, but he hadn't advertised it for rent.

"You want to take this shameless little flirt," she asked, "or tackle the cargo hold?"

"I'll start with this one." He reached up and snagged the toddler. "Hey, squirt. You got a name?"

"Jo—lene," She drawled the name in that cute Southern accent, then giggled. "But Mommy calls me Jolie. I'm free years old. And dis is Lambie-pie." She shoved a stuffed lamb in his face, nearly knocking off his hat.

Despite his wariness, he couldn't help but grin. "You seem awfully happy for someone who's been cooped up in a plane. Somebody slip you a happy pill?"

Her pigtails smacked him in the face as she vigorously shook her head. He laughed.

The sexy-as-hell schoolteacher jumped off the wing holding a duffel bag and what appeared to be a pet carrier. He couldn't see what it contained.

"Jolene's *always* this happy," she declared. "Even at five in the morning, when she thinks I should get up and play." She set down her luggage, hooked her sunglasses into the scooped neck of her tank top and thrust out her hand. "Hey, again," she said when they shook hands.

Her eyes were clear green with tiny flecks of brown, her lips pouty and unadorned. There was a nervousness beneath her smile a less observant person would have missed, further putting him on guard. Grant was a detail man, trained—compliments of the United States Army—to read body language and sum up a person and their motives in a matter of seconds.

At one time, his life had depended on it.

He pegged her as coming from a moneyed background. It was in the way she carried herself, the obvious quality of her clothes, the Prada label on her sunglasses—not to mention that she flew her own airplane. Even if it was a rental, the fees and fuel would be steep.

So why would a woman of this apparent caliber apply for a teaching position in a town that was barely a dot on the map? If she needed money, she'd choose a cheaper mode of transportation—and work in a school district that paid higher wages than the community of Shotgun Ridge could afford.

“You don't fit my image of a schoolteacher.” His gaze dipped to her modest cleavage and then swung to her plane.

“No? What did you expect?”

“Arrival by car, for starters. A little more meat on the bones and a few wrinkles. Pretty much like Mrs. Laboard, my third-grade teacher. The hairdo's close, but Mrs. Laboard wouldn't have looked good in that streaky shade of blond.”

She thrust a hand through her short hair. Every strand fell right back into place. “I hope I'm not too big a disappointment.”

“I can live with it. What's in the carrier?” He nodded at the thing as he set Jolie on the ground.

“Bad judgment,” she said, releasing a little ball of fluff at his feet. “Meet Harley, our eight-month-old Maltese puppy.”

“Darlin', that's no puppy. It's a coyote snack.”

“Shh.” Her gaze slid to Jolene, who was busy stepping on ants. “He's an indoor dog...I'm sorry. I forgot to ask Ozzie Peyton if you allowed pets. I just assumed...this being a ranch and all...” She tugged at the hem of her top. “Harley's housebroken and he doesn't bark.”

Her expression was apologetic, her tone resolute. If he objected to the pitiful excuse for a canine—which he didn't, other than its miniature size—he'd obviously have to get over it in a hurry.

“You know our mayor?” Just the mention of Ozzie's name gave him a clearer picture of what was going on. That meddling old fool.

“Actually,” Abbe said, “Ozzie is an acquaintance of...my father's. I called about a place to rent and he set me up here and offered me the teaching job, to boot. I know it's short notice and all—Harley! Stop eating the rocks. Come here!” She bent and fished a pebble from the dog's mouth.

Grant wondered about the slight hesitation at the mention of her father, and at the way her green eyes flicked away. Something wasn't quite right here—and Ozzie Peyton had some explaining to do.

God help them all.