

Prologue

"I tell you, some of the boys in this town just don't know a good thing when they see it!" Ozzie Peyton stoked the fire in the fireplace, satisfied with the soothing warmth that rushed through the room like a welcome burst of sunshine.

Some might call him a crazy old fool, but he liked to keep the house comfortable for his sweet Vanessa. Her portrait hung above the mantel, and though she'd gone to the hereafter several years back, she was still his best friend and confidante.

"Why, the woman's right under his nose," he lamented to Vanessa. "But do you think he'd do anything about it? Heck no. He even let her get away with staying home on Thanksgiving—but I told you about that, didn't I, love?"

He sighed and sat down with his journal. Since Vanessa had passed on, he'd been keeping a record of his daily thoughts, his plans—especially the ones he, Lloyd, Vern, and Henry cooked up.

Not that the four of them were such a devious bunch. But once they'd tried their hand at this here matchmakin' business, the excitement had simply swept them away. Nothing made a man feel better than when love was in the air.

"Families and babies, that's our aim, you bet. The sound of sweet children's voices. Kelly Anderson has two of the cutest tykes. The littlest one is so quiet." His loving gaze rested on Vanessa's smiling lips. "You'd have gentled her, love, eased out her secrets and gotten her to open up, I just know it. And it's at times like this that I miss you so much."

He told himself he wasn't going to get all maudlin. Vanessa would have his hide. She'd been a sunny woman, so filled with goodness and compassion. The good Lord had seen fit to take her too soon, in Ozzie's opinion, but he didn't like to question the Man Upstairs.

There were reasons for everything—including heartache.

"Plenty of heartache with Kelly Anderson and her little girls, I'm thinking. You remember Bill Dunaway, don't you, darlin'? He was part of my squadron back in the service—a young, wet-behind-the-ears medic. Kelly's his daughter, and when he called me to talk over her problems, well, it just seemed like the perfect plan to have her come on out here and work for Chance for a spell. The boy's fairly hopping in the medical arena these days."

Outside the big picture window, snowflakes drifted gently from the night sky. So far they were having a mild winter in Montana, which was practically unheard of.

"If the weather can cooperate, I don't know why the fool kids can't do the same. Why, before long, I'm thinking we're—the boys and me—are gonna just have to knock their heads together. Chance and Kelly's, that is."

He sighed and picked up his pen. "I know, I know, love. Subtle. I'm an ornery old cuss, though. Thought this one had just fallen plum into our laps, what with old Bill calling me out of the blue that way. I'll give them till Christmas." He gazed back at the portrait where dancing flames from the fireplace cast shadows over Vanessa's face, giving her the look of a Madonna.

"Wouldn't mind a little help from your department, if you know what I mean. If you could just speak to the Man Upstairs... Well, you do your best, sweetheart. After all, it's Christmastime. The season for miracles."

Chapter 1

Kelly Anderson heard the sound of sleigh bells.

"Mommy, come look!" Six-year-old Jessica snatched at the lace curtains, then abandoned her place at the front window and bounded off the couch. Four-year-old Kimberly, her round eyes filled with wonder, reached for Kelly's hand, giving a slight tug—a bid for action or protection, she couldn't tell.

It broke her heart that her youngest daughter hadn't spoken a word in six months. At one time she'd been a chatterbox just like her older sister. But tragedy had trapped her voice inside a broken little soul that hours of therapy had failed to mend.

Kelly had hoped the temporary move to Shotgun Ridge, Montana, would heal the horrors a four-year-old should never have had to witness.

They'd been here a little more than a month now, and Kimmy was still silent.

"Come on, Mom! Hurry!"

"I'm coming," she said, letting her daughters drag her out onto the front porch of Mildred and Opal Bagley's boardinghouse.

The night air was downright freezing, something she still wasn't used to, especially coming from California's mild climate.

Her heart gave a little flip, then softened in absolute delight. A reluctant smile pulled at her mouth.

Dr. Chance Hammond, her sexy-as-sin temporary employer, was parked at the curb...in a sleigh of all things. Well, it looked like a sleigh, anyway. A sort of retrofitted hay wagon pulled by two well-behaved horses adorned with wreaths of jingling bells on their yokes.

She recalled a conversation she'd had with her father hardly a month ago. Frustrated with the turmoil her life was in, she'd wondered what had happened to the days of *Little House on the Prairie*, where neighbors helped neighbors, folks paid for medical services in chickens and homemade canned goods, and life moved at a pace where a person could at least catch her breath.

Looking at the sight before her, she decided she'd found it.

"Get your coats, ladies," Chance called, his hands holding the reins loosely. "Your chariot awaits."

"I wasn't aware I'd ordered a chariot," Kelly said.

He cocked a sexy brow and Kelly felt an unwelcome tug of response flutter in her stomach. She wasn't here to start a relationship with a man—especially a doctor—but this one was fairly persistent. Ever since she'd come to work at his small clinic, he'd made no secret of his attraction to her.

"Aw, you've forgotten already. The drive-through live nativity production starts tonight."

"I didn't forget. It's only down the street a ways." Although the thought of walking two blocks in the snow made her shiver on general principle. Her blood had yet to thicken sufficiently. She'd been cold since she'd arrived in Montana.

“Now why would you want to walk when you’ve got a perfectly good sleigh and tour guide to get you there?”

“Please, Mommy?” Jessica hopped up and down. “Kimberly wants to go! She said so.”

Kelly glanced down at her youngest daughter. The little girl hadn’t uttered a word, but that didn’t stop Jessica from claiming to know her sister’s mind. Kimberly chose not to use her vocal cords, but her eyes spoke volumes.

And Kelly would do anything to hear that sweet voice once again.

She looked back at Chance. “All right. Give me a minute to get our coats.”

He gave her a grin that made her nerves skitter in a way they hadn’t in a very long time, a grin that reminded her of the wolf in one of the fairy tales she read to her girls. Well, he’d just have to turn that charm on someone else.

She wasn’t taking up with Dr. Chance Hammond, and she wasn’t letting him figuratively walk her through the woods to Grandma’s house.

She would, however, accept a short ride to the church’s drive-through nativity production.

For her daughters, she told herself.

After bundling against the weather in gloves, scarves and heavy coats, she herded Jessica and Kimberly out to the sleigh.

Chance hopped down and lifted each of the girls into the wagon, then turned to Kelly, reaching out.

She sidestepped him. “I think I can manage.”

He shook his head. “My mama taught me to be chivalrous to the ladies.”

He put his hands at her waist, and she gripped his arms, looking up into his laughing eyes. “Your mama teach you to flirt, too?”

A few gentle flakes of snow drifted onto his hat. He winked. “This isn’t flirting, Hollywood. When I decide to flirt, you’ll definitely know.”

Oh, he was so smooth. And so charming. And ever since she’d told him she’d come from Beverly Hills, he’d been calling her Hollywood. She’d quit correcting him after the first couple of days at the clinic. “Are those sheep’s clothes under that coat?”

He laughed. “Now the woman calls me a wolf.”

“Did I, now?” She shouldn’t be standing in the freezing cold, gazing up at him like a young girl in her first blush of a crush, but she couldn’t help it. Chance Hammond was a difficult man to resist.

“Implied,” he corrected himself. “And they’re shepherd’s clothes, thank you so much for noticing. I’m in charge of the donkeys.” Beneath his coat was a flowing white costume that didn’t quite reach the hem of his jeans.

“Don’t shepherds watch the sheep?”

“Wyatt Malone’s in charge of them. Him being a cattleman and all, he wants to keep a close eye on the critters for fear they’ll get loose and mow his grazing land down to the roots.”

“In this snow?”

Chance shrugged and hoisted her into the sleigh, grinning at her surprised gasp. “Those cattlemen haven’t met a sheep yet they trust.”

Yes, well, Kelly wasn’t too trusting of this particular shepherd, either.

He vaulted up on the seat, glanced back at Jessica and Kimberly. “Ready, girls?” When they nodded happily, he clicked his tongue at the horses and set them moving slowly down Main Street.

Kelly felt the bite of frigid air against her cheeks. Christmas was definitely in the air. The night was so clear she could see for miles across the prairie as she glanced back over her shoulder, away from town.

Facing forward again, listening to the merry jingle of the bells on the horses, Kelly took in the sights and sounds. They had an otherworldly feel, far removed from anything she’d ever experienced.

The town was breathtakingly beautiful. Christmas lights twinkled in candy colors of red, green, blue and orange, strung along every available length of eaves on the storefronts they passed.

Carly McCall’s boutique windows glittered with shiny baubles and balls draped on mannequins adorned in old-fashioned lace and velvet. Buttons and trim and all manner of sewing notions lay scattered against cotton batting that resembled fresh-fallen snow.

At the end of Main Street, a twenty-foot decorated Douglas fir straddled the courthouse and churchyard, a bright star at its highest point.

Cars were already lined up behind a barricade guarded by one of Sheriff Cheyenne Bodine’s deputies.

“My gosh, I didn’t know this was going to be such a huge production,” Kelly said.

“Compliments of Emily Bodine,” Chance said. “The woman knows her business when it comes to advertising.”

“I’ll say.” Kelly had just started working at the clinic when Emily had come to town, pregnant with twins as the result of a surrogate agreement with her sister and Cheyenne Bodine’s brother. The woman’s capacity to love touched Kelly and everyone else in town—especially the man who’d become Emily’s handsome husband, Sheriff Cheyenne Bodine.

“A camel!” Jessica squealed from behind them, bouncing just behind Chance’s shoulder. “Look, Kimmy!”

Both little girls poked their heads between Chance and Kelly, their round eyes agog.

“Pretty cool, huh?” Chance said with a wink. “Ethan Callahan had the camels and donkeys trucked in, Wyatt Malone provided the cows and sheep, and Stony Stratton brought horses.”

They’d barely pulled the sleigh off to the side of the church before Jessica and Kimberly were clamoring to get down.

“Careful, girls,” Kelly cautioned. “We don’t want to spook the animals.”

“Can we pet ’em?” Jessica asked while Kimberly’s eyes pleaded.

“Course you can pet them,” Chance said. “As long as your mom or me are with you. Careful of the camels, though. They spit.”

“Do not!”

He grinned, winked at Jessica and ruffled Kimmy’s hair. “Scout’s honor.”

Kelly raised a brow. “Were you a Scout?”

“Well, no. But they do spit—the camels, that is.”

He took off his coat and Kelly smiled at his shepherd costume. He was likely to freeze his buns off in this weather. Since they were nice buns, she thought that’d be a pity.

“Silent Night” played through huge speakers positioned on the church steps. A tent with portable heaters housed tables laden with cookies, hot chocolate and urns of steaming coffee.

“I need my shepherds in place!” Dan Lucas called. The pastor’s booming laughter rang around the parking lot, vying with the sounds of animals, children and Christmas hymns.

“That’s me,” Chance said. “Coming?”

Kelly shook her head. “We’re not in costume. I’ll catch you on your break.”

“Aw, Mom,” Jessica complained.

“Plenty of time to visit with the animals and do a walk-through,” she told her daughter. “We’ll go help out at the concession stand for a while.”

Chance nodded and headed for his place, taking the lead ropes of the donkeys he was in charge of.

Kelly watched him go, admiring his grace, his height, his willingness to participate. Even wearing a shepherd’s robe, there was no denying the man’s masculinity. He radiated it like a beacon. Which made his charm all the more appealing.

Oh, she knew there was an attraction between them—she’d have to be blind to miss it. But she’d made it clear right from the get-go that she wasn’t interested in a relationship.

Kimberly and Jessica had to be her first priority. Life had turned upside down for them all during the past year.

This was a stopover, a chance to heal, a chance to rethink and regroup.

And as much as her battered feminine soul wanted to answer the call of Chance Hammond’s flirtations, she knew she had to resist.

Holding her hands out for Jessica and Kimberly, she made her way over to the concession stand just as cars were beginning to turn into the church parking lot. They would make the loop from Main Street through the church lot, driving slowly to take in the live nativity and listen to the Christmas hymns. If they wanted, they could stop at the refreshment stand for a hot drink passed through the car window.

Iris Brewer, who owned Brewer’s Saloon in town, looked up from pouring steaming coffee into a plastic cup.

“Well hello, there, loves. Did Mildred and Opal come with you all?”

“No,” Kelly said. “They claimed their bones weren’t up to standing in the cold half the night. They’ll be along later, though.”

Mildred and Opal Bagley were widowed sisters who owned the boardinghouse where Kelly was staying. The sisters were characters, fond of bickering good-naturedly, yet were as sweet and welcoming as you could ask for. But Kelly knew she needed to find other housing. In another week or so, extended families would start showing up for the holiday celebrations, and since the new hotel wasn’t built yet, the Bagley widows’ boardinghouse was going to be bursting at the seams.

“Can we help out?” Kelly asked Iris.

“Of course. I’ll hand you the coffee and hot chocolate, and you can pass it right through the car windows. The little ones can help with the cookies, but mind that you stay close to your mom,” she cautioned them. “No getting toes under the tires, you hear?”

Jessica and Kimberly were happy to have a job and puffed up their little chests importantly.

“We don’t see much of you, Kelly,” Vera Tillis commented as she lined up to wish the cruisers a merry Christmas and smile at excited children bouncing in the back seats of the cars. “I trust you got over your bug?”

Kelly pulled the collar of her coat higher around her chin, not only to ward off the icy-cold air, but to hide.

“Um, I’m fine. Thank you for asking.” She’d told an outright fib when Chance had asked her to join him at one of the neighbor’s houses on Thanksgiving.

Somehow, though, the man made even a simple request for a patient consult sound like a date. Socializing outside of work was simply too risky.

Tonight, she’d had little choice. He’d been sneaky, brought the sleigh and appealed to Jessica and Kimberly, knowing full well the girls would sway her decision.

She’d have looked like a mean old witch if she’d refused to go with him.

Besides, there was no sense in her daughters suffering because she was worried about keeping a lid on her emotions. Soon enough, Chance would get tired of the chase and give up on her. Men usually did when something wasn’t serving their needs. She ought to know.

A steady stream of cars lined the streets of the town, and after a while, Kelly forgot all about being cold. They’d gone through several urns of coffee and cocoa, and backup pots were already brewing.

“Can we go look at the baby Jesus and camels now?” Jessica asked.

“Yes, do go,” Iris encouraged. “I see Mildred and Opal headed up the walk. They’ll take over for you.”

Kelly adjusted Kimberly’s scarf, tucking it more snugly around her neck, buttoned Jessica’s coat and gave a warning look when the little girl started to complain, then held out her hands, holding both her daughters close to her side as they slipped between cars and moved toward the nativity scene.

A huge crèche, built by the town's contractor, Jake McCall, was the focal point of the production, a bright star seemingly floating several feet above the wooden structure. One of the new babies in town—Kelly wasn't sure which, Eden's, Dora's or one of Emily's twins—was being lowered into a bed of straw. Probably one of the twins, because Emily was stepping in to play the part of Mary, and her husband, Cheyenne, was dressed as Joseph, gazing in wonder at the baby in the manger.

People from all over the county and as far away as Miles City and Billings lined the streets with cars and pickups, cruising by to view the Christmas scene.

One of the camels, an impressive seven feet in height, was standing and looking bored half to death. Another was kneeling, its knobby knees bent, long eyelashes fanning its eyes. Portable heaters kept the set warm, and the cabin-size wood structure kept stray snow flurries off the cast of characters.

Chance held the lead ropes of two donkeys. He looked up and saw her coming, spoke to Wyatt Malone—who was indeed minding the sheep with an eagle eye—then handed one of the donkeys off to his friend and moved around behind the crèche motioning for Kelly to follow.

"How's it going, Hollywood?"

She shivered inside her jacket. "Freezing."

"Aw, this is mild. Wait'll we get a blizzard—" he winked "—and we have to make a house call."

"I think I can wait." That was another thing that made her feel as though she'd stepped back in time. House calls. Where she came from, that was unheard of. But they were very much a part of Chance Hammond's medical practice.

Jessica whispered something to Kimberly, and both little girls gazed at the top of the Christmas tree several yards away, then looked above the crèche to the Star of Bethlehem suspended by wires.

"Do you believe in angels?" Jessica asked Chance.

He smiled. "Sure."

"Did you *see* her?"

"Yep."

"No. Not the toy one on the tree," Jessica insisted.

"Oh. You mean the ones over there?" He pointed to where a choir of angels were singing Christmas hymns, flashlights hidden beneath their silver wings to give a glow to the wings and halos.

"No, the *real* one."

"Jess," Kelly cautioned when her daughter's voice raised an octave in impatience.

Chance winked. "I guess I didn't see her, then. Probably only special little girls get to see real ones."

Kimberly looked at him, her eyes as solemn as his tone. He reached out and trailed a gentle finger over her cheek.

Passing the donkey's lead rope to Kelly, he said, "Can you hold this for a second?"

Kelly didn't want the responsibility, but the rope was already in her hands before she could object. Her insides quivered with nerves. She'd heard that animals could sense when someone was afraid, so she did her best to bluff, to pretend that she stood chest to nose with donkeys every day of her life.

She watched Chance as he bent down to inspect the hem of his shepherd costume where a tear in the shape of his boot heel had rent the fabric. Rather than dwell on the proximity of the donkey's teeth to her sweater, she focused on Chance's long fingers. She imagined they could probably stitch a torn seam in fabric as well as they could a life-threatening laceration in skin. He was an excellent doctor.

She glanced up just as an old Buick pulled away from the crèche on its way to make the loop of the church parking lot. Suddenly the car backfired. The explosion of sound ripped through the crèche, setting off a chain reaction that resembled a slow motion free-for-all.

Voices shouted and soothed as animals shied.

The donkey Kelly was holding lunged, nearly knocking her over, and kicked out with his hind legs.

"Watch out!" She shoved Jessica and Kimberly back, but the warning wasn't quick enough for Chance.

He gave a startled yelp as the animal's hoof connected with his temple, knocking him flat on his back where he lay unmoving. Unconscious.

Stony Stratton was at Kelly's side in an instant, taking the reins of the donkey, speaking gently to the animal and getting him back under control.

She rushed to Chance, kneeling in the snow, checking his pulse, the gash on his head. She was only vaguely aware of the crowd that had gathered around them. Her sole focus was on Chance, and she mentally blocked offers of help and words of concern.

"Chance." She called his name loudly, held her hand on his chest when he stirred and tried to sit up. "Stay put."

"What...?"

"Just be still, would you?" Her heart raced, but her hands were steady as a rock as she assessed his injuries, applied pressure to the wound, dug a penlight out of her pocket and shone it in his eyes to check the reaction of his pupils.

"I'm okay," Chance protested. "Just give me a—"

"Hush."

Jessica, disobeying the directive to stay back, peered at the wound like a bloodthirsty ghoul.

"Ew, he's got a big owie. Kimmy, come look."

"Girls, Chance doesn't need an audience." She glanced up at Stony and Cheyenne, who were sticking close in case she needed help, but keeping the crowd at bay to give her room.

"It's not that bad," she said. "Go ahead with the production. I'll shout if I need a hand." Since they were actually behind the crèche, they had a certain amount of privacy from the cars that had come to a halt when the animals had nearly bolted.

Everyone except Jessica and Kimberly moved away. Kelly scooped up a clean patch of snow and used it to wipe away some of the blood around Chance's wound, being careful not to contaminate the actual site.

"Don't worry," Jessica said compassionately, patting Chance on the shoulder. "Mommy can fix your hurt."

"She can, huh?"

"Yep." Jessica looked back at Kelly, pride shining in her big blue eyes. Kelly had an idea what was coming and didn't quite know how to head it off.

"*Now* is it okay to say you're a doctor, Mommy?"

Like a slow-moving spotlight, Chance's gaze slid up to hers. Confusion and surprise covered the embarrassed discomfort that had been in his eyes a moment ago.

"A doctor," he repeated.

Kelly sighed. She felt guilty as hell asking her oldest daughter to keep silent about her profession. It wasn't really a secret. She simply hadn't wanted to resurrect the responsibilities she'd left behind in California, hadn't wanted to deal with the questions and explanations.

Her private life was hers. She wasn't here to be a doctor.

Still, it made her feel bad that she'd advised her daughter not to mention the details, especially since Jessica was perfectly capable of speaking, and Kimberly, though capable, *wouldn't* speak.