

Chapter One

Clay Callahan's heart slammed right into his throat. He had no idea what made him look in the direction of Cherry Peyton's pasture—he refused to think of her as Cherry Payne and was glad she'd taken back her maiden name when she'd buried her bastard of a husband. The town's folk might have believed her bruised cheek was from the accident. Clay figured different.

Still, the sensation he felt in his shoulder pulled his head right around, and his gaze zeroed in on Casanova. It was as though someone had given him a poke and shouted, "Look!"

He didn't take time to analyze spooky thoughts, because what he saw lying too close to that prize bull's hooves had his knees digging into the sides of his chestnut mare. He urged Ginger into a flat out run, praying—for what, he wasn't sure. The mare's hooves ate up the muddy ground. The land between Wyatt Malone's property and Cherry Peyton's was flat Montana prairie covered by patches of snow and very few trees. Cold air bit his cheeks, sliding icy fingers past the collar of his sheepskin-lined denim jacket.

As Clay neared the pen, he took off his hat, waved it in the air and yelled. "Ha. Go on now. Get the hell out of there."

The bull looked up, seemed to consider, then turned and lumbered away, glancing back just as Clay put the horse in a skid and jumped from the saddle. Anger surged through him. He wanted to put a bullet in the beast but knew Cherry would have his hide. She treated that bull like a pet rather than the dangerous two-ton animal it was.

Besides, Casanova was her livelihood. The only decent thing Wendell Payne had left her—besides the land.

He bent and gently scooped his hand under Cherry's fiery hair. Her name and hair color were a walking cliché. Both red. But man, she was beautiful.

And she held his heart.

Although he wanted to shout, his voice was gentle. "Hey, sugar. Open your eyes for me, now." Her skin was paler than usual. Freckles stood out on her nose and cheeks. Her lips held a tinge of blue. He had to get her off the cold ground, but he wasn't sure of her injuries—other than the bloody gash on her leg, which was obvious because of the huge tear in her jeans. It would take quite a blow to rip heavy denim this way.

Kneeling on the wet ground, he held her head and shoulders with one arm and fished out his cell phone.

Her eyes fluttered open. Blue. He could see the moment pain surged.

"Just hang on. I'm calling Chance." Chance and Kelly Hammond were the doctors in Shotgun Ridge. Since he and Chance had grown up together, Clay had his number in his personal contacts.

“No,” she said. “Just help me sit up.”

“Not a chance, tough girl.” He sat on the muddy ground and shifted her head to his lap, smoothing sticky strands of hair away from her face. “What were you doing messing with that bull, anyway? I swear you treat him like a tame animal—and he’s not.”

“I know my livestock, Clay.”

He snorted, his free hand gently caressing her cheek. “Just be quiet a minute.”

She rolled her eyes, and he could see the effort it took not to cry.

Chance Hammond answered his phone on the second ring. “Where the heck are you, man? We’re all over here at Wyatt’s and—”

Clay cut him off. “I’m at Cherry’s. Looks like she’s been gored or stepped on by that damned bull.”

“I’m heading for the truck now. Where, exactly.”

“This side of Butterhill. By the pen where she and Wyatt keep Casanova.”

“On it. Be there in a couple of minutes.”

Clay tossed the phone down and barely winced when it landed in a patch of dirty snow. He glanced at her face. Pain lines etched her brow. “I can see the leg. Where else do you hurt?”

“Just my chest. I think I hit a rock when I fell.”

“I could kill him.”

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic. Besides, it wasn’t Casanova’s fault. Something startled him. Maybe bit him, I don’t know. I was laying out the salt lick and then next thing I know he’s bucking. I didn’t get out of the way in time.”

Clay wasn’t sure if he should try to attend to her wound—and he wasn’t sure how he felt about her “dramatic” comment. He was relieved to see Chance’s truck coming across the meadow. Cherry’s property bordered Wyatt Malone’s. When Wyatt had talked Cherry into selling him insemination rights to the bull, he’d graded a road—which was pretty much a muddy path at the moment—that ran between his ranch and Cherry’s, making it easier to get to the bull.

The doctor got out and grabbed a tackle box from the seat beside him. “Well, you two are missing some pretty good spiced cider and cookies.” He kneeled and expertly assessed Cherry’s condition.

She tried to sit up, but both men stopped her.

“Let me have a good look before you move,” Chance said. “Besides the leg, what hurts?”

“Her chest,” Clay answered automatically. “And she’s got a cut on her head.”

Cherry hissed out a breath, the corners of her eyes pinched. “I’m perfectly able to speak for myself. Something spooked Casanova. I didn’t get out of the way in time, and he got me in the leg. I think I was trying to twist away and I landed on that rock.” She gestured to a boulder the size of a small melon. “I can’t tell if it’s my chest or ribs that hurt.”

“Hmm. Might have a cracked rib. We’ll see to that in a minute. Hope you’re not partial to these jeans.” Chance took out a pair of scissors. “Sorry. Kelly says I’m scissor happy and should have more of a care for fine clothing.” He grinned.

Kelly had been a specialist in Beverly Hills before she'd come to Montana to practice medicine and raise her two little girls. Thanks to Cherry's uncle and his band of geriatric matchmakers, she'd not only joined Chance's medical practice, she'd married him as well.

"Cut away," Cherry said, then winced when denim and mud pulled at her torn flesh.

Clay glared at the doctor—who cheerfully ignored him.

Cherry ignored Clay, too, biting her lip and fighting to remain still. If she wasn't mistaken, she'd fainted when the bull had kicked her. That was a first. She'd endured a lot of pain in her life and had never gone down for the count. She didn't like the feeling of being out of control.

Chance poured a sterile solution over the wound, then manipulated her leg. "Hurt when I do this?"

Cherry nodded. Hurt was an understatement. She felt Clay's fingers against her hair tighten a bit. You'd think he was the one with the gash just above the calf.

"I won't know if it's broken until I take some X-rays. And this wound requires a lot more than a field dressing. I'm gonna have to haul you in to the clinic."

"Why don't you just bandage it up and we'll see if I can put weight on it?" The idea of paying for X-rays and an office visit sent her into a slight panic. Finances were tight this time of year. Who was she kidding? Finances were tight *any* time of the year. "I have more first aid supplies at the house. If you can help me get home I should be fine. No sense in taking unnecessary X-rays. I haven't even had a chance to sit up and assess what's what."

"Cherry, don't be stubborn. Chance knows what he's talking about. You should go to the clinic."

Cherry ignored him—as much as she could with his hard thighs beneath her shoulders. "Do you have the supplies in your kit to fix my leg wound?" she asked the doctor.

"Yes. It would be easier in my office, but I can manage it—provided there are no surprises when I get a better look and see if you can bear any weight."

"I don't see what the big deal is," Clay said.

Cherry looked at him. She didn't want to beg. And she didn't want to air her dirty financial laundry either. Something in her look must have gotten to him.

"Can I move her?" he asked Chance through obviously clenched teeth.

Cherry wanted to roll her eyes.

"Sure. Take her to the truck and we'll get her to the house—if you're sure," he said, this time turning to Cherry.

"I'm sure for now. You've got a party to get to. No sense in you hauling me all the way into town and spending half the day when you can patch me up here. For that matter, I can patch myself up."

"Tough girl," Clay muttered again. He stood and scooped her up in the process, being careful with her leg and ribs.

Cold air bit into her skin where the denim lay open. The wound stung, that was for sure. And her whole leg throbbled. The slight movement of Clay lifting her made her slightly nauseous.

He put her in the front seat of Chance's truck. "I came on horseback, so I'll meet you there."

"You don't have to stay," Cherry said.

Clay gave her a look that made her heart trip. Lord, he was handsome. Sandy hair, broad shoulders, slim hips, muscles everywhere. He made her yearn. And right then, all she could think about was that kiss they'd shared last week. Under the mistletoe. He'd surprised her. She hadn't seen it coming. And it had rocked her world.

She watched him get on his horse and take off toward the ranch house.

"You know he's crazy about you," Chance said, starting the truck's engine.

Cherry shook her head. "I'm not the right woman for him."

"Sure about that?"

Cherry nodded. "Positive."

The minute they got in the door of the old ranch house, Hope ambushed them, making Cherry's hobbling trek to the kitchen chair even slower. The yellow Lab sniffed and whined and wanted to know what was wrong with Cherry.

"It's okay, girl. Go lay down. I'm okay."

"I wondered where she was," Clay said, coming in the door right behind them. He took off his hat and gave the dog a scratch on her ears. "You don't usually go anywhere without her." He eased up on Cherry's free side and helped Chance maneuver her onto a kitchen chair.

Just then, a little bundle of puppy energy came barreling into the kitchen, skidding on the worn linoleum floor. Although Cherry's pain level was causing nausea and a sheen of sweat, she couldn't help but smile. The puppy, her most recent stray, looked like a baby Dalmatian, but appeared to be full grown at barely ten pounds. Cherry had named her Joy, because that's what she was—a bundle of Joy who'd landed on her doorstep at Christmastime.

"I left Hope here guarding the puppy."

"Cute pup," Clay said, automatically lifting the little dog when it wanted to jump.

"Some idiot dropped her on the highway by my front gate."

A slight tightening at the corner of his eye was enough to express his feelings on the subject of abandoned animals. Normally people around these parts *brought* Cherry their strays. They didn't just leave them to the mercy of the elements. "Well, then, she's a lucky pup. How about I put them in the other room so Chance can do his doctoring in peace?" He gave the puppy an absent kiss on its tiny black ears, then patted his leg, indicating Hope should follow him.

Cherry tensed, uneasy over him moving so freely through her house. She didn't normally invite company in and it bothered her how embarrassed she was over the rundown state around her. The gold and yellow vinyl flooring was cracked and buckling. The sink was stained beyond the help of bleach and filled with a rubber drainboard and clean dishes since the dishwasher had

long since given up the ghost. The refrigerator had a dent in the door but was one of the more decent appliances in the kitchen—along with the stove. Old and dated, it cooked just fine.

All in all, she ought to count her blessings. She had a roof over her head, a fireplace to keep her warm, running water, and a comfortable bed with plenty of quilts. So what if it wasn't *Good Housekeeping* perfect? It kept the rain and snow out.

Besides, her leg, chest, and head were all throbbing at once. Dang it. She didn't have time for injuries. She could feel her heart beating in near panic, knew better than to show that weakness.

"Relax if you can," Chance said, "and let's see what we're working with here."

Between Chance's medical supplies and Cherry's, the doctor was able to do an adequate job of patching her up. The cut on her head wasn't serious and only required a butterfly bandage. Preserving her modesty, Chance shielded her from Clay's view as he lifted her shirt to check her ribs, noting a slight abrasion and a forming bruise.

"Possibly cracked," he said, "but most likely just a bad bruise. It should heal on its own if you take it easy." He'd already cut away the entire leg of her jeans to above her knee, so he sterilized the wound on her calf, numbed the area, applied ten sutures, then gave her a shot of antibiotics and wrapped her leg in gauze.

Cherry could see the concern in Chance's eyes. Casanova's hoof had caught her in the calf, just below the knee. There was a fairly deep gash but no way to know if that muscle was injured or if any ligaments were torn. Time would tell—probably within the next twenty-four hours. It didn't feel broken, though. It hurt like the devil to stand, but she could maneuver if she had to. She knew how to push past pain.

"I don't want you to put any weight on this leg for several days," Chance said, gently securing the gauze with tape. "On the outside, it looks decent. But unless I do X-rays, we won't know what's going on inside."

"I'll let you know if something feels off once I start moving around a bit," she said.

Clay shook his head. "Didn't you hear the doc say to stay off the leg? He didn't say anything about moving around."

"Clay's right, Cherry. Is there someone we can call to give you a hand?" He glanced out the window at the acres of land and livestock. "You won't be out feeding the livestock or horses for at least a week. And that's just my educated guess. Aside from the mobility issues, I don't want any infection in that wound."

Cherry opened her mouth to reply, but Clay beat her to it.

"I'm staying. I'll take care of the chores."

"Clay—"

"You're not in a position to argue right now, Sugar."

She didn't want to cause a scene. She closed her mouth, decided to fight this battle when she and Clay were alone. She'd gotten out of a bad marriage where a man told her what to do and when to do it. She wouldn't stand for another man doing that. Especially one who had no right.

The doctor rested a hand on her shoulder. “Accept the offered help, Cherry. And I’ll let the rest of the folks in town know what’s what. I’m sure you’ll be overrun with willing hands.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“No,” Chance said, quietly. “It’s not necessary, but it’s a fact. You’ve lived here long enough to know this community pulls together when there’s a need.” He packed up his supplies and handed the soiled bandages to Clay who pitched them in the trash can. While Clay’s back was turned, Chance gently touched her shoulder again, made direct eye contact. “As long as they *know* there’s a need.”

It almost seemed as though he was speaking with undercurrents. As though he knew her secret. As though the whole town knew her secret. She glanced away, determined to control her emotions. She was reading more into his look than necessary.

“I’m leaving some pain medication,” Chance said. “You’re going to be sore. I want to know if the soreness is anything other than just that. You know what pain you can tolerate. Don’t try to tough it out if it seems more severe than you expect. That’s a good indication that we need to look deeper. Let your body tell you what it needs. If your ribs are too painful to manage, call the office and either Kelly or I will come and wrap you up.”

“Should you do that now?” Clay asked.

“I don’t want to truss her up too much today if we can get by. She’s got enough discomfort to deal with.”

“I’ll be fine,” Cherry said.

“I’m sure you will with this one watching over you like a mother hen.” He grinned and tipped his head in Clay’s direction. “But I want your promise that you’ll call me if something doesn’t seem right.”

She nodded.

“I’ll be back with some crutches.”

“I think I have some in the barn,” she said, feeling bad that he was taking so much time with her when she’d pulled him away from a holiday party.

“I’ll drop some by just in case. No sense in you having to dig for them.”

She didn’t want to argue and advertise her lack of finances. She wasn’t destitute. But she was on a tight budget and didn’t have extra funds for medical expenses and crutches.

Clay closed the door behind the doctor, then folded his arms and leaned against the counter, his gaze steady on Cherry. He’d discarded his denim jacket, showing off shoulders that tested the seams of his red flannel shirt. The kitchen was small, but it seemed positively claustrophobic with Clay in it. He filled the space with more than just his body. His presence radiated.

He made her nervous—not fearful nervous. Just *aware* nervous.

“Weren’t you on your way to Wyatt’s house?”

“Was. Got a detour.”

“I hate to keep you from your friends.”

“They’re your friends, too, Cherry.”

“I know . . .” She couldn’t finish her thought. Yes, the people of this town were her friends in an arm’s length sort of way, but she didn’t know how to accept that friendship—to *be* a friend in return. Lord. Where had the bossy, leader-of-the-pack, most popular girl in school gone? How had she so thoroughly lost herself? Granted, school days had been many years ago, but still...

“You hungry?” he asked.

Her attention snapped to the present. Could any woman look at Clay Callahan and not be hungry? She doubted that’s how he’d meant his question. “I’ll nuke something a little later,” she said.

Clay sighed and shook his head. “Like it or not, I’m gonna stay here and take care of you.”

“I can call my sister,” she said.

“Right. Brooke’s a city girl. She knows nothing about running a ranch. Besides, she’s got kids and a husband to take care of. It wouldn’t be fair to ask her to drop everything and come out here when I’m perfectly capable—and willing—to lend a hand.”

“How would you know what my sister’s capable of? Or anything about my family, for that matter?” Never mind that she’d had no intention of calling Brooke anyway—partly for the reasons he’d stated. The other reasons were more complicated.

“Darlin’, your uncle is Ozzie Peyton.” He shook his head and grinned. “If there’s one thing that old geezer loves to do, it’s to brag on his family.”

Cherry ducked her head slightly. For a lot of years, she’d avoided her sweet uncle. And Clay calling him a geezer wasn’t by any means an insult. The whole town referred to her uncle and his three cronies as the matchmaking geezers. Lloyd Brewer, Vern Tillis, Henry Jenkins, and Ozzie Peyton. They were determined to marry off every single man or woman in the county. Luckily—or unluckily in her case—she’d already been married. And they’d had enough manners to allow her a mourning period since Dell had died.

Little did they know she didn’t mourn. Something else that caused her shame.

“Is Sal coming around to help out?” Clay asked, dragging her out of her thoughts. Sal worked the ranch with her—part time. In Cherry’s opinion, he was too old to be doing such physical labor, but he insisted on coming out every day and helping her.

“He’s over in Billings with his son’s family for the holiday. His boy had some surgery and Sal’s helping out.”

“How long’s he been gone?”

“Just a week.”

Clay frowned, a muscle jumping in his jaw. “Woman, why don’t you ever ask for help?”

“I’ve been fine. It’s not as though it’s spring calving season. Things are slow. I can keep the ice out of the watering holes and feed the animals on my own.”

He snorted. “If you work sunup to sundown.”

“I’m not afraid of hard work.”

He sat across from her at the kitchen table, reached for her hand, and rubbed his thumb gently over the calluses on her palm, causing her breath to catch. “I know. You shouldn’t have to work so hard, though. Now that I’m here, you can relax.”

“You’ve got your own ranch to run.”

“And two able brothers and a whole slew of employees to carry the load.”

“Bragger,” she said, trying to smile and lighten the mood.

The way he watched her made her nervous. She wasn’t used to the wash of hormones that flooded her when Clay Callahan was around. He made her want. And she had no business wanting what she couldn’t have. She didn’t trust herself or her judgment when it came to men. She was definitely out of practice. It was better—smarter—to keep her distance. To go about the business of her life and keep her emotions and fairytale dreams in check.

“Are we going to talk about that kiss?”

Her stomach jumped so hard it made her dizzy. She wasn’t expecting him to bring that up out of nowhere. He had an unfair advantage. She was wounded. She couldn’t walk away. She pulled her hand out of his. “I’d rather not.”

He cocked a brow. “Never took you for a wimp.”

“Because I’m not.” Her chin lifted. “Besides, what’s to talk about? There was mistletoe. Everyone kisses under the mistletoe.”

“Not like we did, they don’t.”

She felt her cheeks heat and knew darned well he could see the reaction. She’d been in town picking up supplies and had stopped in at Brewer’s Saloon for a burger, forgetting it was Thursday night and half the town showed up on Thursday nights to socialize and give the women a break from cooking. There’d been music, laughter...fun. Something Cherry had had too little of in her life. Abbe Callahan, Clay’s sister-in-law, had seen her and dragged her right into the back room and the impromptu party. Next thing she’d known, there was mistletoe above her and Clay Callahan beside her.

She took a breath. “Clay, let it go.”

“I’d rather not.” He gently tossed her own words back at her.

“Why?”

“Because it’s taking everything in me right now not to come around this table and kiss you again.”

She let the curtain of her hair fall forward, shielding her face. Quietly, she said, “And I’d probably let you and we’d both regret starting something that we can’t finish. I have nothing to offer you.”

Something in her tone must have gotten through to him. He rose from the chair, moved toward her. Her heart pounded, but she didn’t lift her head. Feather-light, he brushed his hand over her hair. “That’s where you’re wrong, Sugar.”

He moved to the stove, grabbed the closest pot, and filled it with water. And just like that, the mood was broken. On to the next thing. She didn’t know whether to be glad or sad.

That's where you're wrong, Sugar. The words were a silky caress that sounded more like a threat.

He opened the refrigerator and stared at the contents. “Hmmm,” he murmured and shut the door. She watched as he banged around in her small kitchen looking for cooking utensils. A cabinet door came off in his hands. He stared at it as though wondering how it had ended up in his grip. Cherry just sighed. He'd been in her house before. She could only apologize for its shabbiness so much. And right now, she was too tired and sore and distraught to care.

* * *

Well, love, I gotta say this one came as a surprise to all of us—me and Henry and Vernon and Lloyd. And I suspect it might have been some of your doing. Ozzie Peyton gazed at the portrait of his late wife, Vanessa. The love of his life, she'd gone to the hereafter some time back. But he still conversed with her, still felt her as if she was right here in the room with him.

A fire crackled in the fireplace, and colored lights twinkled on the Christmas tree in the corner. Seemed silly for an old man with no family to decorate a Christmas tree, but this had been Vanessa's favorite season. They hadn't been blessed with children of their own, but his Vanessa had been a schoolteacher here in Shotgun Ridge, Montana. Had taught nearly every boy and girl—now man and woman—around here. She would have been so pleased to see the growth in the town. The love and the babies.

Ozzie and his buddies—the matchmaking geezers as folks tended to call them—had decided a few years ago that their town was leaning more toward bachelor cowboys than families and had set about to correct that problem. And a right nice job they'd done, even if he did say so himself. He was proud to say they'd successfully matched up eight couples—well, with a couple of them, they'd had a little help, but why quibble?

This latest turn of events, though, had come right smack out of nowhere. That's why he suspected his beautiful wife. He didn't believe in ghosts, but he *did* believe in angels. And his Vanessa was truly an angel. He'd go nose to toe with anybody who dared to disagree.

Who would have thought that prize bull, Casanova, would take it into his ornery head to step on our niece? Hurt her pretty good, love, but don't you worry. Clay Callahan was right there to give her a helping hand—and I suspect that was your doing. How else would he have known to stop by like that? Pretty sneaky, if you ask me. I couldn't have done it better myself! Ozzie grinned and gazed at his journal. Ever since Vanessa had gone on to Heaven, he'd been keeping a log of his thoughts and plans. It soothed him. This was his main means of communicating with her. Vanessa had been his best friend and confidant all of their married life, and why should that stop now? Besides, she clearly had a little pull with the Man upstairs—she'd proven that when little Kimberly Anderson, who'd been trapped in silence after witnessing the death of her father, had spoken right there in the town square on Christmas Eve. The children had seen the angel. So had Ozzie. And he would recognize his Vanessa anywhere.

Still, there was no reason she should have all the fun. After all, he and Lloyd and Henry and Vern had a reputation to uphold.

I know it's Christmastime, and it's the season for miracles. I suspect it's gonna take a miracle to get that sweet niece of ours to trust again. If Wendell hadn't already passed, I'd go knock him in the head, that's for sure. All that drinkin' and leaving the ranch chores to fall on sweet Cherry's shoulders. How was she supposed to keep up? He was a poor excuse for a husband. And I don't like to wish ill on anyone, but I'm hoping he got a demotion to Hades, rather than being promoted up there with you, love. He glanced again at Vanessa's portrait, thought he saw a twinkle pass over her stunning eyes.

He nodded. *You bet. The Man upstairs keeps good tabs on the going's on down here. I knew he'd have the lay of the land where Wendell was concerned. But if you could just speak to him about Cherry and Clay...the boys and I would be much obliged. Love and healing are what we need to make this Christmas in Shotgun Ridge the best ever, you bet.*