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RAMSAY

ALL I WANT
FOR
CHRISTMAS

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Praise for Hope Ramsay's Chapel of Love Series

A FAIRYTALE BRIDE

“Be prepared to laugh and cry, sometimes at the same time.”

— **Goodreads Review**

“A gem of a novella.”

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“A Fairytale Bride is a book that all book lovers will love and dream that they owned a wonderful bookstore like Melissa.”

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“Wonderful story you will want to put on your holiday reading list.”

— **Goodreads Review**

“A joy to read.”

— **Goodreads Review**

“An amazing Christmas story that is both magical and wonderful.”

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[*Last Chance Family*](#)

[*Last Chance Hero*](#)

[*“A Midnight Clear” \(Short Story\)*](#)

The Chapel of Love Series

[*“A Fairytale Bride” \(Short Story\)*](#)

[*A Christmas Bride*](#)

[*A Small-Town Bride \(available March 2017\)*](#)

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Excerpt from *A Small-Town Bride*

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ALL I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS

HOPE RAMSAY

Chapter 1

Dusty McNeil rolled the landscape measuring wheel over the ground and wished he'd opted to take Christmas Eve as a day off. Normally he worked over the holidays, since he didn't have any family, but this particular Christmas Eve the temperature in the Shenandoah Valley was nudging seventy degrees, making it a perfect day to go fishing.

Dusty lived to fish.

Instead he was working on a response to Willow Peterson's request-for-proposal for a complete landscape upgrade for Eagle Hill Manor, a grand mansion that had been an inn for the last thirty years. Willow had recently purchased the business and had big plans to turn it into a showplace.

In addition to sprucing up the manor house and some of the outbuildings, Willow also wanted to do a historically accurate restoration of the old Laurel Chapel, an eighteenth-century church that stood on a small knoll overlooking the valley. The church had been abandoned for more than a hundred years, and the path from the manor house to the chapel was no more than a narrow track through a small wooded area on the south side of the property.

Dusty continued to roll his wheel over the rough terrain, measuring the distance for a new footpath. He emerged from the trees into the clearing where the chapel stood, read the measurement, and noted it in the small notebook he carried in his hip pocket.

He was about to turn back toward the house when a small, piping voice said, "Hi, Mr. McNeil. Whatcha doing?"

He turned to find eight-year-old Natalie Lyndon sitting on the front steps of the ruined chapel, her red hair tangled and the knees of her polka dot leggings stained. She looked like an adorable urchin, and everything about her reminded Dusty of her deceased mother, Shelly, one of Dusty's high school friends.

Natalie's father, David, was another close friend. It sure looked as if Dusty's oldest friends, David Lyndon and Willow Peterson, might be hooking up for the long run. Natalie might be getting a new mother this Christmas.

"I'm measuring," he said.

"Whatcha measuring?"

"The distance from the manor house to the chapel. Miss Willow wants to improve the path."

Natalie nodded, and Dusty figured he best be getting on about his work. He sucked at talking to kids, and he'd decided a long time ago that he never wanted to be anyone's father.

He was about to turn back down the path when Natalie spoke again. "Um, Mr. McNeil, can you mail this letter for me?"

The little girl got up from the step, skipped across the grass, and pressed a slightly smudged, note-sized envelope in his hand. He glanced down at it. Written in pencil, in backward slanting cursive were the words:

*Mr. Santa Claus
1 Reindeer Way
North Poll*

At least he thought that's how she spelled North Pole; Natalie's Ls and e's looked a lot alike, so maybe she had spelled the word correctly.

He looked down at the kid. Wasn't she too old to be writing to Santa Claus? By the time he'd turned eight he'd lost his faith in Santa, but apparently Natalie hadn't. But then Natalie had been pampered and protected and brought up in an idyllic setting. Even if the little girl had lost her momma, she'd still been loved and cared for. Dusty's childhood hadn't been at all like Natalie's.

He cleared his throat. "Uh, shouldn't you be giving this to your father?" Dusty sure didn't want to be the person who disappointed Natalie. Although, when you got down rock bottom, Santa was bound to be a big disappointment for everyone, sooner or later.

Natalie cocked her head and stared up at him like a sad little puppy. "Daddy is a Grinch," she said. "And besides he would forget to mail it. And I don't want Daddy to even know that I'm writing Santa."

Great, what had he gotten himself into? David had probably already said no to the present she wanted, in which case Natalie would be disappointed. Period. But far be it from Dusty to be the one to break the truth to the kid. That was David's job.

So he tried to wiggle out of the dilemma. "You think the mail will deliver this letter to Santa in time? I mean it's Christmas Eve."

"Yeah, I know. I procrastinated."

Dusty laughed. "That's a pretty big word."

Natalie gave him a long, earnest look. "Grammy uses that word all the time. Mostly because Daddy procrastinates about a lot of stuff."

Dusty nodded. David had been having a hard time these last two years getting over the death of his wife. Thank God Willow had come back to town and pulled him right out of his funk.

"So, will you?" Natalie asked. "Please."

Damn. What else could he do? "Sure," he said. "I'll mail it on my way back to work, okay?"

A big smile bloomed on Natalie's face like a brown-eyed Susan opening for the summer time heat. "Thank you so much." She turned and skipped back to her doll, pulling it into her lap as she resumed her spot on the chapel's steps. "Angelina, I think Santa will give us what we want, don't you?" she said.

Dusty turned away, jamming the letter in his pocket. Should he give the message to David? Read it himself?

No, neither of those things. He would mail it, just as Natalie had asked. Not that mailing a letter to Santa would solve her problem. Natalie was not going to get what she wanted for Christmas.

Chapter 2

Dusty finished taking his measurements in record time and managed to get down to Liberty Run for some fishing late in the day. The day had turned cooler, but cool days were perfect for trout. He caught a couple of rainbows, which he returned to the stream. He never kept the fish he caught, unless he landed an invasive species like snakehead or carp.

Dusk had fallen by the time he reached the small A-frame house he'd built with his own two hands. It sat about a quarter-mile away from where the old family place had stood for more than a hundred years. The old house had a crooked foundation, a warped porch with a wobbly railing, and siding that had long ago faded to gray. So when Dusty bought his daddy out seven years ago, he'd torn the old house down and recycled some of the wood to build his tiny house.

He didn't have more than five hundred square feet of living space, but that was enough for him. He could heat it with a wood stove, and since it was small, he didn't have to be all that sociable—not to his girlfriends, or his father.

Not that Dusty knew where Daddy had gone. He'd taken off for parts unknown after Dusty put a hundred grand into his hands. He hoped the old man never came back, but he still lived with the daily fear that one day the old bastard would darken his door. His tiny house provided insurance against ever having to live with Daddy again.

Dusty had just settled down with a turkey sandwich on rye—about the best he could do when it came to a Christmas Eve dinner—when the sound of tires crunching on gravel interrupted his meal. He got up from the fold-up table in his tiny kitchen and headed to the front of the house where a floor-to-ceiling wall of windows gave a view of his front deck and drive. He peered through the glass, just as Marleen unfolded all six feet of her perfectly proportioned body out of her Jeep Cherokee.

Damn. He'd just broken up with Marleen three days ago. The woman had been all over him about “deepening the commitment,” which in Marleen's mind, meant going over to Wheeling to spend Christmas with her momma and daddy.

What was it about Christmas that made his girlfriends go all commitment-needy on him?

The minute any woman suggested that it might be nice to meet her parents Dusty ran in the opposite direction. Why couldn't the women in his life understand that he was a bad risk when it came to domestic bliss?

It frustrated him because he never went into a relationship with any woman without telling her the truth, right up front. He always made it clear that he liked hooking up, but not settling down.

So why the hell had Marleen taken a detour on her way to Wheeling? She reached into the back of her Jeep and pulled out something that looked like a wicker picnic basket. What the hell?

Was she bringing him Christmas dinner? His stomach might be down with that, but his brain sounded all kinds of alarms. He turned toward the front door just about the time Marleen reached his deck. He expected his doorbell to ring, but instead, she dropped the basket with a thump, turned around, and hightailed it back to her Jeep.

“Hey,” he called as he opened the door. She didn't respond.

“Hey,” he called again. “What's this?”

She looked up at him with tears in her eyes. Why didn't women listen when he told them the truth about himself? He hated it when they cried. It made him feel guilty.

“Merry Christmas, Dusty,” Marleen said in a shaky voice. “I hated to think about you being alone. So. . .” Her voice faded out as she yanked the Jeep's door open, climbed in, and fired up the engine. She wasted no time peeling out of the drive, sending gravel flying.

He looked down at the picnic basket at his feet, his stomach growling in anticipation, but when he pulled back the flap, up popped a head with a short puppy-dog snout, long puppy-dog ears, and cute curly, soft puppy-dog fur.

“Damn,” he swore.

He grabbed the puppy before it made an escape, and the dog thanked him for it by washing his face with a wet tongue. He brought the dog inside and put him down on the floor. Holy crap, that dog had big paws. He might be cute now, but he’d be the size of a small pony full grown.

Down in the bottom of the basket Dusty found a note in Marleen’s loopy handwriting.

I named him Noel because he’s your Christmas puppy. He’s a labradoodle—that’s a cross between a Labrador Retriever and a standard Poodle. He’s two months old. I’m giving him to you because you need to commit to something.

The puppy looked up at him and wagged its tail, while Dusty let forth a string of profanity. The dog must have read his distress because it immediately squatted and peed all over his floor.

If Dusty ever saw Marleen again, he’d wring her beautiful, long neck. He picked up his cell phone and dialed her number. She didn’t answer. Naturally.

He headed into the kitchen for some paper towels. The puppy followed after him looking hopeful. He mopped up the mess, then Googled the word “labradoodle” and discovered that this little puppy would probably weigh more than sixty pounds when it was full grown.

He didn’t need a dog, didn’t want a dog, and couldn’t have a dog this size in his small house. Besides, he put in long days on the job at the landscaping company. He didn’t have the time to give a dog the attention it needed. And if he kept the dog, he sure wasn’t going to name it some kind of stupid, weenie name like Noel.

He collapsed onto his easy chair and the unnamed dog immediately nipped at his ankles and then tried to climb up on his lap.

####

An hour later, Dusty had come no closer to finding a solution to his dog problem. A call to the Jefferson County Animal Shelter confirmed that they were not open on Christmas Eve and wouldn’t be open tomorrow either. More important, a few additional Internet searches led Dusty to the conclusion that he didn’t want to take Noel, or whatever his name, to the Jefferson County Shelter because they euthanized unwanted pets.

He didn’t want a dog, but he sure didn’t want to be responsible for Noel’s demise, either. Several frantic calls to various humane societies proved useless as well. Even animal lovers took time off to celebrate Christmas, going to church, or wrapping presents, or whatever people did on Christmas Eve. No one was taking stray dogs, or dogs that had been mistakenly given as unwanted Christmas presents.

Dusty might even have succumbed to the critter’s cuteness if it hadn’t found one of his antique fishing creels and, mistaking it for a puppy chew toy, proceeded to destroy it. The dog would have to go once Christmas was over, but since it would be here for a couple of days, he would need to figure out what to feed it.

He was trying to come up with a way to jury rig a kennel to keep the dog contained so he could run off to the 24-hour grocery store, when his cell phone rang. Finally. Marleen had come to her senses.

He snatched up his phone, but when he looked at the caller ID, his heart sank. Why the hell was Willow’s mother, Linda Peterson, calling him on Christmas Eve? He had a special relationship with Linda, but she’d never invited him to Christmas Eve dinner before.

“Hey,” he said putting his phone to his ear.

“Dusty, thank goodness you’re home. I need your help.”

Dusty’s heart kicked up a notch. He would do anything for Linda. She’d saved his ass a time or two when Daddy had had too much to drink. “What’s the matter?”

“Oh, it’s not life threatening, Dusty, relax. It’s just my old truck. It’s finally given up the ghost, and I need a truck tonight.”

“What for?”

She chuckled. “Come on over to the farm and find out,” she said.

“Uh. . .” He eyed the dog. No way he could leave that puppy alone in his tiny house. He’d come back to a big chewed up mess.

“What? You got a date tonight?” Linda sounded really surprised.

“No. But Marleen just dropped off a Christmas present.”

“Really? That was nice of her.”

“No, not so much. The present has sharp teeth and a wagging tail. You want a puppy, Linda?”

She snorted. “No. I already have too many barn cats. Besides I decided when Murphy died that I was too old to take on another dog.”

“You aren’t too old.”

“I am for a puppy.”

“The thing is, I just got handed this dog and I can’t leave him here alone.”

“Oh, that’s no problem. I like puppies, even if I don’t want one. You can bring him along.”

Chapter 3

The dog might not be fully housebroken but he had riding shotgun in a pickup figured out. He sat up in the passenger's side, with his tongue lolling and a doggy smile on his face as he watched the lights whiz by on Route 7.

Serenity Farm sat on twenty acres of land west of the Shenandoah River and about ten minutes from downtown Shenandoah Falls. Dusty had spent his share of nights in Linda's barn in the summertime, or on an air mattress on the living room floor during cold weather. He'd been only ten years old the very first time Linda had taken him in.

That had been a terrible year. Granny had passed, Momma had taken off with another man, and Daddy had taken a nose dive right into a bottle of bourbon. The first beating happened on Christmas Eve 1992. Daddy had given him a whole passel of bruises, and then the old drunk had thrown him out of the house and told him not to come back.

Thank God Linda's bar, The Jaybird Music Hall and Cafe, had been open on Christmas Eve. Dusty had found his way there, and Linda had taken him home that night, letting him sleep on the air mattress under the Christmas tree.

Of course, Linda had called Child Protective Services, and the county had come sniffing around a few days later, but Daddy had sobered up by then. Years later, Linda told Dusty that she'd had a lot of conflicted feelings about his situation. On the one hand she thought Dusty needed to be taken away from his daddy, but on the other hand she didn't think very highly of foster care.

Instead, she gave Dusty a key to the Jaybird Cafe and told him he could sleep in the back room anytime he needed to. And from time to time she took him out to the farm and let him stay for a couple of days, feeding him, letting him help with chores, and generally showing him more kindness than anyone had ever done in his life.

So if Linda needed him for anything, Dusty was there for her.

When he pulled into her driveway, Linda was waiting for him on the farmhouse's porch, wearing a Santa hat and a pair of earrings that lit up and flashed like Christmas tree lights. She looked like a sixty-something, counter-culture elf, wearing a Santa hat and a Grateful Dead T-shirt that glowed in the dark.

He set the parking brake and opened the door. The puppy immediately tried to make a break for it, and Dusty snatched him up in his arms. "Hey," he said to Linda as he climbed down from the truck.

"Looks like you have a handful there."

"Yeah. It would have been nice if Marleen had given me a leash and a collar for the pooch. But she didn't. In fact, she left the dog on my doorstep in a basket like a foundling, with just a note and nothing else. No food, no dishes, no record of his vaccinations. Good thing I was home at the time, otherwise God only knows where he would have gotten off to."

He crossed the farmyard and stepped up onto the porch, enduring Linda's smirk, visible in the light from her earrings. "Aw, he's adorable, Dusty."

"Yeah, well, he might be cute now, but he's gonna get a lot bigger, and I don't have room at my house. You sure you don't want him?"

She shook her head, and her earrings swayed. "I already have enough animals to take care of. And no dog is ever going to replace old Murph."

He let go of a sigh. "So, what can I help you with?"

"Come on inside and I'll show you."

Linda firmly believed in recycling, so all her furniture came from elsewhere—often from the side of the road. She would reupholster stuff with whatever fabric she could get at a discount, so none of her furniture matched.

For some reason, all the mismatched stuff conveyed a sense of security and safety to Dusty. Linda might be a

terrible housekeeper and homemaker, but she was kind, and in Dusty's book that meant more than anything. The world would be a better place, in his opinion, if more people were like Linda.

He continued to hold the squirmy dog as he followed Linda into the living room. "Holy crap," he said. "What the hell's going on?"

The room was chock full of Christmas presents in all shapes and sizes. There were fat ones and skinny ones and tall ones and round ones and some that were just weird shaped. There must have been forty presents stacked up along the back wall.

"Jeez, Linda, I didn't know you had that many friends."

She cocked her head, and her Santa hat jingled. "I don't. These presents are for kids living on the south side of town, or way up on the ridge."

Poor kids, in other words.

"I thought the collection for the Marine Corps' Toys for Tots program was last week," Dusty said, throwing the dog up on his shoulder like a baby.

"This ain't the Toys for Tots program, not that I have any issues with what they do. But the Marines, bless 'em, never take the time to figure out what the kids really want, you know? I mean a kid could want a football and get a baseball mitt instead. When that happens, it sucks for the kid."

"Tell me about it."

She grinned up at Dusty, and took the dog from him. "Hey there cutie," she said, enduring a wiggly hind end and a wet puppy tongue. "Does he have a name?"

"Well, sort of. I mean Marleen said in her note that she'd named him Noel, but if you ask me, that's a wimpy name for a dog."

"No, it's not. It's very festive."

"Yeah, right. I think we need to think about another name."

"Does that mean you're thinking about keeping him?"

He eyeballed the dog. He was kind of cute, but Dusty didn't have room for him. "Look at him, Linda. Where am I going to stash a big dog like that in my tiny house? He's going to get as big as a pony."

"Or a reindeer. Maybe we should name him Sven?"

"Uh, what does Sven have to do with reindeer? And by the way I think Rudolf is a dumb name for a dog too."

She snorted a laugh. "Well, it's obvious you've never seen *Frozen*. You may be the only person in town who hasn't."

"The kids' movie? No. I haven't seen *Frozen*."

"Obviously, because there's a moose-sized reindeer in *Frozen* named Sven." Linda looked deep into the puppy's dark brown eyes. "Nice to meet you Sven," she said. "Are you ready for some Christmas magic?"

The dog gave a little *wuf*, as if he was totally down with the idea. Dusty didn't believe in Christmas magic, so he kept his mouth shut.

"Let's go see if we can find Murphy's old collar and leash out in the kitchen," Linda said to the dog in that baby talk voice that women always used when speaking to puppies. "Murphy wasn't a very big dog, you know, so I think his old collar might just fit you . . . for now." Linda turned to look at Dusty over her shoulder. "You could start loading the presents in the bed of your truck. Start at that end." She pointed to the near end of the living room. "Load the presents in order. I've already got the route all planned out."

Dusty shook his head. "How on earth did I get roped into being Santa's helper?"

"Because you have a pickup and you're a good, dependable man, Dusty McNeil, even if you don't realize it yet." Linda headed off toward the kitchen talking baby talk to the dog while Dusty got busy loading up the sleigh. . . er . . . truck.

####

Sven-the-Labradoodle decided that it was great fun riding shotgun in Linda Peterson's lap, which made Dusty hope that Linda would change her mind and take the dog before the night was out. It was high time Linda got over Murphy's death. Her dog had lived to be sixteen years old and had been one hell of a great coon dog. But he'd been gone now for almost six months. And the way Linda held that puppy told Dusty that she could be swayed.

"Our first stop is at the Smith's," Linda said, giving him directions. "Six-year-old Sam wants a *Star Wars* Lego

set, and his little sister is getting her first baby doll.”

“Since when have you been one of Santa’s helpers?” he asked as he headed toward the south side of town.

“About three years ago. George Deiss, down at the post office, roped me into being a helper. But it’s kind of a stealth program, you know. We don’t make a fuss. It’s better that way.

And that was exactly like Linda. Some people in town looked down their nose at her because of the way she dressed and her counter-culture approach to life. But those folks didn’t know the real Linda Peterson. The Linda who had a heart of gold.

They pulled up to the first house, and seemingly out of nowhere, Linda produced a pair of felt reindeer antlers that she tied onto Sven’s head. The dog surprised the hell out of Dusty by letting her get away with it, suggesting that Linda truly was the right person for this dog.

“Wait here,” Linda instructed, as she and Sven jumped down from the truck. She dropped the truck’s tailgate, scooped up a couple of presents, and knocked on the front door. She was greeted with warm hugs and big smiles as if she was expected. Mrs. Smith made a big fuss over Sven, and the whole exchange took the better part of five minutes. Linda came back to the truck with a paper plate covered in aluminum foil. “I’ve got molasses cookies,” she said, shoving the plate in Dusty’s face.

“Yum,” he said. “I love molasses cookies.”

“Don’t eat too many. You want to pace yourself so you have room for the Rooney’s brownies.”

“Why haven’t you ever asked for my help with this?” Dusty said, lifting the foil on the plate of cookies.

Linda gave him a long, sober stare. “Because I didn’t think you were much of a Christmas person, to be honest. And I don’t even blame you for that.”

“Well, thanks,” he said taking a bite out of one of the cookies. Sven got right up in his face, begging for a bite, but Dusty wasn’t about to spoil the dog. Besides Christmas cookies were bad for puppies.

“You know,” Linda said, “I don’t mean to bring up bad memories, but I’ve never forgotten that Christmas Eve right after your granny died, when your daddy kicked you out of the house. I felt so useless that year because I didn’t know you would end up sleeping at the farm, and of course, I didn’t have anything for you under the tree. You broke my heart that year. I remember watching you play My Little Pony with Willow like a good sport. I know you wanted some kind of Ninja Turtle action figure.”

Damn. She remembered? Even after a quarter of a century. A big lump formed up in his throat, and it took a moment before he could speak again. “It was a Ninja Turtle Pizza Launcher,” he said.

“A pizza launcher?” She rolled her eyes.

“Yeah, it was kind of cool, you know? It was a green tank that had a place where you could load up these plastic disks and shoot ‘em like small Frisbees.”

“You still remember all the details, don’t you?” Linda’s voice was soft and kind.

He shrugged, trying to keep his emotions in check. He was a grown man. He should have gotten over this particular disappointment. “It was a long time ago,” he said, putting his hands on the wheel. “Where to next?”

“The Emorys. They live just down the block. Nathan wants a light saber.”

He fired up the truck and eased down the road half a block, where Linda hopped out with Sven and delivered more Christmas cheer. This went on for several hours, and before long Dusty was helping Linda carry presents, greeting his neighbors, and stuffing himself with Christmas cookies, Christmas brownies, Christmas fruit cake, and some home-made Christmas candy.

It was after eleven by the time they were down to their very last delivery, to a house way up on the ridge.

“This next stop might get dicey,” Linda said as Dusty wound his way up twisty roads. It was a clear night with a full moon casting a liquid silver glow over everything.

“How so?” he asked.

“The Millers aren’t exactly expecting me. This is the first year for them. Little Ellie wants a Doc McStuffins Take Care of Me Lambie.”

“I have no clue what that is,” Dusty said.

“Not surprised. Ellie is six and probably a little old for Doc McStuffins. But I’m thinking she’s one of those kids who’s gonna be a doctor or a vet one day. Anyway, it’s what she wants. She gave her letter to Ms. Baughman, one of the Morgan Elementary first grade teachers, who handed it to George Deiss at the post office. I guess Ms. Baughman didn’t want to tell Ellie’s parents about the letter, or upset them, you know, because money is tight.”

“Wait a sec, you found out she wanted this present because she wrote a letter?”

“Yeah, a letter to Santa. That’s how we find out about a lot of the kids. The first time we did this, no one was expecting us because George Deiss took it upon himself to read every letter to Santa that arrived at the Shenandoah Post office. He ignored the ones that came from the nice parts of town, but the ones from the south side, well, he came around to folks and asked for donations and one thing led to another and pretty soon I was involved.”

“And when you get involved you usually take over.”

She snorted a laugh. “Well, George still reads the letters, but I have a whole posse of friends who help me with the shopping and wrapping. And then there’s Jamie Lyndon, who pays all the bills, not that it amounts to much, you know. Most of these kids aren’t asking for the moon.”

“I know, Linda.”

She gave him a sideways look. “Yeah, I guess you do. So, anyway, a lot of the families know about this, so the letters get hand-delivered by parents who need a little help come Christmas time. But sometimes we get letters from unexpected places. Turn right here, Dusty, this is the address.”

He turned into a driveway that led to a one story house with a few Christmas lights burning. “Anyway, Ellie Miller’s daddy was a truck driver, you know,” Linda continued as Dusty cut the engine and set the brake. “But he hurt his back and had to go on disability. Things have been tough for them the last year or so.”

Dusty listened while he took in the slightly shabby house and the derelict car in the yard. These people were hillbillies, no question about it.

“Uh, maybe I should deliver this one, okay?”

She gave him a long, assessing gaze. “I’m not afraid of these folks, you know?”

“I know. But sometimes the folks up here can get ornery about stuff, like charity.”

“Dusty, not everyone who’s down and out is like your daddy.”

“Yeah, I know, but I have a bad feeling about this one.”

She handed him her Santa hat. “Go for it, then. It’s the last present.”

“You look after Sven. I’m not sure taking a dog to this front door is the right approach.”

“Whatever.”

Was that a smirk on Linda’s face? Well, let her smirk. It was one thing delivering presents in town, but the folks up here on the ridge could be unfriendly. He didn’t like the idea that Linda had been making these deliveries on her own all these years. Next year he aimed to ride along again, just to keep her safe.

He hopped down from the truck and scooped up the last present, wrapped in pretty red and green paper with Santa faces all over it. He walked down the broken stone path and rang the doorbell. He had to wait a long time before a female voice called from the other side of the door. “Who is it?”

Dusty thought for a moment before answering. “One of Santa’s helpers.”

The silence stretched out for a while before he called again. “I just have a present to deliver to . . .” Damn, he’d forgotten the kid’s name, “. . . uh for your daughter.”

Great. He hadn’t managed to sound very friendly or convincing.

“How do you know my daughter?” The woman sounded wary as hell.

“Uh, well, actually, I don’t know her. But I guess she wrote a letter to Santa and, uh, well, the big guy decided to answer it.”

The door swung open, and Dusty found himself staring down the barrel of a shotgun. There was a little bitty woman at the trigger end of it, and she sure had a determined look on her face.

“What are you, some kind of pervert?” she asked.

Just then, the dog barked behind him, and the woman’s gaze flicked toward the truck for an instant. Dusty grabbed the shotgun and wrenched it out of her hand.

“Don’t scream,” he said, and thank God she didn’t. Instead she glanced behind her as if she was afraid of awakening someone. That’s when Dusty saw the bruise on her cheekbone.

Damn. He wanted to get right up in that woman’s face and tell her to leave now, and take her kid with her. But he knew she wouldn’t go.

So instead, he held up the present. “I wasn’t kidding. I got a present for your kid. It’s a doctor toy or something. I don’t know. It’s what she asked for. And if you’re a smart woman you’ll give it to her tomorrow morning. And you’ll tell her it’s from Santa, and that way she won’t lose her faith in the magic the way you probably have. And

maybe next Christmas you and she can be someplace better.” He put the present down on the ground and backed away.

“Please, don’t take the gun. It belongs to my husband.”

“I’m not stealing your gun, but you don’t want to be pointing it at anyone. Not even your husband, okay? You need to take care of your little girl. I’m just going to lean it up against that tree over yonder. You can come get it when we leave.”

He moved back slowly, leaned the gun against the tree, and hightailed it back to the truck, just as his stomach roiled and all those cookies almost made a reappearance.

Chapter 4

"You all right?" Linda asked as Dusty pulled onto the mountain road.

"No."

"She probably wouldn't have pulled the trigger, you know."

"That's not what I'm upset about."

"What then?"

He took a deep breath. "That laid off truck driver of a husband is beating her. She had a bruise on her cheek."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

Linda reached over and patted his arm. "I'll see what the women's shelter can do to help her, okay? In the meantime just remember that little Ellie is going to get the Christmas present she asked for. And even though that's a small thing, it's still something."

He thought about it for a long time as they headed down the mountain. "It's not such a small thing. Not to a kid in a family like that. I mean . . . shoot I don't know, and I don't have the words to say it right, but I guess for a kid like that, having Santa actually answer a letter is kind of reaffirming. Like there's kindness and hope in the world or something. I sure wish . . ." His voice trailed off.

"You wrote to Santa about that Ninja Turtle Pizza Launcher. You were almost ten years old—old enough to know the truth about Santa. But you sent that letter anyway, didn't you?"

His chest ached the same way it had all those years ago when he'd been a scared little boy with no one to turn to. He'd learned to be stoic. He'd learned not to care too much, not to get involved, not to love too hard. Not to hope. "Stupid me," he said gaining control over his voice. "I already knew Santa was a lie. But I kept hoping Daddy would get his shit together. And maybe, down deep, I wanted to believe in Santa. Sort of like . . . Oh, crap!"

"What?"

"Something I forgot about. Something I should have done." He dug into his pocket and pulled out Natalie's crumpled up envelope. "Natalie wrote a letter to Santa. She told me she procrastinated—her word not mine—and didn't get it written until today. And I'll bet it's because she feels the same way—knowing that there isn't a Santa but wanting to believe so hard it makes her hurt inside. And stupid me, I just didn't want to get involved. But she sucked me right into her problem and asked me to mail the letter for her."

"And you didn't give it to David?"

"Like I said, I'm stupid. I mean, I figured David already knew what Natalie wanted and he'd either gotten it for her, or he'd decided that what she wanted wasn't appropriate. After all, she's not like Ellie or any of the other kids we visited tonight. She's going to get dozens of presents."

"But maybe not the one she asked for, huh?"

"I'm a total asshole, aren't I?"

"No, you're not. But you're someone who's never really figured Christmas out. Because if you think Santa doesn't exist, then you just don't understand." Linda plucked the envelope from Dusty's hand. "Let's see what Natalie wants, shall we? Maybe we can make sure her wish comes true. After all, it looks as if that little girl is going to become my step-granddaughter, so I have a vested interest in this one. And besides, I believe in spoiling kids at Christmas time, even the ones with wealthy fathers."

Linda unfolded the piece of lined paper and read by the light of her glowing Christmas light earrings.

Dear Santa,

I waited till the last minnit because I was pretty sure you don't exist. But now I am sure you do because I made a wish that daddy and miss willow would stop fiteing and be friends. And it happend. So I desided that wishes can come troo.

Grammy sez I should be greatful because I have lots of toys. So I probly dont need any thing for Christmas. But just in case you wanted to no I wood really like a puppy.

I would be greatful if you gave me one. And I would walk it and take care of it. I promise.

Very Sinseerly,

Natalie Marie Lyndon

Linda finished reading the letter out loud and hooted a laugh, just as Dusty pulled into Serenity Farm's drive. "Dusty," she said in a happy voice, "you live a charmed life. Either that, or Santa is hard at work moving pieces around on his Christmas chessboard. Come on, boy, I've got Murphy's old crate and a dog bed, and maybe even a few dog toys. Let's get this last present delivered."

"Whoa, wait a sec. David doesn't want Natalie to have a dog. I mean, a dog is a huge commitment."

The truck's cabin light came on as Linda opened the door, just in time for her to give him one of her "motherly" looks. "It's true, a dog is a big commitment, but not nearly as big as a few other commitments I can think of. Besides, David needs a dog."

"No, he doesn't need a dog any more than I do."

Linda grinned. "Trust me on this, Dusty. Natalie will take one look at Sven and fall in love, and David will take one look at his happy daughter and give right in to her. Problem solved, joy spread, happy ending for all. And, best of all, unless you tell, no one will know you are responsible for granting Natalie's wish. I'm sure I'll get blamed for it. And I'm a big girl. I can handle it."

"Not to mention the fact that you get blamed for all kinds of things in this town that aren't your fault."

"Well, that too. And if it doesn't work out, then you can always assuage your guilt by offering to adopt him later."

"I don't want a dog."

"I know, but it would appear that you have one right at the moment."

"My house is too small. I *can't* have a dog. You know that."

"Well, actually I don't know that. But I do accept the fact that you think you can't keep the dog."

Dusty shook his head. There were times when Linda made no sense at all.

#####

"This is bat shit crazy," Dusty said as he set the parking brake and gazed up at Eagle Hill Manor. The moonlight danced with scattered clouds and cast silvery shadows across the grand colonnade, giving it the look of an old renaissance painting, maybe by one of the Dutch masters.

"Look, we're good," Linda said. "It's one in the morning, the house is dark, even the Christmas lights have been turned off, and I have a way in." She held up a brass key.

"Willow hasn't even formally signed the escrow papers yet, how do you have a key?"

"Because I'm her mother."

"And?"

"I insisted. She has a key to my house. It was a fair trade."

"What if the dog barks?"

She opened the truck door. "He's out like a little baby light. I think letting him run in the paddock for a while tuckered him out."

Linda opened the crew cab door and pulled out an animal crate that was too big for Sven but wouldn't stay that way for long. The puppy was curled up inside, fast asleep on a fluffy dog bed with a couple of Murphy's old chew toys. "Grab the dog food and the bowls, will ya?" Linda said as she headed off to the inn's front door.

Dusty hefted a big bag of kibble and a plastic shopping bag with a couple of bowls, a leash and a few more dog

toys. "I feel like I'm breaking and entering."

"Shhhh. I'm pretty sure Willow is sleeping with David out in the guest house, and I have it on the authority of Harlan Appleby that Poppy is shackled up with Walter Braden at his house. So the inn is deserted at the moment."

"Wait, if no one is in the house, should we be leaving the dog? I mean what happens in the morning? I don't want the puppy to be left alone for hours."

"You know, Dusty, anyone would think that you didn't want to give this puppy away."

"That's not it. I'm just concerned is all."

"Well, don't be. I've been invited to Christmas breakfast here at eight o'clock. And the last time I looked, all the presents were under that big tree in the inn's lobby. So quit worrying. Natalie will probably be up at dawn anyway."

He quit arguing, although his sense of guilt plagued him for reasons he couldn't quite fathom. After all, they were granting Natalie's Christmas wish. That should make him feel good shouldn't it? It wasn't as if he had a place for Sven in his life.

Natalie needed the dog more than he did.

Linda opened the door, and the two of them tip-toed into the lobby, which was draped with pine roping, red ribbons, and every manner of shiny ornament. They didn't need to use their flashlights because Willow had left the lights burning on the fifteen-foot Christmas tree. The tree occupied the space created by the curve of the inn's grand staircase, and cast a festive glow over the lobby.

Linda set the dog crate down in front of the tree and affixed a bright red construction paper tag that said:

To Natalie

From Santa

The dog's name is Sven because he thinks he's a reindeer.

Linda used a calligraphy pen for the writing, and decorated the tag with glitter so it looked exactly like a gift tag from Santa. In fact, every time Dusty had ever imagined getting a present from Santa, it had come with a big red and gold tag like that. He approved. Linda sure knew how to make a gift look special.

They arranged the dog food, bowls and leash around the crate, and were halfway to the front door and their escape, when Sven woke up. He gave a sad puppy whine and then, when Dusty made the mistake of looking back, he barked.

"Oh, crap," Linda said. "Let's go, before—"

"What the hell?" someone who sounded suspiciously like David Lyndon said from the upstairs hallway.

"Shoot, they must be sleeping in the Churchill Suite, and not out in the guest cottage," Linda said. "Come on let's get out of here."

Someone turned on a light upstairs, and footsteps sounded along the hallway. Dusty grabbed Linda by the arm and hurried her out the door, not even stopping to lock it behind them. They raced to the pickup truck, and Dusty fired it up, just as the inn's front door opened.

"Oh, crap, I'm in trouble," he said, as he slammed the car into gear and hightailed it out of the inn's parking lot. "David knows my truck," he said. But even as he said the words Dusty knew he'd take Sven back if David insisted. And a tiny part of him hoped that might happen.

Chapter 5

Dusty drove Linda back to the farm and stayed for an hour, sharing the highlights of the evening with Juni, Linda's younger daughter who had taken over the management of the Jaybird Cafe. They spent a lot of time talking about Ellie Miller and her mother, and laughing over Sven's misadventures as a doggy reindeer. He drank a couple of cups of eggnog, but begged off when Linda suggested he spend the night up in Willow's attic bedroom.

He didn't want to gate crash Linda's holiday. Besides, Christmas was one of those times when Dusty preferred to be left alone.

And yet, as he drove home, he found himself wishing he'd put up a Christmas tree, or gone with Marleen to Wheeling, or kept Sven, just for the company. Something had changed tonight. Somehow, Linda with her glow-in-the-dark earrings, her present deliveries, and even her crazy scheme to off-load the puppy, had brought real joy into Dusty's life. Christmas joy. And he could honestly say he'd never really felt that before.

Still, he had to be realistic. There wasn't any room for a Christmas tree or Sven in his tiny house. And if he'd gone off to Wheeling, Marleen would have gotten the wrong idea, and he'd never have discovered Linda's Christmas secret. So it was better this way. He wasn't afraid of being alone. He preferred it, all in all. And tomorrow, instead of having to put up with family, he'd go fishing. The weather was supposed to be beautiful. Christmas was for kids, not guys like him.

It was at the darkest hour of the night, after the moon had set, when he pulled his truck onto the long gravel road that led to his A-frame. He might have stumbled up the steps to his deck were it not for the motion detectors he'd installed. A couple of flood lights kicked in the minute his boot hit the first step, dispelling the inky night and revealing a box at his front door, wrapped in brown paper and tied up with string.

Who used brown paper and string for shipping boxes, now that heavy duty packing tape and stick on labels were available? The box—no more than eighteen inches square—was an anachronism.

He approached cautiously. The folks in Shenandoah Falls were, by an large, good, hardworking people with big hearts. But there were some folks in town who wanted Dusty to clear out so they could buy up his land and build a park. He didn't think someone would try to do mischief to him, but you never knew these days. And the package fit the definition of suspicious.

He got close enough to read the return address, and his neck hairs stood up as a shiver worked its way down his spine. *One Reindeer Way, North Pole*. The very same address Natalie had used for her letter.

This had to be one of Willow's pranks. She was notorious for pulling his leg. And he usually pulled right back. In fact, she'd probably see his dog delivery as a prank, even though it wasn't.

He figured she'd put shaving cream or something inside the box. He was prepared to get a pie in his eye the moment he opened it. And that would be okay. With Willow it was tit for tat and no one ever got ticked off.

The thought put a smile on his lips as he took the package inside and sat down on his small sofa to open it. The twine was tied so tight that he had to use his jackknife to cut it. To his surprise the box didn't spring open once the twine was removed, but the brown paper fell away, leaving behind the most beautiful wrapping paper Dusty had ever seen. It was red and green and gold and silver and had winking Santa's all over it. It was sort of like the paper Linda had used for her gifts but grander and shinier.

And like Linda's presents, this one also had a red gift tag, but it wasn't made out of construction paper. This tag was shiny, and the calligraphy on it was as fine as what you might see in an old, hand-lettered manuscript.

It read, "To Dusty From Santa" on the front, with a longer message on the back:

The Mrs. and I were doing some housecleaning this summer and we found this. Guess it must have been lost for a while. Sorry about that. People like to think I'm perfect, but I'm

not. Nobody is, you know. Doesn't mean you should lose hope, though. When you have nothing else, if you still have hope, then you have everything

Santa.

Right then, Dusty knew this gift wasn't one of Willow's pranks, nor had it come from Linda.

Right then, Dusty believed.

He slipped his thumb under the paper and carefully unwrapped a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles Pizza Launcher.

Read a Sneak Preview of Dusty's book

Privileged Amy Lyndon needs the one thing she has never had before—a job.
Dusty McNeil is going to give her the one thing she never expected—love

A preview of *A Small-Town Bride* follows.

Chapter 1

Amy Lyndon's first clue that her life was about to change came at eleven forty-five on a sunny Friday, the last day of March, when Daddy stormed into her room without knocking. Luckily, Amy, who had just gotten out of bed, was wearing her bathrobe or there might have been an embarrassing father-daughter moment.

"I've had it up to here with you," Daddy said, gesturing wildly, his face as red as a glass of Bella Vista Vineyards Pinot Noir.

"What's the matter?" Amy kept her voice low and calm. She'd learned this trick from Mom, who had been an expert at handling Daddy's sudden, but infrequent, rages.

"What's the—" His words came to a sputtering stop as a vein popped from his forehead. Uh-oh. The vein thing was a bad sign. And his complexion had turned almost purple, closer to the color of Malbec than Pinot Noir.

"Daddy, calm down. You'll give yourself a stroke or something."

He spoke again in a voice that rattled Amy's bedroom windows. "Get dressed. Then get out."

"What?"

"You heard me. I want you out of this house by..." He checked his Rolex. "Noon. That gives you fifteen minutes. And if you're smart, you'll run straight to Grady Carson. I understand he's proposed. Congratulations."

"How did you know that?"

"Everyone knows it. You've been dating him for a year and a half, and he's everything you need in a husband."

Amy said nothing because Grady Carson was most definitely not everything she needed. Who knew he was planning to pop the question at Tammy's wedding? Like from out of nowhere. She'd turned him down in no uncertain terms and kept her mouth shut about the whole thing. If Daddy knew about Grady's proposal, then Grady must have told him.

Damn him. Damn both of them.

"Daddy, I don't plan to—"

"Don't tell me you don't want to get married. Because, to be honest, Amy, I'm tired of you living off my goodwill. It's time you go live off someone else's." Daddy waved a piece of paper in front of Amy's nose, then pulled his reading glasses down from their resting place above his bushy eyebrows. The paper appeared to be an American Express bill. "You spent twelve hundred dollars on shoes last month? Really?"

"They were Jimmy Choos, and I—"

"I don't give a rat's ass who made them. Amy, your credit card bill last month was more than ten thousand dollars."

"Oh? That much, huh?" She was bad with money, like Mom had been. Most of Daddy's rages were precipitated by the arrival of credit card statements. This was a known fact.

"You're twenty-eight, still unemployed, and living at home. This can't go on any longer. Either accept Grady's proposal or move out. Today." He marched out of her bedroom.

She followed him out into the hallway. "You can't make me go," Amy said to his retreating back. "And you can't force me to marry someone either."

He turned, one eyebrow arched in that classic angry-daddy look. "Wanna bet? Now, get your things out of here before noon."

"But the Z4 won't hold all my stuff." The sports car held two people, barely.

"Oh...that's too bad. When you come back engaged to Grady, I'll let you get your stuff. Until then, it's *my* stuff. God knows I paid for it all, including the sports car."

They stood with gazes locked for a moment. "I'm not marrying Grady. He's an idiot."

"No, he's not. He's made a fortune as a hedge fund manager, and that takes brains. Honestly, if you were more like your brothers or cousins we wouldn't be having this discussion." Daddy stopped yelling at her and strode down the hallway.

Amy didn't argue any further; she'd heard Daddy's complaints many times over the years. She just didn't measure up like her brothers and her cousins, most of whom were super smart, had gone to Ivy League colleges, and completed law school. Amy was just...ordinary.

She returned to her room and stared at the clothes in her ginormous walk-in closet. She'd give Daddy a couple of hours to calm down about the credit card bill. That's how Mom had always handled him. Tomorrow he would be his normal, happy self.

In the meantime, she needed to get out of the house.

She threw on a plain white tank top, a pair of Rag and Bone boyfriend jeans, her new Isabel Marant sneakers, and the black Burberry biker jacket that had most definitely contributed to the size of her Amex bill this month. Daddy needed to get over it. She only went shopping in New York twice a year. And besides, she'd had to go shopping—Tammy, one of her sorority sisters, needed someone to help her pull together her honeymoon wardrobe, and Amy had a killer eye for fashion.

Thoughts of Tammy and Evan off together on a three-week honeymoon tour of Paris, Rome, and Athens unleashed a wave of envy. She could have a honeymoon like that, but marrying Grady would be too high a price.

She headed out to the circular drive and fired up the BMW Z4. Fifteen minutes later, she took a seat at the Red Fern Inn, a two-hundred-year-old taproom and restaurant in downtown Shenandoah Falls. She waited a long time before Bryce Summerville, the inn's owner, came over to the table, wringing his hands.

"Miss Lyndon," he said in a deferential tone. "I'm sorry to ask this, but how do you intend to pay for your lunch today?"

"What?"

"Um, this is sort of embarrassing, but your father called not five minutes ago and told me not to accept your credit card."

"He did what?"

"He called me—"

"I heard you. I'm just having a hard time believing you. How did he know I was getting lunch here?"

"You get lunch here quite frequently."

That was true.

"He told me he's canceled your card."

Heat climbed up Amy's face. "I'll pay with cash, and I'd like the eggs Benedict." Her appetite had disappeared, but she couldn't get up and walk out now. Not with Viola Ingram and Faye Appleby, card-carrying members of the Shenandoah Falls gossip association, sitting at the adjacent table listening in.

Amy waved at Viola. "Hey, Ms. Ingram. How're you doing today?"

"Just fine and dandy," the senior citizen said in a bright voice. "I heard that you and Grady Carson are about to make a big announcement."

Oh, great. Everyone in town must know about Grady's proposal. "No, Ms. Ingram, no big announcements are pending," she said. She was going to kick Grady's ass the next time she saw him.

When her lunch finally arrived, Amy could only choke down two or three bites. She sat there steaming about Grady and Daddy for a long time and then paid her check with the last of the cash in her wallet.

She strolled down Liberty Avenue to the Bank of America branch, where she visited the ATM only to discover that the machine wouldn't give her any money. The bank said she was overdrawn, but Daddy had deposited her allowance last week. Daddy was a joint signer on the account, which made it easier for him to transfer funds. And that's when it struck her, literally like a hammer to the head, that what Daddy could transfer in, he could just as easily transfer out.

How dare he?

She drove back to the four-thousand-square-foot California contemporary that she shared with her father. The house sat up on the ridge not far from Bella Vista Vineyard, the winery Daddy had started thirty-five years ago, before Virginia wines had become all the rage.

She stormed up the front walk and discovered a locked front door. That was surprising since Daddy's office was

located in the house, and even if he'd gone up to the vineyard, Lucy, the housekeeper, was always around.

She dug out her house key, but it wouldn't work the lock. What the hell? When had she started hallucinating? She pinched herself.

Ouch.

In desperate need for reassurance, she reached for her iPhone, but it might as well have been a brick. She had no bars of service.

That's when the panic set in. She ran the short distance up the drive to the Bella Vista Vineyard's headquarters, and by the time she arrived, gasping for air, her panic had morphed into a dark sinking hole in the middle of her stomach.

Ozzie Cassano, Daddy's chief winemaker, greeted her in the courtyard right by the entrance to the tasting room. It was almost as if he'd been waiting for her.

"Where's Daddy and Lucy?" she asked without preamble.

"Lucy's on vacation."

"Since when?"

"Since this morning. And your father isn't here either."

Ozzie's soft Italian accent failed to calm her. "What do you mean? Daddy's always here unless he's at home or at Charlotte's Grove."

"I'm sorry. He told me to tell you he's taking a vacation, too."

OMG! She hadn't seen this one coming. "Not with Lucy, I hope."

"I don't know, miss."

"Look, Ozzie, can I borrow your keys to the house? Lucy and Daddy locked it when they left, and my key didn't work."

Ozzie stared down at his dusty boots and shrugged his shoulders. "I'm very sorry, Miss Lyndon," he said. "Your father, he told me you were not to be let into the house under any circumstances. He also told me you were getting married soon." Ozzie finally looked up and flashed his gold fillings. "Congratulations."

####

If there'd been a pay phone anywhere in Shenandoah Falls, Virginia, Amy could have called Grady and demanded that he rescue her. But pay phones were like dinosaurs, totally extinct.

And if she'd had the forethought to fill up the Z4's tank last night, she could have driven herself to DC and rescued herself. But she hadn't filled the tank because she'd planned to do it this morning.

Proving that procrastination could be a mean bitch. Or maybe procrastination had saved her from making a bad decision.

She parked in the town lot and spent the afternoon thinking things through.

Daddy assumed she would find an easy way out of this predicament. At the very least, he would expect her to run up to Charlotte's Grove and throw herself on Aunt Pam's mercy, which would be about the same as calling Grady and telling him she'd changed her mind about marrying him. Or maybe he expected her to call her brothers, Andrew and Edward, but Grady was their friend and landlord. So asking her brothers for help—assuming she could beg a telephone for that purpose—was out, too.

She was not going to take the easy way. She'd show Daddy. She would sleep in her car.

This decision proved more challenging than it sounded. The Z4 had two bucket seats with a console between them, and neither of the seats reclined enough to make sleeping easy. Plus the sunny March day turned into a bitterly cold March night. Could a person die from exposure in forty-degree weather? She would have asked Siri if her iPhone had been working.

By the time the sky began to turn pink, she felt as if she'd won a moral victory even though it was hard to feel morally victorious when you were starving, had to pee, and didn't have a bathroom handy.

Lucky for her, Gracie's Diner was located a block away from the garage, opened early, and had a bathroom.

Amy had never set foot in the diner before eleven in the morning, so it surprised her when she opened the door and discovered no other customers. Damn. Her bathroom plan depended on Gracie being too busy to notice Amy slinking in to use the bathroom.

Instead, Gracie was on her the moment Amy stepped through the door. “Morning, Amy. You’re here early today. You want the usual?”

So awkward. How could Amy use the diner’s bathroom and not purchase anything? But what other choice did she have? She was in danger of wetting her pants. “Uh, I’m on my way out of town,” she lied, “but I needed the restroom.”

Gracie cocked her head and gave Amy a once-over. Oh my God, she probably looked like a mess after trying to sleep in a Z4. Not knowing what else to do, and needing to pee really bad, Amy turned her back on Gracie and walked to the ladies’ room with her shoulders straight.

She was a Lyndon, a prominent, wealthy, and influential family. She did not need to beg for the chance to pee in a toilet instead of somewhere outside. The thought of peeing in the woods left her trembling. How did a girl do that, anyway? And what about toilet paper? Since she’d never been a Girl Scout, she didn’t know the answers to these suddenly existential questions.

The diner’s bathroom was basic but clean. She did her business, washed her hands and face, and gave her hair a quick comb. She felt much better.

Hungry, but better. She lingered for a while, hoping other customers might show up and trying to figure out how to leave the diner without humiliating herself. She’d just started running various scenarios in her head when the truth descended like an atom bomb.

She was homeless. And penniless (almost—she had fifty cents in her purse).

How did a person do poor, hungry, and homeless? Amy had never wanted for anything in her life. Maybe she should say sayonara to her hard-won moral victory. She could always borrow Gracie’s phone and call Grady.

A knock sounded on the door, followed by Gracie’s voice. “Hon, are you all right? You’ve been in there a while, and I...”

Amy opened the door. “I’m fine.” Her voice wobbled. She would not ask to borrow the phone. There had to be another way.

“No, I don’t think so,” Gracie said. “You come out and have your eggs and bacon.”

Oh crap. What was she supposed to do now?

“I...I...don’t. I mean I can’t...” She let go of a long, trembling breath. “Daddy locked me out of the house yesterday and told me I had to marry Grady Carson. Then he took all the money out of my checking account. And I probably should call Grady, but I have to borrow your phone.” The words came out in a terrible, hoarse whisper.

She expected Gracie to yell at her for using the bathroom without having any intention of buying food. Or, worse yet, to take her into the back room and hand her a phone. But instead Gracie draped her arm over Amy’s shoulder. “Come get your breakfast. You can pay me for it later, after you sort things out with your father. And no woman should ever marry someone she has second thoughts about. Shame on your daddy.”

The tense muscles in Amy’s neck and shoulders relaxed as Gracie led her to the counter, where a plate of eggs and bacon awaited. “Eat your breakfast. You’ll feel better.”

Amy did as she was told, downing the eggs and bacon like a starving person. She had no idea where her next meal would come from, so she allowed Gracie to refill her coffee cup several times while the diner filled up with the usual Saturday crowd.

Pippa Custis, the owner of Ewe and Me, the yarn shop in town, came in for a bowl of oatmeal.

Walter Braden came in holding hands with his new wife, the former Poppy Marchand. For a couple of old people, they were sweet. They ordered two big breakfasts and spent the entire time gazing into each other’s eyes.

Alicia Mulloy, the hygienist at Dr. Dinnen’s office, ordered three different kinds of donuts. Amy wondered if Dr. Dinnen knew about Alicia’s sugar habit.

And then Dusty McNeil strolled through the door and turned Saturday into Man Candy Monday. Wow. He was like some unholy combination of Thor and Captain America all rolled into one gorgeous example of maleness.

Gracie swooped down on him with a cup of coffee and a plate of eggs and bacon, as if she’d been expecting his arrival. He gave Gracie a smile full of laugh lines and dimples and white teeth. And then he turned toward Amy.

Unlike the other customers, he didn’t pretend she was invisible. Oh no. He gave her a long, assessing gaze that made Amy’s pulse jump. Dusty McNeil had a badass reputation as a player who preferred the showgirls and cocktail waitresses who worked up at the casinos in Charles Town, West Virginia.

So why was he ogling her?

She had no idea, but she returned the favor. Who wouldn't enjoy gazing at that chiseled face or those bright baby blues or all that golden blond hair?

And that's when a crazy idea popped into her desperate head. Maybe she could invite herself over to his place for some Netflix and chill. Spending a night with him wouldn't be much of a sacrifice. And it would probably be way more fun (and warmer) than sleeping in the Z4.

Or sleeping with Grady for that matter.

But no. Initiating a booty call would not be the right next step. She'd chosen to sleep in her car instead of falling back on a man. She'd taken a principled position. So she pushed the ridiculous idea of sleeping with Dusty McNeil out of her mind and concentrated on her coffee mug while she tried to figure out what her next step ought to be.

She came up with exactly nothing.

"Y'all seem to be busy up at Eagle Hill Manor these days," Gracie said to Dusty. And since Amy didn't have anything better to do, she eavesdropped.

"Yep. Ever since that article in *Brides*. Willow's hiring another event planner. Know anyone who might be interested?"

Gracie shook her head. "No, but I'll keep my eye out."

A job.

Why hadn't Amy thought of that before?

A job would solve all her problems. And becoming an event planner sounded like the perfect fit except for the fact that she had zero real work experience. But she had been her sorority's social secretary and had planned all kinds of themed parties and charitable events. She'd even had a hand in helping several of her sorority sisters with their wedding plans.

This was perfect. She'd get a job instead of a husband. And wouldn't that blow Daddy's mind?

About the Author

Hope Ramsay is a *USA Today*, bestselling author of heartwarming contemporary romances. Her books have won critical acclaim and publishing awards. She is married to a good ol' Georgia boy who resembles every single one of her Southern heroes. She has two grown children, a couple of demanding lap cats, and a puppy named Daisy. She lives in Virginia where she spends her time writing, knitting, and playing her forty-year-old Martin guitar. If you enjoyed this story, please consider joining Hope's [mailing list](#). You can also connect with Hope on Facebook at [HopeRamsayAuthor](#) and on [Twitter \(@HopeRamsay\)](#).