

Chapter One

*March
Central Texas*

March Madness.

Lucca Romano stood at the window of his office on the campus of Landry University and gazed out at green grass and purple bearded irises without actually seeing them. In his mind's eye he focused on another place, another time, when a white ten-passenger van traveled a ribbon of dark asphalt highway bisecting a barren winter plain.

Despite the warm sunshine beaming through the window glass, cold permeated Lucca's bones, and he shuddered as the memory washed over him. Pings and whooshes as text messages arrive and depart from a half dozen different cell phones. The rhythmic beat of rap. Young men's laughter as a yapping chocolate brown puppy claws his way over the front passenger seat.

Everyone's spirits are high after a win, especially after the first win of the season. Sure, it was just an exhibition game, but it proved that the Midwest State University Ravens are tough competitors.

"Keep the dog in the back," Lucca says, reaching for the little pup. Why had he allowed Seth Seidel to bring that dog home, anyway? The kid lives in a dorm. He has nowhere to keep a dog.

He'd done it because the people selling the puppies out of the back of their truck had been puppy mill people. Lucca's own heart had gone as soft as Seth's upon seeing the "display." Lucca had even loaned the kid some cash to buy the dog.

"Sucker," he mutters, passing the pup now christened "Sparky" to the backseat.

Five minutes later, Sparky is back. Lucca sighs and stretches for the puppy. Sparky wiggles out of his hand and falls, his sharp little claws reaching for purchase and finding the driver's arm. The driver startles and stomps the brake, and in an instant, Lucca's world changes forever.

The wheels lock. Tires skid on black ice. The van slides . . . slides . . . slides in slow motion.

Standing in his sun-drenched office, seventeen months and a thousand miles away from the horror, Lucca swayed and reached out to brace himself against the inevitable crash.

Tires skid off the road, and the van tilts then rolls, again and again and again. People and possessions fly. The boys scream. Lucca's body jerks against the seat belt. His head hits something hard and the world goes black.

He regains consciousness with a pounding head; cold, icy air; and panicked voices. "Alan? Oh, God. Alan! Coach! Somebody! Help me! Coach!"

He opens his eyes and sees splatters of blood on the dashboard.

"Coach?"

Jerked back to the present, Lucca glanced over his shoulder to see his graduate assistant in his office doorway, a puzzled expression on his face. How long had he been standing there?

Lucca cleared his throat. "Yes?"

"It's ten after four."

Lucca's gaze shifted to the clock on his wall. He had called a team meeting for four o'clock, so he was late. He was never late. No wonder his assistant looked confused.

"I'll be right there."

The young man nodded and left. Lucca wiped away the perspiration beaded on his brow and sucked in a pair of deep breaths, seeking the calm for which he was known at courtside. Unfortunately, calm proved elusive.

When his wall clock chimed the quarter hour, Lucca shook his head. He wiped the beaded perspiration from his brow, then slipped on his suit coat. As he exited his office, he attempted to gather his thoughts. He had a list of instructions to give his team prior to the event that Landry University's athletic department had planned to celebrate the Bobcats' success in the NCAA tournament.

When Lucca took the head-coaching job a year before, he had inherited a group of players who had the raw talent to win. Once he convinced them to buy into his system, he'd been confident they would play well enough to win their conference and make the tournament. When he'd made his traditional preseason bet with his brother Tony, the new head coach at Colorado, he'd predicted a tourney berth and first game win. Making it all the way to the Sweet Sixteen had been a thrill.

A thrill that hadn't lasted beyond the dream he'd had during the flight back to Texas following the tournament loss.

He'd awakened with a jolt somewhere over Alabama, the repressed memories fresh, the terror real. He'd spent the balance of the flight trying to lock them away again, but as the hours passed, it was as if the nightmare had plowed the field of his psyche and

kicked up a cloud of pain and misery that had churned into a tempest worthy of a 1930s era dust storm.

He pushed open the door of the men's locker room and got a whiff of that familiar sweaty scent that had been part of his life for as long as he could remember. Not even the high-dollar NBA venues had been able to get rid of the acrid, musty locker room smell entirely. Today when the stench hit his nostrils, his stomach took a nauseated roll. A storm was brewing inside him.

March Madness.

He walked past a locker whose door hung open. Without a conscious thought, he jabbed it with his elbow, and the metal door clanged shut. Someone had left a pair of athletic shoes on a bench, and one of them had fallen onto the floor into Lucca's path. He swung a hard kick at the sneaker and sent it crashing against the far row of lockers. Then he picked up the other shoe and threw it hard after the first. A janitor mopping the shower floor glanced up ready to complain, but his growl transformed to a gawk when he saw who had made the noise.

Lucca understood the man's surprise. Coach Romano didn't slam things. He didn't kick things. He certainly didn't throw things. He'd patterned his professional behavior after legendary coach Phil Jackson's philosophy of mindful basketball, which included teaching his players to be aggressive without anger or violence and stressing the value of focus and calm in the midst of chaos.

Today, Coach Romano seemed to have lost his Zen.

He exited the locker room and walked out onto the hardwood floor of Bill Litty Arena.

His assistant coaches and players stood with their attention focused on the Jumbotron hanging at center court. A quick glance upward showed Lucca that it was video of their Sweet Sixteen loss, specifically the final two minutes of the game during which his Landry University Bobcats had scored eight unanswered points and came within a whisker of making the biggest upset of the tournament. They'd been a twelve seed playing number one, and they'd held their own against one of the best teams in the country. He'd been so proud of his team.

Why he could barely manage looking at them now, he couldn't figure. On the whole, these were a good group of kids. His point guard had a legitimate shot at making it in the NBA, and what the rest of the team lacked in talent, they made up for with hard work. They'd slipped their size thirteen feet into Cinderella's slippers and danced their way to the Sweet Sixteen. Even before their final game, Lucca had fielded a call from a representative of a prominent "basketball school" who had wanted to congratulate him on his team's season. Rumor had it that the school's icon of a coach planned to retire after one more season, so Lucca believed it had been a courting call.

His sister Gabi's words whispered his mind. "You're a star now, bro."

Shame washed over him and he set his teeth against it.

His players groaned as the replay showed the missed jumper that had broken their streak. "You should have passed it back to me," the power forward said. "I'd have made it."

"I should have kept it myself," the point guard fired back.

"Don't let Coach hear you say that," the center said. "Surrender the 'me.' . . ."

“For the ‘we,’” the others finished, quoting one of Lucca’s favorite sayings with some laughter.

“Lame,” the point guard said, giving a dismissive snort.

At the sound, Lucca halted midstep. His team was mocking him.

His temper flashed. Don’t they know how lucky they are? Don’t they have a clue?

They are healthy and whole and playing a game. An effing game! On scholarship!

They’re not broken, confined to a wheelchair.

They’re not dead.

Fury coursed through Lucca’s veins. He imagined himself giving his star player a swift boot in the ass. Instead, he barked out a command, “Everybody to the baseline. We’re running ladders.”

His players turned to stare at him, their expressions ranging from incredulous to smirking. His voice deadly calm, Lucca asked, “You think I’m kidding?”

No one spoke. Lucca focused on the point guard. “Norris?”

The young man hesitated, then grinned. “Yeah, I do, Coach. Season’s over.”

Lucca folded his arms and put all of his angry disgust into his glare.

After a moment, Norris’s cocky smile died. Lucca jerked his head in a “get going” motion. His team shared a shocked look, then started running.

For the next half hour, Lucca drilled them hard, his voice harsh, his manner cold, which wasn’t at all his customary way of coaching. More than once he caught a player darting him a “WTF?” look. Twice his assistant coach approached him to inform him of the time, but Lucca stopped him with a flick of a hand. Only when people began filing into the arena for the celebration did he send his team to the showers, giving them

fifteen minutes to clean up and return to the court. He heard the grumbling and saw the scowls, but his players weren't stupid. They knew not to cross him today.

Too bad he had a boss to deal with, he acknowledged as he spied the athletic director's sixty-something secretary approaching him with a scolding frown on her face.

"For heaven's sake, Lucca," Mrs. Richie said. "Mr. Hopkins is not at all happy. He has a group of donors waiting to meet you and Jamal Norris. The AV people wanted access to the arena floor an hour ago so they could set up their microphones. I have parents who expected family time with their students before tonight's event knocking on the door of my office. Why in the world did you hold a practice this afternoon?"

Lucca closed his eyes. He didn't care about the AV folks, and helicopter parents made him crazy. But schmoozing with the alumni and soliciting donations was a big part his job. He could be good at it when he wanted. Today, he simply didn't have it in him to make nice. "My team needed it."

"Well, you are wanted in the director's office ASAP. This practice completely disrupted our schedule."

Mrs. Richie reminded him enough of his late, beloved grandmother that he swallowed his caustic response. "I'll go right up."

She nodded, then checked her watch. "And Jamal?"

Lucca had no intention of singling out his point guard that way. The press did enough of it as it was. While it was true that Norris had turned in a stellar performance in the tournament, all the attention had overinflated the young man's opinion of himself to an extent that Lucca believed was detrimental to both Jamal and the team. He searched for a compromise.

“You can let AD Hopkins know that I’ll invite our visitors into the locker room at the end of the night. That should make everybody happy.”

Surprise widened Mrs. Richie’s eyes. Lucca never allowed visitors into the locker room. “I’ll call him and tell him you are on your way.”

Due to the mood he was in, Lucca considered the ten minutes he spent glad-handing the donors to be excruciating. He found the congratulations and back slaps annoying. When one of the donors asked him if he’d like new televisions for the team’s rec room, he almost told the man to send his money to the girls’ swim team. Those young women had heart and rode to their meets in a six-year-old van that made Lucca cringe every time he saw it parked in the lot.

He breathed a sigh of relief when the athletic director announced that the time had come to adjourn to the arena. As the men filed out of the office an investment banker from New York stepped in front of Lucca and put a hand against his chest. “If I can have just a moment, Coach?”

Lucca sucked in a breath as the urge to slap the man’s hand away rolled over him like a tidal wave. Damn, he was on edge. He’d better get himself together or he just might do his career irreparable harm. Would that be so terrible?

The donor didn’t seem to notice Lucca’s bad attitude. He was too busy slipping something into Lucca’s jacket pocket. “Some friends and I want to make sure you know how pleased we are to have you here at Landry. You’re a great coach. You proved it last year when you motivated that ragtag group of kids at Midwest State all the way to an NCAA berth and—”

“Those kids played their hearts out,” Lucca interrupted, nausea churning in his stomach.

“Sure they did. Sure they did. But you knew how to motivate them, didn’t you? Dedicating their season to their dead teammates. That was a brilliant bit of coaching.”

Brilliant coaching, my ass. “That was the team’s idea,” Lucca said carefully. “It was a difficult time for—”

The donor talked over him. “What you did with this team this season . . . what can I say? Jamal Norris had no intention of attending Landry until we managed to steal you away from Midwest State, and Norris is the reason we played in Atlanta this year. If you can manage to keep him out of the NBA’s clutches for another year . . . a national championship is within our grasp. You’re a special coach, Lucca Romano. You’ve got a great future ahead of you, and we want to do everything in our power to make sure that future is here at Landry.”

He gave Lucca’s pocket a little pat, then stepped back. “We want you to remember our gratitude when the Dukes and Kentuckys of the world come calling. And don’t you worry, we’ll see that you get regular reminders, too. Now, we’d better hurry to catch up with the others. Don’t want the festivities to start without us, do we, Coach?”

Don’t call me Coach, Lucca wanted to say.

The donor motioned for Lucca to precede him from the office. Lucca shook his head. “You go ahead. I have to take a leak.”

The donor gave him a knowing grin, dropped his gaze to Lucca’s pocket, then winked. He obviously thought Lucca couldn’t wait to check out the “gratitude” in his pocket. The man couldn’t have been more wrong.

Lucca was battling the need to puke.

Ragtag players. Knew how to motivate.

The van sliding, rolling. The screams. Dear Lord, the screams.

“My son,” Mrs. Seidel said at the funeral, her eyes stricken, her tone broken. “Did he suffer?”

“Coach. Help me. Please, Coach.

Bile rose in Lucca’s throat, and he headed for the lavatory connected to the athletic director’s office. He made it to the commode just in time.

Once the spasms ended, he went to the sink, turned on the water, rinsed his mouth, and then splashed his face. When he glanced at his reflection in the mirror, he wanted to vomit all over again.

Instead, he exited the bathroom and his boss’s office. Rather than following the pulse of music that now rose from the arena, he turned toward his own office, went inside, and locked the door behind him.

Then, Lucca lost it.

Breathing hard, seeing little beyond the haze of rage and heartache and guilt roaring through him, he swept his arm across his desktop, sending everything crashing to the floor. Next he eyed the trophies on the wall shelf. Crash. He picked up his notebook computer and threw it onto the floor, hard, then kicked it for good measure.

Within minutes, he’d trashed his entire office. With nothing whole left to destroy, he turned on himself, balling up his fist and punching the wall.

He was pretty sure he broke some bones. The pain felt good. It felt deserved.

Using his bloody, damaged hand, Lucca removed the folded check from his pocket and looked at it. Fifty thousand dollars. Because he'd felt sorry for a dog, killed two kids, and paralyzed another? He tossed the bloodstained check away. It floated toward the floor and landed atop shards of a shattered crystal trophy.

Lucca quit the room and the campus. Within days he'd departed the state, and by the end of the month, he'd fled the country. Lucca Ryan Romano couldn't live with himself. He was done.

March Madness.

Two

July

Eternity Springs, Colorado

Hope Montgomery flipped through the curriculum planner with the scheduled events for the upcoming school year. When her gaze settled on a particular date, she sucked in a sudden breath. March 15. The most horrible day of her life. The day her world changed forever.

She closed her eyes and absorbed the hurt. This was the way it happened now, five years later. Rather than being her constant companion, the pain would slither up and strike when she wasn't prepared or braced for it.

“Beware the Ides of March,” she softly quoted.

She shut her planner and set it aside, then reached for her coffee. Her hand trembled as she raised the china cup to her mouth, but she concentrated on savoring both the smell and the taste of the aromatic, full-bodied brew. Using her senses helped

anchor her to the present, and besides, the coffee at Angel's Rest Healing Center and Spa was truly sublime.

Nevertheless, she teetered on the brink of tears until Celeste Blessing swept into the old Victorian mansion's parlor saying, "I'm so sorry I'm running late, Hope. It's been one thing after another today. First we had a plumbing problem in the showers beside the hot springs pools, then one of our guests suffered a death in the family, the poor dear, and I helped arrange emergency transportation home. Finally, my sister phoned, and I'm afraid I lost track of time."

Hope stood and smiled at the vital, active, older woman whom she'd come to view as the matriarch of Eternity Springs. The owner of Angel's Rest, Celeste wore black slacks, a gold cotton blouse, and a harried smile.

"Celeste, I love your new haircut," Hope said.

"Thank you. I do, too." Celeste lifted a hand to fluff the short, sassy style, her blue eyes twinkling. "One of my male guests told me I look just like Judi Dench. He's an old flirt and I think he was hoping for a discount on his bill, but I'll accept the compliment."

"As well you should," Hope agreed. "He's right."

"Thank you, dear. I'm going to tell my sister you said that." Celeste wrinkled her nose as she added, "She told me I was too old for this style."

Hope couldn't help but smile. She had met Celeste and her sister when they'd rented the South Carolina beach house next door to Hope's vacation rental the spring before last. The sisters had caught Hope crying on the beach one March morning, and they'd offered comfort to a stranger and changed the path of Hope's life. Like most

sisters, they'd bickered, but the love they shared had been obvious. Hope could picture Desdemona saying the hairstyle remark to Celeste. "How is Desi doing these days?"

"She's well. Busy, but then, aren't we all? She tells me she's let her hair grow and dyed it bright red."

Mentally picturing the tall, flamboyant woman, Hope grinned. "Is she still traveling quite a bit?"

"Constantly. As a result we don't have the opportunity to see each other as often as we'd like. I'm trying to convince her to visit Eternity Springs sometime soon. She asked me to tell you hello and to blame her for my tardiness, but we're both to blame. It was downright rude of me to ask for a ride to the baby shower and then not be ready on time. Please forgive me."

"Don't be silly, Celeste. We have plenty of time." Besides, no matter how happy Hope was for the expectant parents, baby showers were always a little tough for her. She thought that being with Celeste might make the day easier. "Your front desk worker gave me a cup of spectacular coffee, and I used the time to my benefit, looking over some of the paperwork Principal Geary gave me this morning. It's hard to believe that school starts in just three weeks."

Hope picked up her purse and slipped the strap over her shoulder. "Can I help you carry anything?"

"Thank you. I have a few gifts in the kitchen."

Celeste led Hope down the hallway toward the kitchen. Upon entering the cheery room, Hope stopped and laughed. The kitchen table was covered in gaily wrapped and

ribboned packages and bags, all in nursery themes in shades of a beautiful baby blue.

“A few bags?”

“It’s the latent grandmother in me, I fear. I just love buying for little ones.”

Hope’s smile softened to bittersweet as she recalled stacks of pink onesies and a closet full of ruffles. “I do, too.”

They loaded the gifts into Hope’s crossover SUV, chatting about the presents they’d chosen. This would be Hope’s first visit to Jack and Cat Davenport’s mountain estate, Eagle’s Way, and she looked forward to seeing it. She’d heard it was fabulous.

They picked up two more passengers for the drive, Maggie Romano and her daughter, Gabi. An attractive widow in her early fifties, Maggie was the newest full-time resident of Eternity Springs, having relocated at the beginning of the summer to be nearer to two of her adult children. Gabi was the town’s deputy sheriff, though with her long legs, high cheekbones, and her mother’s beautiful blue eyes, she could have been a model if she’d wanted. Hope was in the early stages friendship with the Romano women. She liked them both very much, but considering her history, she was cautious about letting anyone too close. Experience had taught her that people invariably got too nosy, or they failed to be a friend when she needed one the most.

Celeste Blessing had been the lone exception. Being around Celeste was like slipping into Angel’s Rest’s inviting hot springs pools—sans the sulfur smell—on a cold winter’s night. She simply made Hope feel better. She’d planted the seed about moving to Eternity Springs during those beach house days, then nurtured the notion with phone calls. Once Hope expressed real interest in making the change, Celeste had championed her with the principal and school board. One job offer later, Hope packed

her bags for a fresh start in a place that called to her, instead of in a place where she'd run to, like the last move she'd made.

The four women made small talk as their trip commenced. Gabi relayed a story about the sheriff's office dispatcher's unfortunate experience with online dating, and with the laughter the story elicited, the melancholy that had lingered within Hope after the unfortunate lesson planner incident began to dissolve. She turned onto the road that climbed out of the valley, and her spirits rose along with it.

They were halfway up the ridge when Maggie observed, "I've not been up this road before. What a spectacular view!"

"Isn't it lovely?" In the front passenger seat, Celeste twisted around to speak with Maggie directly. "This is one of my favorite Gold Wing rides. There's a scenic overview before the turnoff to Jack and Cat's place where you can look down on Eternity Springs. It just makes me feel good to be there. And when you travel on up to the highest point of the road, I sometimes feel like I can reach into the sky and touch heaven."

"Maybe I'll have to get a motorcycle," Maggie mused. "We could form a gang, Celeste."

Gabi let out a groan and buried her head in her hands as Celeste laughed out loud.

It was a beautiful summer afternoon. Temperatures hovered in the midseventies. Snow-capped peaks climbed into a sapphire sky dotted with puffy white clouds. The road wound around a mountainside to reveal an alpine meadow carpeted with wildflowers. "Oh, how gorgeous," Hope observed. "What are those purple-blue flowers called?"

“Gentians. They’re one of my favorites,” Celeste said. “Up near Heartache Falls they . . . oh dear.”

Hope braked to a stop as they came upon a small herd of bighorn sheep congregated on the road in front of them. Celeste clucked her tongue. “These animals are becoming my nemesis. This is the third time they’ve delayed me this month. Sarah Murphy will have my guts for garters if we’re late to the shower.”

“We have plenty of time,” Hope assured her.

“Yes, but Sarah is not her usual cheery self these days. I need a distraction. What’s the latest on your project, Maggie?”

Gabi rolled her big blue eyes and groaned a second time. Her mother sniffed with disdain, then beamed at Celeste. “Actually, I have exciting news. Jim Sutton has accepted my offer for his great-grandmother’s Victorian on Aspen Street. With a little renovation, it will make a perfect B&B.”

“That is exciting news,” Celeste said.

“Congratulations.” Hope’s brows knit as she tried to place the house. “On Aspen, you say? Which house is it?”

“The yellow one between Fifth and Sixth.”

Hope realized Maggie must be referring to the dilapidated three-story whose faded, flecking paint sometimes floated on the air like dandruff. She pictured an overgrown yard, broken shutters, rotted gingerbread trim, and plywood-covered windows.

“It needs a little work,” Maggie added, as if reading Hope’s mind.

“And Murphy Mountain is a little hill,” Gabi drawled.

“Now, honey . . .”

Gabi slipped on a pair of designer sunglasses. “Zach is quaking in his hiking boots. I heard him tell Savannah to be quick and hide his tool belt.”

“I promised I wouldn’t ask your brother to help,” her mother protested. “He’s the sheriff, for heaven’s sake. He doesn’t have time to be my handyman.”

“I’m the sheriff’s deputy,” Gabi whined. “Why am I instructed to report for cleaning duty first thing Saturday morning?”

“Zach gets newlywed dispensation. Besides, he and Savannah won’t be home from their trip to South Carolina to visit her nephew until late Friday night. I won’t try to drag him out of bed early Saturday morning.”

“He’s so your favorite.”

“Right now, yes.”

The exchange surprised Hope. In her experience, mothers denied the existence of a favored child even if the charge was true. Taking her attention off the bleating roadblock that was finally beginning to move, she glanced into the rearview mirror to observe the Romano women.

Gabi caught her look and flashed a grin. “It’s okay, Hope. Zach is due a turn at being favorite.”

She wanted to ask why, but she wasn’t that nosy. Celeste obviously didn’t share her concerns. “Hope moved to Eternity Springs in January, so she wasn’t here for all the excitement last August. She probably doesn’t know your family history. Tell her about Zach, Maggie. She loves happy endings as much as I do.”

“It is a happy ending, isn’t it?” Maggie sighed with pleasure, then explained. “I’ll share the short version, Hope. Our family is dealing with a rather unique situation. I got

pregnant with Zach when I was fifteen and I gave him up for adoption. Gabi and her brothers tracked him down and we were reunited last year, so I have a lot of pent-up love to shower upon him.”

Oh. A lost child, found. Hope’s throat grew tight.

“Mom has always been a big proponent of sibling equality when it comes to parental favoritism, so my sibs and I understand it’s Zach’s turn,” Gabi added. “That doesn’t mean the rest of us won’t complain about it. Especially under current circumstances. I can’t be your handyman, either, Mom. It’s too big a job. You need a contractor—shoot, you need a miracle worker—if you’re going to turn that broken-down behemoth into a bed and breakfast.”

“I know, Gabriella. I actually have something different in mind. Someone different. I know a man who is good with his hands who desperately needs a project. He’s a hard worker who needs a miracle.”

“A miracle? Who do you know who needs . . . oh. Lucca.”

“He’s one of your twins, isn’t he?” Celeste asked Maggie. “The one who coaches for Colorado?”

“No. That’s Anthony. Lucca took the Landry University Bobcats to the Sweet Sixteen last March. Then he . . . well . . .”

“He wiggled out,” Gabi said, a bite of temper in her voice. “He quit his job and took off, didn’t tell the family where he’d gone. He invested his NBA contract money wisely, so he has the means to do that sort of thing, but running off without any word like he did . . . he acted like a total jerk and it hurt us. I’m warning you, Mom. It’s going to take some time for me to forgive him. And what makes you think he’ll come here anyway?”

According to Max and Anthony and Zach, he's perfectly happy lounging in his Mexican beach chair and getting drunk on tequila and tugging the ties on bikinis. He has absolutely no intentions of ever coming back."

Maggie squared her shoulders. "He's my son. I have not begun to utilize all the weapons in my arsenal. He will come."

Hope followed college sports, so she'd made the connection between her new friends and the well-known collegiate basketball coaches. She'd been aware that Lucca Romano had publicly crashed and burned and alienated the power brokers in his professional field, and soon after meeting Maggie and Gabi, she'd yielded to temptation and Googled him for more detail on the incident.

Hope recognized that the man had suffered a tragedy, and she sympathized with his pain. She did not, however, respect the way he'd chosen to deal with it. Quit everything, quit on everyone, and run off to become a drunken beach bum? It demonstrated a distinct lack of character as far as she was concerned. His mother must be so disappointed in him.

"I hope you're right, Mom," Gabi said. "I'm not so optimistic. I'm afraid you're going to be hurt."

"He'll come," Maggie replied, her blue eyes gleaming with confidence. "Now, look at that beautiful iron sculpture up on our right. It's an eagle in flight. How graceful."

Celeste nodded. "That's our Sage's work, a gift to Jack."

"So this is Eagle's Way?" Hope asked. "We're here?"

"Yes." Celeste checked her watch, then beamed. "With three minutes to spare, thank the dear Lord."

They drove through an open gate and along a road that wound through a meadow painted with wildflowers. The large, sprawling house was built in the traditional mountain log home style with windows facing what had to be one of the best views in Colorado. “Wow,” Hope said.

“Wait until you see the inside,” Celeste said. “And the patio and pool area. Gabe Callahan is a landscape architect, and what he designed is perfect for such a heavenly spot.”

Jack Davenport stood on the front steps, and he waved at Hope to pull her car onto a circular driveway where Cam Murphy, Gabe Callahan, and Colt Rafferty stood acting as valets. “Hello, dears,” Celeste said, climbing from the car. “I’m surprised to see you here. I thought the girls decided they wanted a traditional females-only baby shower.”

“We’re just here to provide muscle,” Jack said. “As soon as everyone arrives and all the loot is hauled inside, we have a date with fishing rods and the creek.”

“You have a lovely home,” Hope told him.

“Thanks. We do love it up here.”

Just then the front door opened and Nic Callahan called, “Thank goodness you are here. Sarah and Cat are ready to get this party started.”

“Are we the last to arrive?”

“Rose is running late, but she had a patient. She’s asked us to start without her.”

Hope stepped into the great room, and her gaze was torn between three gorgeous sites: snowcapped mountains displayed like a fine-art painting through the wall of windows; a glowing Cat Davenport holding her sleeping four-month-old son, Johnny, in her arms; and Sarah Murphy, sprawled in an overstuffed easy chair, her feet propped up

on an ottoman, a grumpy scowl on her face, and a baby belly so big that Hope wondered if she might be having a litter rather than a single baby boy.

“Sarah, you look beautiful,” Hope told her.

“You are a liar, Hope Montgomery, but I appreciate the effort.”

“How do you feel, darling?” Celeste asked.

“Fat. Grouchy. Ugly. Fat. My back hurts. I haven’t seen my feet in weeks. My so-called friend and neonatologist tells me I could go another week, curse her black heart.”

The physician in question, Sage Rafferty, rolled her eyes. “I’m not your doctor, Sarah. I gave you my personal opinion, not my professional one.”

Sarah pouted, then turned to Nic. “Sage is right. I should have asked you instead of her. You’re a vet. I’m a cow. When should I head for the barn and lie down on the straw? Or would I stand up? Do cows have their babies lying down or standing up?”

“Mother,” Lori Murphy chastised, her expression long-suffering. “Just stop it. The baby is healthy and you are healthy and you look lovely.”

“Your father called me a whale!”

As one, the women in the room gasped.

“No, he didn’t.” Lori explained to the others, “He called her a great white because she’d just bitten his head off for accidentally sloshing coffee onto the kitchen floor.”

“It was clean. I want a clean house when I go into labor. But I shouldn’t have snapped at him, and he spoke the truth. Big fish, big bovine . . . what’s the difference? I’m fat! I wanted this baby very much, but why couldn’t I have a little bump like Cat had? I’m bigger than Nic was and she had twins! I’m a blimp and I’m ugly and I’m too old to

be doing this. What woman has her first and second children more than twenty years apart? I can't do this!"

Hope blinked. Was the normally confident, composed Sarah Murphy sliding toward the edge?

"Sure, you can." Nic Callahan crossed the room to sit on the arm of Sarah's chair.

"And I thought this was supposed to be a baby shower, not a pity party."

Sarah's lips quirked. "Can't it be both? I'm a hundred and twelve months pregnant."

"I'll bet you didn't sleep last night, did you?"

"Not much. Between the heartburn and his constant kicking and the fact he has his butt right on top of my bladder . . . and his father snores!"

"You've never done well when you're short on sleep."

"Newborns don't sleep. I'm going to be a terrible mother."

"You're a wonderful mother," Lori protested. "The best. And this time, Cam will be around to help."

Sarah sniffed. "I love you, Lori. And I love your father and my friends. I love our baby. I have a wonderful life. I don't know why I'm being such a witch."

"It's the late-pregnancy hormones," Sage said.

"I hope it is hormones and not the new me. But my emotions are a mess. I'm happy and excited, but I'm also anxious and nervous and worried. At sixteen I was too young and stupid to know what the deal was. Now, I know what it means to parent and I'm scared to death."

"Of course you are," Nic said. "That's normal."

"She's right," Ali Timberlake chimed in. "Every mother-to-be is a little bit afraid."

You should be afraid, Hope thought, though she wouldn't dream of speaking the warning aloud.

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Sarah." Cat took a seat in a wooden rocking chair, then shifted her infant son to lie against her shoulder. "What you have to remember is that the risk and worry are worth it because the reward is so great."

"Excellent advice," Sage Rafferty said. "On that note, I say we get down to business." She made a flourishing gesture toward a table piled high with gifts. "Presents!"

Sarah's eyes went misty. "There's a mountain of them. You guys went crazy."

"A little," Celeste admitted. "But it's so much fun to buy for babies."

"At the rate we're reproducing, someone should open a children's store in town," Nic observed.

"Is that an announcement?" Gabi asked.

"Bite your tongue," Nic responded as Ali handed Sarah the first gift to open.

Hope enjoyed the afternoon. She liked these women and she appreciated the way they welcomed newcomers into their circle of friendship with such genuine pleasure. She didn't know if it was a small-town thing or particular to Eternity Springs, but either way, she felt as if she had found the people who were meant to be in her life and the home she was meant to have.

She'd found a new life, a good life, to replace the one that had been stolen away from her.

And when she watched Sarah Murphy ooh and ahh over three-month-sized overalls and took her turn cuddling little Johnny Davenport, she reminded herself to be thankful

for what she had. Positive thinking took work, but Hope knew that it was work worth doing. Negative thoughts could be dangerous and destructive and lead a person to consider dangerous, destructive acts. She knew that firsthand.

The memory of one particular bleak afternoon floated through her mind, and as always, she gave thanks for the ember of hope within her that continued to burn even today.

Because sometimes, dreams come true. Sometimes an infertile couple had their little Johnny, she thought as she gazed down into the precious face of the cooing baby in her arms. When Sarah opened a hand-knitted baby blanket and burst into tears, it proved that sometimes long-lost lovers returned to create the family that had been meant to be.

So, why couldn't it happen to her, too? She couldn't live her life in a constant state of waiting amid misery and depression, floating in the numbness of prescription pain killers. But if she kept her thoughts positive, continued to put one foot in front of the other, and move forward on this road of life, well, then, who was to say she couldn't have her own miracle some day?

Jack and Cat Davenport had their new son. Cam and Sarah Murphy were married and awaiting their second child. Maybe someday she would get her miracle, too. Maybe someday, Holly would come home to her.

Sometimes, kidnapped children were found. Sometimes, miracles did happen.

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