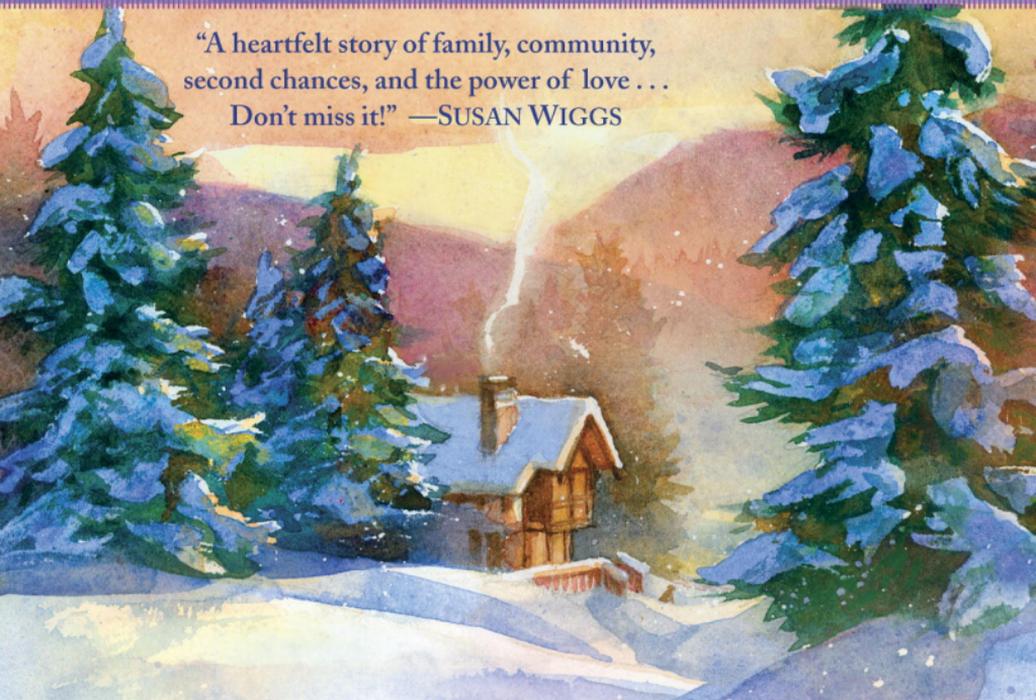


# EMILY MARCH

"A heartfelt story of family, community,  
second chances, and the power of love . . .  
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An  
Eternity Springs  
Novel

## Angel's Rest

GABE GAVE IN to both their desires. He tugged off his shirt and it wasn't until he heard her shocked gasp that he realized just what he'd done. The scars had been a part of him for so long now that he forgot he even had them. He unconsciously straightened, bracing himself against the barrage of questions sure to come. Questions he had no intention of answering. That part of his life was a closed book.

The pretty veterinarian surprised him. But for that one betraying inhalation, her professionalism never slipped. Maybe her gaze was a bit softer, her touch as gentle as the snowfall, but she never once recoiled or eyed him with pity. Gradually Gabe relaxed. For a few stolen moments he allowed himself to pleasure in the sensation of human touch upon his skin.

"I'll quarantine the boxer," she said. "You should drive into Gunnison and see Dr. Hander at the medical clinic. He'll put you on prophylactic antibiotics. When was your last tetanus shot?"

"Last year."

"Good."

Next she ran through a series of basic questions about his medical history, and then asked him to lie on his back. "Your legs will hang off the table, I'm afraid, but this way will keep your pants dry."

His jeans had been wet since he wrestled with the dog, but he kept that detail to himself and studied her through half-closed eyes as she prepared to bathe his wounds with saline. Her beauty was the wholesome, girl-next-door type. He figured the lack of a ring on her finger was due to work-related safety factors rather than marital status. Bet she was married with a couple of kids.

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# O N E



*Eagle's Way Estate*  
*Outside of Eternity Springs, Colorado*

Holding a 9 mm Glock in one hand and a tumbler of single-malt scotch in the other, John Gabriel Callahan stared out the mountain home's wall of windows and knew it was time to take a hike. An hour ago he'd watched a gray cloud bank roll in and swallow the rocky peaks above. The rain had turned to snow twenty minutes later. Now a thin layer of white dusted the branches of the trees that surrounded him in every direction. Evergreens and aspen—yellow, gold, and orange with autumn. It was a breathtaking view. A lonely beauty.

It was perfect place to . . . hike.

He set down his glass without sampling the whiskey, then shifted the automatic from his left hand to his right. He held it balanced on his palm, testing the weight, absorbing its warmth. How long had it been since he'd held a gun? Long enough for it to feel foreign. Not nearly long enough to forget.

Heaven knows he needed to forget.

A bitter smile hovered on his lips. He stuck the Glock into his jeans at the small of his back, and ignoring the jackets hanging on the coat rack, exited the house.

He paused long enough to lock the door behind him

and secure the key in the lock box like a good guest should. Then he paused on the wide wooden deck, surveyed the area, and debated which way to go. Up into the mountains behind him? Along the shallow creek that bisected the high, narrow valley? Across the creek to the tree-covered slopes rising before him? It didn't much matter. Wilderness stretched in every direction. The memories traveled with him everywhere.

He chose to climb the mountain behind him, where the path appeared a little rockier, the forest a bit more dense. The more rigorous the path, the better.

He hiked a long time, his thoughts bouncing between events of his life. His lives. That's how he thought of it. He'd had his life in Texas, then the dark months overseas and his struggle for survival, and finally the new life when he'd started over. The third time, he'd gotten it right. *The third time's the charm.*

Charmed. Magical.

Over.

A bitter wind whipped around him, and he grew as numb on the outside as he'd been on the inside for the better part of a year now. Weariness weighted his legs and his soul.

The snowfall intensified, visibility decreased. As the ground disappeared beneath a blanket of white, he idly wondered if this snow would last until spring. It was early in the season for snow, so he doubted it. Although, at this high altitude, with this low temperature, who knew? Bet it wasn't more than fifteen degrees. A man could freeze to death.

But that way was too easy.

He turned into the wind, and in the echo of wind and memory he thought he heard a sound. Listening hard, he heard it again and his gut clenched. It sounded like . . . laughter. The sweet, familiar notes of laughter. A woman's. A child's. Happy.

Haunted, Gabe closed his eyes and shuddered.

*No laughter, just ghosts.*

*Over. It's over. I'm done.* He broke into a jog, chasing the imaginary sound or running from it, he didn't know. It didn't matter. He moved deeper into the forest, uphill and down, paying scant attention to his path until trees gave way to rolling meadow. It was a beautiful, peaceful place.

Their suburban home in Virginia had been a beautiful, peaceful place. A sanctuary.

The imagined echoes of laughter swelled and strengthened into a whirlwind of memory, sweet and pure, and Gabe listened and yearned until the sound transformed and all he heard were screams. He was so very tired of the screams.

In a Rocky Mountain meadow, Gabe Callahan tripped and fell flat on his face. He lay in the biting cold and snow, breathing as if he'd run a marathon, sweat—or maybe tears—running down his face. He wanted to die. Dear God, he wanted to die. Here. Today. Now. Right now.

Today would have been Matthew's sixth birthday.

Enough. He climbed to a kneeling position and reached for the Glock. This time the weapon felt natural in his grip. He flicked off the safety and chambered a round. Shutting his eyes, he took one last deep breath. A sense of peace surrounded him like the snowfall, and he was ready.

The force hit him without warning, a hard body blow to the back that knocked him forward and sent the Glock sailing from his grip. Weight settled atop him. Gabe's thoughts flew like bullets. Not a man. Fur. An animal. Sharp claws dug into his back. Mountain lion? Would fangs sink into his neck?

Instinct kicked in, and in a strange twist of fate, Gabe prepared to fight for his life. He rolled and the animal

rolled with him and let out a sound. Gabe froze. This wasn't a mountain cat.

*Arf, arf, arf.* It pounced again, its forelegs landing on Gabe's chest, and a long wet tongue rolling out to lick his face.

A dog.

Gabe's breath fogged on the air as he let out a heavy sigh, pushed the dog off his chest, and sat up. It was a goofy, too-friendly, starved-to-skin-and-bones boxer with floppy ears and a crooked tail. Gabe turned his head as the tongue came back and bathed his face in slobber once again.

Then, for the first time in months, John Gabriel Callahan smiled.

"You're an angel, Dr. Nic," said the fifth-grader, her arms full of a shaggy-haired, mixed-breed puppy and her eyes swimming with tears. "I love you. I'm so glad you moved home to Eternity Springs. I knew you'd be able to fix Mamey, and that we wouldn't have to put him down like Daddy said."

Nicole Sullivan stood at the doorway of her veterinary clinic and waved at the girl's mother, Lisa Myers, who waited in the ten-year-old sedan on the street, her eight-month-old son strapped into a car seat in the back. "I'm glad I could help, Beth. And I'll enjoy your mom's canned peaches all winter long."

The smile remained on her face until the car drove off and she sighed and murmured, "Too bad I can't pay the electric bill in peaches."

Or baked goods. Or venison. She had managed to barter a case of elderberry wine for a radiator hose replacement on her truck.

"Mom says you have to stop giving away your services," said Lori Reese, Nic's volunteer assistant and seventeen-year-old goddaughter.

“Like your mother doesn’t let Marilyn Terrell pay for a portion of her groceries with free video rentals,” Nic fired back. “Rentals she seldom uses.”

Lori shrugged. “My mom is queen of ‘Do as I say, not as I do.’ ”

“That’s true.” It was also true that Nic had a severe cash-flow problem. In the five years since her divorce, she’d worked hard to pay down the debt her sleazy, tax-evading ex had dumped in her lap, but she still had a long way to go. Those bills on top of her school loans and a practice whose invoices were paid in foodstuffs as often as currency made meeting monthly expenses a challenge.

“Let’s swab the decks around here, Lori, and call it a day,” Nic said, checking her watch. “I have an appointment at the bank, and with any luck, I’ll be through in time to catch a bite of supper at the Bristlecone Café before it closes.” She still had two free specials coming in payment for suturing the cut on Billy Hawkins’ chin after his skateboard accident.

As the closest thing this county of 827 permanent residents had to a medical doctor since Doc Ellis died in August, Nic stitched up almost as many two-legged creatures as four-legged ones these days. While she was glad to help with minor injuries, Eternity was desperate for a doctor.

“Mrs. Hawkins is closing for supper?” Lori pursed her lips in surprise as she grabbed the bottle of disinfectant from the supply closet. “Wow. She never does that. I knew this meeting tonight was a big deal, but . . . wow.”

“It’s an important announcement. Eternity Springs needs a miracle.”

Lori wrinkled her nose and squirted lemon-scented spray on the exam table. “I don’t think building a prison in town qualifies as a miracle.”

“I can’t honestly say I’m thrilled at the prospect myself, but it would bring jobs to town and boost our permanent population. The town needs that if we’re going to survive.”

“Tell me about it.” Lori tore a handful of paper towels from a roll and went to work. “Even if they’re not going on to college, everyone leaves town after high school graduation because the only work here is summer work. Mom says it wasn’t like that when you were my age. I want to go away to college and vet school, but I also want to be able to come back home to live after I graduate. I love Eternity Springs.”

“I hear you.” Nic had fallen in love with the tiny mountain town when she and her mom moved here to be close to Mom’s sister and her husband. Nic’s jerk of a father—her mom’s married lover—had finally cut all ties with his mistress and their daughter. Nic had been nine years old and devastated, and the place and its people had given her a hug and a home. Years later when her marriage fell apart, she could have gone anywhere to rebuild, but this mountain valley had called to her soul. She’d spent a year at a clinic in Alamosa to reacquaint herself with large-animal veterinary medicine, and then finally she’d come home. She’d renovated her late uncle’s dental office into a vet clinic and scraped by.

Nic loved Eternity just as it was, but she recognized that her hometown wouldn’t thrive and perhaps not even survive if the local leaders didn’t succeed in bringing in some sort of new industry. New jobs meant new residents, which would be good for everyone. A new prison would definitely bring that doctor they needed so desperately to town. If Mayor Hank Townsend relayed a thumbs-up on the prison tonight, she could at least look forward to having that particular burden shifted off her shoulders.

“I don’t want to live anywhere else, Lori,” she told her

young assistant. "If building a prison in the valley means we get to stay here, then I'll help clear the land for it myself."

Lori sighed dramatically, reminding Nic of the teenager's mother at the same age. Those two were so much alike it was scary.

"You're right. I see that." Lori's expression clouded with worry as she met Nic's gaze. "But I love Eternity Springs as it is. What if we do get the prison and it changes us?"

Nic's stomach gave a little twist at the thought, but experience had taught her how to answer Lori's question. "Change happens whether we like it or not. The trick is to accept it, to make it work for us as best we can. Who knows? Maybe it'll bring that man your mom's been waiting for to town."

Lori rolled her eyes. "Great. I've always wanted a criminal for a stepdad."

"I was thinking more of a tall, dark, and handsome contractor." She waggled her brows and added, "Who wears a tool belt. Sarah has always had a thing for tool belts."

"Dr. Nic, puh-lease! That's my mom you're talking about. Besides, we already have a handful of contractors in town. I can't say I'm impressed."

Nic laughed and carried the trash bag outside, where sometime in the ten minutes since young Beth had left with her Mamey a light snowfall had begun. Years of experience told Nic the flurries wouldn't stick, but this did represent the first snowfall of the season. Winter was bearing down upon Eternity, and Nic recognized the fact with dismay.

Once upon a time, winter had been her favorite season. Cold weather invigorated her. She loved the holidays, winter sports, and cozy nights snuggling in front of a fire with the man she loved. But a series of really

awful winters had all but ruined the season for her. First she'd found her husband in bed with another woman two weeks before Christmas. Then a stroke took her beloved uncle David the following November. The next winter, the financial fallout from an ugly, prolonged divorce took its toll, and Nic was forced her to sell her share of her Colorado Springs vet practice. Then, on New Year's Eve of her first winter back in Eternity Springs, her mom and her aunt had dropped the bombshell that they'd bought a condo in Florida and moving day was two weeks away. Now Nic couldn't feel the sting of a snowflake on her cheek without mourning all that she'd lost.

And wondering what losses the coming winter would bring.

Attempting to ward off the melancholy that threatened, she exhaled a cleansing breath and hauled the trash bag outside to the waste cans, which she then rolled out to the street for tomorrow morning's pickup. When she was halfway back to the clinic, an unfamiliar red Jeep Wrangler skidded to a stop at the curb. Nic's steps slowed as a bedraggled stranger climbed out of the vehicle. He was tall, broad, and trim with dark hair overdue for a cut and a square jaw that needed a shave even worse. He reached into the backseat to reappear with an armful of struggling dog—a skinny brindle boxer whose left hind leg appeared to be bleeding badly.

Nic picked up her step. "Lori? Emergency patient coming." To the man, she called, "Bring him here."

The stranger followed Nic into the clinic. Lori took one look and then set about preparing the supply tray Nic would need. The stranger placed the boxer on the exam table Nic indicated and held him in place.

"What happened?" she asked.

Concern shadowed his whiskey-brown eyes. "A damned leghold trap."

“He’s your dog?”

He shook his head. “No. He’s probably a stray. Our paths crossed a few days ago while I was hiking the backcountry, but he didn’t hang around or follow me home. When I was hiking on Murphy Mountain today I heard something howling in pain, so I tracked the sound and found him caught in the trap.”

“You poor baby,” she murmured to the dog.

“We tussled a bit when I tried to free him. I’m afraid I made his injuries worse.”

Nic sedated the suffering animal and made a cursory examination. Lacerations, trauma where he’d chewed himself. Broken teeth. She studied the bone. “Not fractured, believe it or not. Significant muscle damage, but I think we can save the leg.”

With that pronouncement, Nic focused on her patient and went to work.

Gabe breathed a little easier when he saw the competent, methodical manner in which the vet acted. Dr. Nicole Sullivan of Eternity Springs Veterinary Clinic—according to the sign beside the door—obviously knew what she was doing. He could leave with a clear conscience.

Instead, Gabe stayed right where he was, watching the woman work.

One minute stretched to five, then to ten. She had good hands—long, narrow fingers that moved with a surety of purpose. Straight white teeth tugged at a full lower lip when she tied off sutures. He judged her to be younger than he was, but not by a lot. Early thirties, he’d guess. She was petite but shapely, fair-skinned with a dusting of freckles across her nose. She wore her blond hair long and pulled back in a ponytail; plain gold studs were in her ears. He saw no rings on her fingers beneath the latex gloves.

She spoke in a quiet, confident voice as she explained her actions to the teenager. A teacher with her apprentice, he thought. She was good at it, too. Gentle and warm, her tone soothing and compassionate. A healer.

Gabe didn't belong here. He should leave.

Only he didn't want to leave.

"So where did you come from, boy?" the vet asked the unconscious dog as she frowned over something on his belly. "He's little more than a puppy. Judging by his body weight and the state of his coat, he's probably been out in the wild for a while."

"Think he could have been abandoned at birth?" the teenager asked. "No collar on him, and I've never seen a boxer his age who still has his tail. This one is crooked, too. If he had an owner, you'd think they'd have docked his tail."

"It's a cute tail," the vet declared. "Gives him character."

Gabe tugged a worn leather dog collar from his back pocket. "Here. I have his collar. It came loose while I was trying to free him from the trap."

He handed the collar to the teenager, who checked its heart-shaped metal tag. "Rabies vaccine is current from a clinic in Oklahoma. Bet he belonged to summer tourists and got lost from his family."

"I don't recall any lost dog notices for a boxer," the vet said. "We'll make some calls. He could have traveled a long way." She glanced up at Gabe. "Where did you find him?"

"Murphy Mountain."

Surprise lit the vet's pretty blue eyes. "That's private property."

"Not private enough, apparently. The owner didn't set that trap."

The teenager's head jerked around. "How do you know? Are you a Davenport?"

“No.”

The girl waited expectantly, and when Gabe remained stubbornly silent, she tried again. “If you know the owner didn’t set the trap, then you must be a friend of the Davenports. That, or you’re just another trespasser.”

Gabe gave in. “Jack Davenport is a friend.”

The girl’s chin came up. “Then would you give him a message for me? Tell him that I’m looking for his cousin, Cameron Murphy.”

“Lori,” said the vet, a thread of steel beneath the warmth. “Don’t.”

“But—”

“Lori Elizabeth, no.”

A mutinous expression settled on the girl’s face, but she went silent. Gabe tried not to be interested in what that bit of drama had been about. Davenport business, obviously. Definitely none of his.

He needed to leave. Should have just dropped off the dog and hightailed it. Why had he hung around, anyway? That wasn’t like him.

The *beep beep* of a car horn sounded outside. “There’s your ride, Lori,” said the vet, lifting a gauze bandage roll from the supply tray. “Tell your mom I’ll see her at the school tonight, okay?”

The teenager hesitated and darted a glance at Gabe. “I could stay, Dr. Nic.”

“Thanks, sweetie, but you go on. I’m going to wrap this bandage and I’ll be done here.”

The girl didn’t like leaving the vet alone with a stranger, and Gabe couldn’t blame her. He should speak up. Say he was leaving, too. Instead, for some inexplicable reason, he kept his lips zipped.

*Beep beep.* “Oh, all right.” The girl tugged off her gloves, then looked him straight in the eyes. “What was your name, mister?”

His lips twitched and he acknowledged her challenge with a nod. “Gabe Callahan.”

“I’ll tell Mom you won’t be long,” she said, shifting her gaze to the vet. On her way out the door, she paused and added, “By the way, I think Mom is having supper with Sheriff Turner.”

In the wake of the girl’s departure, Gabe shoved his hands in his jeans pockets and observed, “That was subtle.”

“We watch out for one another around here.” She quickly and efficiently wrapped the bandage, released the locks on the table where the dog lay, and rolled it toward a wall lined with crates. When she opened the door to a medium-sized wire box, Gabe stepped forward. “Let me help.”

“Thanks.”

Careful of the boxer’s injured leg, he slipped his hands beneath the dog’s torso and shifted him into the crate. When he stepped back, Dr. Nic was frowning at him. “What? Did I do it wrong? Did I hurt him?”

“Before, I was concentrating on the dog. I didn’t notice.” She gestured toward his chest. “That’s your blood, not his.”

Gabe glanced down at his shirt. “More his than mine, and my fault for being careless. He got me a time or two before I thought enough to use my shirt to wrap his head while I released him from the trap.”

“Why didn’t you use your coat?”

“Wasn’t mine.”

He watched her silently mouth a word that just might have been *idiot*. Gabe almost grinned.

“Scratches or bites?”

“Both.”

She sighed heavily. “Go sit on the table and take off your shirt.”

"There's no need for that," he said, uneasy over how appealing he found the idea.

"That dog's been running wild. At the very least you need the wounds flushed and examined." She pointed toward the table.

He hesitated, and she scowled at him. "Now."

Gabe gave in to both their desires. He tugged off his shirt and it wasn't until he heard her shocked gasp that he realized just what he'd done. The scars had been a part of him for so long now that he forgot he even had them. He unconsciously straightened, bracing himself against the barrage of questions sure to come. Questions he had no intention of answering. That part of his life was a closed book.

The pretty veterinarian surprised him. But for that one betraying inhalation, her professionalism never slipped. Maybe her gaze was a bit softer, her touch as gentle as the snowfall, but she never once recoiled or eyed him with pity. Gradually Gabe relaxed. For a few stolen moments he allowed himself to pleasure in the sensation of human touch upon his skin.

"I'll quarantine the boxer," she said. "You should drive into Gunnison and see Dr. Hander at the medical clinic. He'll put you on prophylactic antibiotics. When was your last tetanus shot?"

"Last year."

"Good."

Next she ran through a series of basic questions about his medical history, and then asked him to lie on his back. "Your legs will hang off the table, I'm afraid, but this way will keep your pants dry."

His jeans had been wet since he wrestled with the dog, but he kept that detail to himself and studied her through half-closed eyes as she prepared to bathe his wounds with saline. Her beauty was the wholesome, girl-next-door type. He figured the lack of a ring on her

finger was due to work-related safety factors rather than marital status. Bet she was married with a couple of kids.

Pain sliced through him as she applied the solution, and Gabe sucked in a breath.

“Sorry,” she murmured. “It’s important to clean all these scratches.”

“Wouldn’t want them to scar,” he replied, his tone desert dry.

He saw the question in her eyes, and she must have seen the answer in his, because she kept quiet. She moved a step closer and caught a whiff of her scent. Summertime peaches, ripe and juicy. Now there was an incongruous item for a cold autumn day.

Her gentle finger brushed across a hard ridge of scar tissue and she softly said, “More than a hundred and thirty bacterial diseases can be transmitted to humans from a dog’s mouth, Mr. Callahan. Dr. Hander will tell you what to watch for, but as long as you take the antibiotics he’ll prescribe, I doubt you’ll have a problem.”

“I’ll be fine.”

She paused and waited for him to meet her stare. “You’re not going to go see Dr. Hander, are you?”

“It’s a long drive. Can’t you give me antibiotics?”

“I’m a vet.”

He held her gaze and said, “Woof woof.”

As she rolled her eyes, he pressed, more from curiosity about how she’d react than a desire for drugs. “It’s two hours to a hospital from here. I’ll bet you have an emergency stash.”

“This isn’t an emergency.”

Her teeth tugged at her lower lip and she looked torn with indecision. His gaze settled on her mouth until Gabe abruptly lost interest in the game. He rolled to a sitting position. “Don’t worry, Dr. Sullivan. I’ll be just fine. I know. I’ve had worse.”

Her gaze dropped to his chest, and this time he saw a flash of pity she couldn't hide before she finally asked, "What happened to you?"

He pulled on the bloodied, tattered shirt and ignored the question. He needed to get out of here. "What about the dog? Will he be okay?"

She accepted the dodge with a nod. "He'll be uncomfortable for a while, but he should make a full recovery. I'll keep him quarantined in case he has underlying issues we can't immediately identify."

He slipped his wallet from the pocket of his jeans, removed a few bills, and set them on the counter. "Thanks for your help, Dr. Sullivan."

Without another word, he turned and walked back out into the snow.

He had almost reached his jeep when the clinic door banged open and she came running after him. She held cash and a small orange bottle in her hand. "Wait. These were hundreds. That's way too much."

He refused the bills she pushed his way, but took the bottle. "What's this?"

"You told the truth about no allergies, right?" As he nodded, she scowled and added, "Take two a day until they're gone. You didn't get them from me."

Gabe stared down at the pill bottle. She could get in all kinds of trouble for doing what she'd just done. For all she knew, he could be a DEA agent.

It was a basic human act of kindness, and it sliced through the scar tissue surrounding his heart, sparking a flicker of warmth in a place cold for too long. "Thanks, Doc. You're a lifesaver."

## T W O



Nic entered the school auditorium through a side door and looked for a place to sit. The place was packed. She'd bet that 90 percent of the residents of Eternity Springs had gathered for tonight's meeting. A fluttering hand on the opposite end of the auditorium caught her attention. Nic waved back to Sarah Reese, whose short cap of dark hair crowned an angular face and whose long, luscious lashes set off Elizabeth Taylor violet eyes that were the envy of every woman in town. Sarah gestured toward the empty seat between her and Eternity's newest permanent resident, Celeste Blessing, who appeared to be having an animated conversation with the man seated to her right, Reverend Hart, the pastor at Community Presbyterian.

"Thanks for saving me a spot," Nic said to Sarah, sinking gratefully into the chair. Her feet were killing her.

"I was hoping you'd show up. I understand you had some excitement at the clinic tonight. Dish, girlfriend."

Nic hesitated. This was more than just a man-with-a-dog story. This was a man-with-a-dog-visiting-the-house-on-Murphy-Mountain story, which made it more than idle gossip to Sarah and involved more scars than those that marred the stranger's chest. "Not much to tell. Guy staying up at Eagle's Way found an injured dog on the mountain."

Sarah studied her manicure and said in a casual tone, "Lori said he knew Jack Davenport and that he looked to be our age."

Nic gave a slow nod. "Maybe a little older. He didn't mention Cam, Sarah."

Her friend momentarily stiffened, then wrinkled her nose and gave her dark hair a toss. "Did I ask?"

"No." But then, she never did. Nic was one of only three other people who knew about Sarah's unfinished business with Cameron Murphy. "Lori said you were having dinner with Zach Turner."

"After this meeting, if nothing comes up," Sarah said. As Nic arched a curious brow, she added, "He's a *friend*, Nicole."

"He could be more if you'd let him."

"We're not like that."

"I don't know why not. He's gorgeous, and he wears his . . . pistol . . . so well."

Up on the stage, the mayor and council members huddled around the sound system while a technician tested the microphone. Nic waited until Celeste Blessing finished visiting with Reverend Hart, then said, "Celeste, I drove down Cottonwood Street today. You did it, didn't you? That new ride in front of Cavanaugh House is yours?"

Blue eyes twinkled as she reached up to adjust the jaunty brim of her white felt hat. "You mean my Honda Gold Wing?"

Sarah leaned forward and gaped at Celeste. "You bought a motorcycle?"

"What can I say? I love to fly."

Sarah groaned, closed her eyes, and banged her forehead against her palm. "My daughter is *so* not allowed to hang out with you anymore."

Celeste laughed softly, and—as always when she heard that particular sound—Nic's tension melted away. The woman had a gift, an air of serenity about her that

was contagious. A widowed, retired schoolteacher from South Carolina, Celeste wore her silver-gray hair in a stylish bob, spoke with a delightful, soft southern accent, and demonstrated an old-money class that blended with a youthful sense of fun. Nic adored her. “Have I mentioned how glad I am that you decided to retire in Eternity Springs, Celeste?”

Pleasure warmed the older woman’s eyes. “Thank you, dear. You’re too kind.”

“Nope. Just selfish. Being around you makes me feel good.”

A loud squeal blasted through the room. Celeste winced and sighed. “That reminds me of my Fancy-cat when I was slow with breakfast.”

Nic gave her new friend’s hand a comforting squeeze. Celeste had arrived in town this past spring with a treasure trove of books and a cranky, arthritic Persian cat. When she brought her ailing Fancy to Nic’s clinic, the depth of her love for her pet had been obvious, and Nic had hated relaying a terminal diagnosis. Celeste had been working up the nerve to have Fancy put down when the cat died in her sleep just over a month ago. Though the older woman had accepted the loss of her pet with grace, Nic knew she was hurting. “You let me know when the time is right for you, and I’ll fix you up with a four-legged somebody needing a home.”

She wondered how Celeste felt about boxers.

“You have a good heart, Nicole Sullivan, and I appreciate your sensitivity. I think I’ll be ready for another pet sooner rather than later. That big old house is lonely with only my old bones rattling around in it.”

“I can imagine.”

Upon moving to Eternity, Celeste had purchased the old Cavanaugh estate, the large Victorian mansion built back in the 1880s by one of the owners of the Silver Miracle mine. Cavanaugh House had been a showplace

in its time and later additions contributed to its hodge-podge charm. But after tragedy struck the family in the 1970s, the house had sat empty and the years of neglect had taken a toll.

Onstage the huddle broke and the three council members took their seats at a table. Mayor Hank Townsend stepped up to the podium, banged his gavel twice, and declared, "I'm calling this special town hall meeting to order. Thank you all for coming out on such a blustery autumn evening. Looks like winter might arrive early this year. Hope everyone is ready."

From the front row, the owner of Fill-U-Up, Eternity's combination gas station and convenience store, called out, "Quit politicking, Hank, and tell us what the governor's office said!"

The mayor scowled and banged his gavel again for good measure. "You're out of order, Dale Parker."

"Just like the diesel pump at your place," added one of the council members, Larry Wilson, who owned Eternity's building supply store. "I have to go beg fuel for my delivery trucks from the city pumps. When do you intend to get that thing fixed?"

"As soon as I know that my business will survive the winter," Dale fired back. "Just spill the beans, Hank. Are we getting the prison or not?"

The mayor closed his eyes, pinched the bridge of his nose, and visibly braced himself before saying in a flat, defeated tone. "No. No, we're not."

Nic released the breath she unconsciously had been holding as the gathering let out a collective groan. Beside her, Sarah shut her eyes and winced. This was bad news for Eternity. Nic knew it. Yet she couldn't deny that in her heart of hearts, she was glad. No matter how she'd tried to convince herself and others, she never believed that a state prison would be the answer to Eternity's prayers.

“That’s it, then,” Dale Parker said, his tone morose. “Eternity is done for. Three bad summer seasons in a row and no prison to halt the bleeding. We might as well roll up the sidewalks and hang a Closed sign at the city limits.”

A buzz of voices agreed with him. Hank Townsend shook his head. “Hold on now, Dale. Everybody take a deep breath and don’t be so negative. Your city council isn’t giving up. In fact, we’ve scheduled a meeting directly following this one to come up with a plan D. Everyone who—”

“That makes me feel better,” Dale interrupted. “After all, plans A, B, and C worked out so well.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” muttered Celeste. Sitting catercorner to the gas station owner, she reached out and rapped him on the head with a rolled copy of the weekly town newspaper, the *Eternity Times*. “Let the man speak, Mr. Parker. You might learn something.”

Parker frowned over his shoulder. “Beg pardon, Mrs. Blessing, but plan D? It’s obvious that we’re fighting a losing battle here.”

As the audience buzzed mostly with agreement, Hank Townsend shoved his fingers through his hair and grimaced. “All right, all right, all right. I’ll admit it. Eternity is looking more like Temporary every day. We have a dwindling population and zero industry. Summer tourism is sick because we’re smack dab in the middle of the most isolated county in the lower forty-eight and the price of gasoline skyrockets every summer. Winter tourism is nonexistent. We’re too far from the ski resorts, and it’s too hard to get here to enjoy what we do have to offer. Once the snows close the mountain passes, we have one way to get in and out of here, and even I don’t like facing Sinner’s Prayer Pass in wintertime.”

“Wussy,” called Alton Davis, the liquor store owner,

who supplemented his income by driving a snow plow in winter—over Sinner's Prayer Pass.

"You bet," Hank replied.

A voice from the back of the room called out, "So is your plan D to annihilate the Davenport heirs, Hank? Gonna fix that troublesome will once and for all?"

The mayor froze, blinked, then snorted with amusement. "I have to admit, that idea has some appeal. Sure would solve a lot of problems to be able to cut a road through Waterford Valley and bring Eternity closer to civilization. Unfortunately, murder is illegal."

"Not to mention immoral," added Reverend Hart.

Dale Parker heaved a heavy sigh. "Nice to dream, though. Eternity Springs has been paying for that deal between Daniel Murphy and Lucien Davenport for a century and a quarter. You know darn well that if Murphys still owned the land, they'd have sold access to the mountain and to Waterford Valley at some point in the last century. Instead, ol' Daniel cursed us forever when he sold out to a rich man whose descendants care more about ancient history than they do about progress."

"Oh, please," said Emma Hall, owner, publisher, and sole employee of the *Eternity Times*. "This is a waste of time. The Davenports aren't going to change their position. Even if they did, don't forget who else would have to sign off on any deal involving Murphy Mountain. That would be Cameron Murphy. The same Cam Murphy you all routed out of town when he was little more than a boy. Somehow I doubt he'd be all that anxious to play Eternity's savior."

A drawn-out discussion of Cam Murphy's youthful misadventures followed, during which Sarah steadily slumped in her seat. For about the millionth time, Nic cursed the string of events that had done so much damage to both her childhood friends.

Celeste's keen, blue-eyed gaze shifted between Sarah

and Nic. She pursed her lips and thumped them thoughtfully with an index finger, then said, "You know, girls, Eternity Springs doesn't need a savior."

Nic answered with a wry smile. "No. We need a town psychologist. After all, it doesn't say much about the collective mental state of Eternity's citizens that we're clinging so hard to an isolated, financially bankrupt, long-past-its-prime mountain town."

Celeste harrumphed. "People tend to place entirely too much importance on so-called prime years. Believe me, I know."

Sarah elbowed Nic in the side. "I wouldn't argue with the senior citizen with a new Honda Gold Wing."

Celeste continued. "As for the rest, actually, my dears, the fact that you do cling to this lovely mountain town says everything. Eternity Springs might be financially bankrupt, but its moral coffers are full. The people here are good folk. After living here six months, I have concluded that this town is worth saving."

"I know it's worth saving," Nic said.

Sarah wearily massaged her brow. "It's a nice thought, but at this point, I doubt that particular miracle can happen."

Celeste exasperatedly blew out a puff of air. "This only proves that you don't have much experience with miracles. All Eternity Springs needs is an angel."

"That's not news," Sarah said. "I can't tell you how many corporations, private investors, and venture capitalists the mayor and town council members have approached. No one was interested in investing in Eternity Springs."

"That's why I said you need an angel," Celeste responded as Mayor Townsend pounded his gavel in an attempt to regain control of the meeting. "Isn't it lucky you have one?"

With talk of Cam Murphy's misdeeds finally subsid-

ing, Celeste Blessing rose to her feet. "Mayor Townsend? If I might have the floor for moment? I have a plan to share. My own plan A." With a wink toward Nic and Sarah, she added, "A for angel, if you will."

"I'm happy to hear what you have to say, Mrs. Blessing." Hank Townsend waved her forward. "You're such a little bitty thing, why don't you join us on the stage so you can speak into the microphone?"

Nic watched in bemusement as Celeste made her way to the podium. The auditorium grew quiet, the air expectant, as the audience focused on the newcomer in their midst. Sarah leaned toward Nic and murmured, "When I grow up, I want to be like Celeste."

"She does have a way about her." Hope flickered to life within Nic as Hank Townsend adjusted the microphone for Celeste. Plan A for angel? Was Celeste Blessing Eternity Springs' angel?

"Think maybe she's more than just a retired schoolteacher?" Sarah asked, her mind obviously taking the same path as Nic's. "Maybe she's an heiress. Or . . . what has she said about her late husband? Could he have been a corporate bigwig?"

"I don't recall her saying much about him. Plus I wouldn't bet against *her* having been a corporate bigwig. Who knows, maybe Celeste landed in Eternity packing a golden parachute."

Onstage, Celeste leaned toward the mike and said, "Thank you, Mayor Townsend, council members, and fellow citizens. I appreciate the opportunity to address you. First, let me publicly thank you all for the very warm welcome you gave me as a newcomer to Eternity. I just knew that a town built along Angel Creek had to be a special place, and you've proved me right. You've been kind and friendly and my move here has been everything I hoped for. I want you all to know that I have faith in this town, faith in the people who live here."

“Hear, hear,” called Reverend Hart.

Celeste beamed at him and continued. “Here is the message I want you all to hear. Eternity Springs didn’t need the state of Colorado to build a prison here to save the town. Eternity Springs simply needs to free itself from the prison of its past and utilize the gifts a generous and loving God has bestowed upon it. Then, and only then, will this wonderful little town heal and thrive and fulfill the promise of its name.

“Now, we face a long, difficult winter and it won’t be easy to overcome our fears, foibles, and failings. Each one of us must reach inside himself and find the will to do what must be done. But know this: spring is within sight. Thank you, and God bless.”

Celeste stepped away from the podium and exited stage left.

For a long moment, nobody spoke. Sarah and Nic shared dumbfounded looks. Then the clatter of a metal door opening and swinging shut shook them from their reverie and the audience buzzed. Dale Parker groaned and buried his head in his hands. Mayor Townsend snapped his gaping jaw shut, then turned to his city council members. “That’s plan A?”

Parker moaned through his hands. “A for angel, she said. Lady is living in la-la land.”

“A for Alzheimer’s, more likely,” grumbled a council member.

“That’s not funny, Ronnie,” Sarah scolded, the remark having touched a sore nerve.

The council member had the grace to look sheepish as the mayor spoke into the mike. “Okay, then. Well. Anyone else want the microphone?” Without allowing a response, he rushed on. “For anyone who’s interested, some of us will be congregating at the Pub to further discuss our options. Anyone who wants to put his or her

brain to planning . . . uh . . . well, our next move, is welcome to join us. This meeting is adjourned.”

He banged his gavel once again and the crowd slowly dispersed. Nic and Sarah both kept their seats, not speaking, but silently communicating in the way that old, dear friends do.

Finally Sarah spoke. “What just happened?”

Nic drummed her fingers against the armrest. “Do you feel it, too?”

“That something significant just took place?”

“And nobody noticed.”

“Yeah.” Nic drew a deep breath, and then exhaled in a rush. “No. We’re just being weird.”

“We do that often.” Sarah nibbled at her bottom lip.

“True, but not under circumstances like this. Ordinarily when we’re being weird, we have the urge to call each other at the same moment or we order the same dress from an online store and wear it to the same event.”

“Or remember that time we both got a craving for good Mexican food and drove all the way to Gunnison to get it, and you walked into the restaurant before I’d finished my chips and salsa?”

The memory still nettled, so Nic lifted her chin. “You mean the time I called you to invite you to go with me but you were already on the road . . . without inviting me?”

“Hey, I was supposed to be dieting.” Sarah grinned without apology. “But you’re right. This was a different kind of weird.”

As Nic tried to put her finger on tonight’s particular brand of weirdness, a familiar voice called, “Hey, you two.”

Nic glanced over her shoulder to see Sage Anderson striding down the auditorium’s side aisle, her Gypsy skirt swirling around trim ankles, her long and wavy auburn hair bouncing with her steps. Sage was one of

only a handful of permanent, year-round residents to move to Eternity Springs during the past decade. A painter, she thrived on the isolation the little town had to offer, and the work she'd produced of late was quickly making her the darling of the art world.

Sage had her secrets. She rarely talked about her life before the move to Eternity Springs. Sarah thought she was running *from* something. Nic believed she'd run *to* something in the mountains. Whichever way didn't much matter. Sage was their friend. They liked her and respected her privacy, so they kept their curiosity to themselves—even if it was difficult sometimes.

"I didn't see you," Nic said as Sage plopped down in a seat in the front row and twisted around to look at them. "Where were you sitting?"

"I came in late. Stood in the back." Her dangling purple crystal earrings sparkled as her green eyes gleamed. "Am I ever glad I did. 'Eternity Springs simply needs to free itself from the prison of its past and utilize the gifts a generous and loving God has bestowed upon it. Then, and only then, will this wonderful little town heal and thrive and fulfill the promise of its name.' I heard that and . . ." She snapped her fingers. "A visual popped into my brain. I'm gonna head home and get to work, but wanted to say hi to you two first."

"Batten down the hatches," Sarah said. "The creativity wind is upon us. We won't see her again for a week."

Nic nodded. "I'll hang the Do Not Disturb signs around the studio on my way home tonight. I'd rather avoid being called out to treat the wounds of any poor, unsuspecting soul who might hazard a knock upon her door."

"Oh, stop it," Sage said with a laugh. "I'm not that bad. I never draw blood." She beamed at Sarah and Nic, and exhaled a satisfied sigh. "Look, it very rarely hap-

pens this way. I am so stoked. Celeste Blessing gave me a gift with that speech of hers. I think she's wonderful. If the mayor and city council and grumpy old men like Dale Parker want to ignore her, then too bad so sad. I think she put the hope back into Eternity Springs tonight, and that's an important start."

Sarah gave Nic a look. "And we thought nobody noticed. Somebody did."

"Spring is in sight," Nic quoted, giving a rueful smile. "Think we can believe it?"

"I do," Sage declared. "I absolutely do."

"I want to," Sarah offered. "Although believing would be easier if this were February rather than the end of September."

Nic stared absently at the graffiti inked on the seat back in front of her and considered what troubles loomed before her in the coming months. She had taxes due on the house and clinic. The water heater was making funny noises and the furnace had been on borrowed time for three winters now. On a personal front, she faced long winter nights rambling around in a house that should be filled with children and laughter and love, but instead echoed with loneliness and grief over a lost dream.

Was Celeste right? Was spring—the end of her personal winter—finally in sight?

"Plan A for angel," she murmured as, unbidden, the image of a rescued boxer and a haunted-eyed stranger with scars on his chest and wounds on his soul flashed in her mind. *You're a lifesaver.*

"You know what?" Nic said, glancing from one friend to the other. "I believe it. It is weird, but we do weird here in Eternity Springs. I trust in Celeste's insight. I think she gave us all a gift. We just have to be smart enough to recognize it and act on it."

"Works for me," Sarah said.

“Me too,” Sage agreed. “That’s why I’m headed home to work. See you two . . . well . . . probably in a week or so.”

Nic left the school auditorium with a lighter heart and a more positive outlook than she’d had in months. Maybe she was fooling herself. Maybe this was no more than relief over dodging the prison-comes-to-town bullet. Maybe Celeste had some strange hope-creating disease, and by sitting next to her, Nic had caught it.

Whatever it was, she liked the feeling and she refused to second-guess it. Today, for the first time in a very long time, Nicole Sullivan was looking forward to winter.

Gabe held a steaming cup of coffee in his hand as he stepped out onto the deck bathed in morning sunshine and took a moment to appreciate the exquisite view from the northern exposure of Eagle’s Way. Above a sea of evergreens, a trio of snowy peaks kissed a robin’s-egg sky. Patches of snow clung to the ground in shady spots and decorated the hills like icing. At the base of the mountain, waterfowl floated on the surface of a sapphire lake. The scene was beautiful, peaceful, and serene.

He inhaled a deep breath of crisp, pine-scented air and took stock of his situation.

Today might be a decent day.

Though he took care to keep his emotions locked away, he couldn’t deny that something inside him had changed since the day the stray dog knocked his Glock into the snow. He didn’t sleep half the day away anymore; he had energy again. For the past week he’d spent much of his time involved in heavy labor.

His breath fogged on the air and he checked the outdoor thermometer. Twenty-two degrees now, but he’d bet that would double by noon. It’d be a beautiful day to sweat.

He'd noted that a section of retaining wall beside the garage needed repair, and once he'd analyzed the situation and double-checked the house plans in Davenport's study, he'd realized that the builder had screwed up. They'd built the retaining wall five feet off the line, and as a result, vehicles entering and exiting the garage had to make a sharp left turn. Judging by the scrapes of paint on the support posts, the error needed to be corrected.

With no more snow in the immediate forecast and plagued by an unusual restless energy, Gabe had called his host and pitched his idea to tear down the wall and rebuild it according to the original design. Davenport had given him the go-ahead without hesitation. Not because he worried about a few paint scrapes, he'd allowed—he himself never messed up that turn, thank you very much—but because he knew from experience that strenuous physical work helped ward off the demons of depression.

Gabe didn't disagree. An hour of hard, physical outdoor labor beat an hour on a shrink's couch any day of the week.

On this particular day, he finished the north stretch of the new wall by late afternoon and decided he'd worked enough for the day. His muscles were sore, his body weary. Best of all, he'd rebuilt mental defenses right along with the retaining wall, and for the past six nights he'd slept nightmare-free. With any luck, tonight would make it seven.

As he tugged off his work gloves, he realized he was hungry. For the first time in longer than he could remember, he craved a real meal. Maybe he'd clean up, go into town, and try out that restaurant Jack had bragged about—the Bristlecone Café. Wouldn't hurt to pick up a few supplies, either.

Twenty minutes later, showered and dressed in clean jeans and a blue flannel shirt, he opened the pantry door

to check the cereal supply and heard a scratching sound at the kitchen door. He glanced back over his shoulder and froze. "What the . . . ?"

Having a raccoon show up at the back door wouldn't have surprised him. Or a deer. An elk. A mountain lion. Actually, having a bear come pawing at the door wouldn't have shocked him. But a boxer? *The* boxer?

He wore one of those white plastic cone collars that prevented dogs from chewing at their stitches, and he looked ridiculous. Healthy, but ridiculous. Crooked tail wagging, ears perked, pink tongue extended, panting.

"It's been two weeks," Gabe muttered, thinking aloud. Was that long enough for the dog to be released from quarantine? Maybe. Had the vet brought the dog back to him to keep? Why? He'd told her the dog wasn't his.

Gabe frowned at the dog, then stepped outside, careful to block the boxer from scooting past him until the door was safely shut. "What's the deal, dog? Did you slip your leash and run away?"

He didn't see the vet or anyone else. Ordinarily Eagle's Way's serious security safeguards would prevent drop-in visitors, but for the past eight years Gabe preferred to leave gates and locks open whenever possible, no matter where he was. Memories of the six months he'd spent as a . . . guest . . . in an Eastern European prison were hard to shake, so he initiated Eagle's Way's security system at night but left the place accessible during the day. The vet could have driven right up to the house if she'd wanted, but the drive was empty. She must have parked in the circular drive in front. She'd probably ring the bell any moment now.

Gabe turned to reenter the house. This time the boxer was ready. A brindle blur all but knocked Gabe down as he dashed inside, through the kitchen, and into the hallway, headed for the great room. Gabe muttered a curse

and took a quick mental inventory to determine what might be at risk of destruction as he trailed after the dog, wincing at the thought of the crystal collection on the coffee table—exactly at crooked-tail height.

“Hey!” he called as he hurried after the dog. “Stop. Stay. Sit.”

He might as well have said “Sing ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ ” for all the good that did. Luckily, the dog made it across the room without destroying anything, and after a quick sniff he curled up on the rug in front of the fireplace.

“Well, make yourself at home, why don’t you?” Gabe muttered as he crossed to the front door. He stared out at the circular drive where he expected to see a car—but didn’t. There wasn’t a car or truck or any vehicle of any type in sight.

Gabe’s frown deepened as he stepped out onto the front porch. No car by the garage, either. “Hello?” he called. “Dr. Sullivan?”

Nothing. Nada. No one.

Reentering the house, he braced his hands on his hips and stared at the boxer. “You did not come all the way up here by yourself.”

The dog exhaled a loud, snorty sigh. His tail thumped twice against the rug, and a stray thought sneaked past Gabe’s barriers. Matty would have loved him.

*Daddy, can I have a dog? Please? Pretty please?*

Gabe gave himself a shake, then grimly said, “Well, it doesn’t matter how you got up here. You are not staying here.”

The tail thumped three times. Otherwise the dog didn’t move so much as a whisker. In fact, he looked as if he’d be content to lie by the fire all winter. “Not hardly,” Gabe muttered.

Well, he *was* headed to town anyway. A quick stop by the vet's to dump the dog wouldn't be a big deal.

Gabe grabbed his car keys from a nearby table and jangled them. "You want to go for a ride?"

One floppy brown ear perked up inside the silly white cone.

Gabe jangled the keys again. Both ears perked. Gabe tried to recall if he'd seen a dog leash anywhere in Eagle's Way. Maybe in the mud room?

When he returned to the great room with a leash in hand, the boxer leapt to his feet. After fastening the leash to the leather collar and adjusting the white plastic cone, Gabe led him to the garage and helped him climb up into the Jeep. He and the boxer headed into town.

Again.

## T H R E E



Nic gave her reflection in the bathroom mirror one last look and wished she'd splurged on a new shade of lipstick for her date tonight. She'd worn a bronze shade for years. This was a new life. A new man. She should have a new lipstick.

"Too late now," she told her reflection. "He'll be here in ten minutes."

As Nic made her way downstairs, she admitted that referring to Bob Gerard as a "new man" was a stretch, since this was to be their first date and she'd only met Bob four days ago. He was part of the mayor's plan D, a business consultant from Colorado Springs whom Hank Townsend had brought to town to identify any options for saving Eternity Springs they might have overlooked.

Bob had flirted with Nic from the moment they met during a "business leader" luncheon at the Bristlecone. When he called that night to chat, her first instinct had been to brush him off the same way she had every other man since Greg Sullivan broke her heart. Then she'd recalled Celeste's speech at the high school about prisons of the past and she'd taken the leap, dusting off her own rusty flirting skills. Bob didn't seem to mind her awkwardness. When a conversation about hunting led to his admission that he'd never tried game meats, she'd

screwed up her courage and invited him to dinner for the specialty of her house—roast venison.

For this casual evening at home, she'd chosen to wear black slacks and an aquamarine V-neck cashmere sweater that Lori and Sarah claimed did wonders for her eyes. Nic just hoped she could get through dinner without spilling anything on it. She'd about ruined the oxford shirt she'd worn while preparing the meal—despite wearing an apron at the time. "I'm not nervous," she said aloud. "I'm not."

When the doorbell rang, she startled. No, not nervous at all.

She put a smile on her face and opened the door, saying, "You're right on time . . . oh. Mr. Callahan."

Gabe Callahan stood on her front porch, the boxer he'd rescued up on Murphy Mountain at his side. "You knew I'd bring him back?"

"No. Not you. I thought you were someone else." She frowned down at the dog and said, "Why is the boxer with you? Is Celeste okay?"

"Who is Celeste?"

Without warning, the dog yanked the leash from Gabe's hand and darted past Nic and into her home just as her telephone started ringing. Flustered, she said, "I'm sorry. Let me get that. Please come in."

Her home was a standard Victorian design with two rooms on either side off a large entry hall with the staircase to the second-floor bedrooms at its center, a narrow kitchen stretching the width of the house at the back. The closest phone sat on a table at the back of the center hall, toward the kitchen. The boxer disappeared into the cozy library, where Nic spent most of her time and where she'd set a small table for two. Her unexpected guest followed the dog.

She grabbed the phone on the fourth ring without bothering to check the caller ID. "Hello?"

“Nic, hi. It’s Bob. Look, I’m not going to be able to make it tonight. I’m on my way home now. Had an emergency.”

She waited for her stomach to sink in disappointment. To her surprise, all she felt was relief. “I’m sorry to hear that. I hope it’s nothing too serious.”

“My son had an accident on his four-wheeler. Broke his arm and a leg. My wife is frantic, and frankly, so am I. Do you know how long it’s gonna take me to get home? This town of yours is way too isolated.”

“Excuse me?” Nic’s heart began to pound. “Did you just say ‘my wife?’”

“Oh. Well . . .”

Her blood began to boil. “You weren’t wearing a wedding ring.”

“Yeah. Well . . .”

“You sorry, lowlife jerk. You flirted with me from hello. I can’t believe you . . . Listen. You can take your ‘consulting’ and shove it. We don’t want your kind in our town.” She started to slam the phone down, froze, and brought it back to her ear. “I hope your son is okay.”

After that, she did slam the receiver into its cradle. She stood staring at it, her hands on her hips, breathing hard. Anger coursed through her blood. “What is it with men? Are they totally incapable of faithfulness?”

“Depends. It’s a character issue more than a sexual one.”

Nic closed her eyes in embarrassment and swallowed a groan. She’d forgotten about her visitor. Lovely. Just lovely.

“I seem to find only the characters without character. Oh well.” She shrugged and shook off her discomfort. “Talk to me about the dog.”

Gabe glanced at the boxer, who lay curled on a rug in

front of the fireplace. “He came scratching at my door a little while ago, and I’m bringing him back to you.”

“He scratched at the door of your Jeep?”

“No. He scratched at the kitchen door at Eagle’s Way.”

“How did he get up there?”

“I thought you brought him.”

“No.” Nic shook her head. “I can’t keep strays that come to me. It’s one of my few hard-and-fast rules, otherwise I’d be overrun with pets. The boxer is on a week-long get-to-know-you visit with Celeste Blessing, who I hope will agree to adopt him. She lives in the big yellow Victorian on the east bank of Angel Creek.”

“That’s a long way from Murphy Mountain.”

She nodded, then tilted her head and studied him, her eyes narrowed with suspicion. “Did he really show up at Eagle’s Way?”

One side of Gabe’s mouth lifted in a self-mocking smile, and he raised his hands palms out. “Hey, I have no reason to lie. I’m not married, and I’m not trying to date you.”

“Ouch,” she muttered, embarrassed at the reminder of what he’d overheard. “I need to call and check on Celeste. Would you keep an eye on Tiger for me, please? The way my luck is running, he’ll decide to sample the meat I have resting on the kitchen counter.”

“Tiger?”

She gestured vaguely toward the dog. “My name for him. It’s his brindle coat, the black stripes on brown. Makes me think of tiger stripes.”

Nic lifted the phone and dialed Celeste’s number, conscious of the quickening in her pulse as she imagined all sorts of disasters that could have happened to her elderly friend. When Celeste said “Hello” following the third ring, Nic exhaled a relieved breath. “Hi, Celeste, it’s Nic. I’m calling about the boxer.”

"Ah . . . I take it he's found his way home?"

Nic gave Gabe Callahan a sidelong look and responded, "In a manner of speaking. He's here with me now. What happened?"

"Well, we were outside enjoying the sunshine when Archibald walked over, climbed up on my lap, licked my face, then trotted off. He obviously had somewhere to go, so I wasn't worried about him."

"Archibald?" Nic repeated, not certain she and Celeste were on the same wavelength. "We're talking about the boxer, right?"

"Yes, well, he needs a name, and that seemed to fit."

In what universe, Nic couldn't guess. "What time was this?"

"Oh, this morning sometime."

"And you weren't concerned when he didn't come back?"

"No, dear. Archibald is a sweetheart of a dog, but I'm not meant to be his companion. He and I both know that. We had quite a talk about it."

Nic decided then and there that it was time to take Celeste into Gunnison for a thorough medical checkup. She wasn't a dotty-old-dear type at all. Concerned, Nic asked, "Are you feeling all right, Celeste? Any unusual aches or pains?"

"I'm fine, dear. In fact, I'm just about to take a quick spin on my Honda. It's a beautiful evening, and this time of year, each one we have is a heavenly gift. You should make a point of enjoying yourself, too. I recall that this is a difficult day for you."

"Yes, well . . ." Nic glanced toward Gabe and saw that he was perusing the offerings on her bookshelves. The boxer hadn't budged from his position in front of the fire. "Maybe Archibald will help me pass the time. Drive safely, Celeste. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

She ended the call and joined her visitors in the li-

brary. Gabe arched a brow her way and repeated, “Archibald? That’s worse than Tiger.”

“What have you been calling him?”

Gabe glanced down at the dog and shook his head. “I don’t name things I don’t intend to keep.”

She spared him a scolding look before turning her attention to the dog. Since he didn’t seem interested in coming to her, she crossed the room and knelt beside him. “All right, Tiger. Let’s give you a quick once-over to see how you fared on today’s trek. Hmm . . . no new scratches or scrapes that I can tell. And, actually, these stitches can come out. How about it, handsome? You ready to ditch the collar?”

As she unfastened the Elizabethan collar’s plastic tabs, she glanced up at Gabe. “I have a yellow canvas bag hanging on a chair in the kitchen. Would you grab it for me, please? It’s the room at the far end of the entry hall.”

“Sure.” When he handed the bag over a few moments later, he said, “I see why you wanted to keep the dog out of the kitchen. Something smells awfully tempting.”

“It’s my specialty. Pistachio-and-pine-nut-crust-ed rack of venison with wild mushrooms.” As she removed the stitches from the boxer’s leg, she said, “Why don’t you stay and share my supper, Mr. Callahan? I have plenty, and everything is ready.”

He glanced toward the table set for two. “Oh . . . uh . . . thanks, but I don’t think so.”

“Why not? You have to eat, and it’s not like I’m trying to date you, either.”

His stare shifted toward the kitchen, and she thought she saw a flash of regret in his eyes before he shook his head. “I thought I’d drop by the Bristlecone Café. I’ve heard the food is excellent.”

“It’s wonderful and you definitely need to try it, but it

won't be tonight. It's Tuesday. The Bristlecone is closed on Tuesdays."

"Oh, well . . ."

His obvious reluctance began to annoy her. "Are you a vegetarian? Don't care for game? If that's it, you really should try my venison. I promise you'll change your mind."

"Dr. Sullivan—"

"Nic."

"I'm Gabe. I appreciate the invitation. Your venison sounds and smells delicious, but I'm not much company."

"All right. What's a little more humiliation?" She folded her arms and sighed. "Here's the deal, Gabe. I know I'm being pushy. It's an unfortunate tendency of mine. But the fact is that I really, really don't want to be alone tonight. See, today is . . . was . . . my wedding anniversary. Would have been six years today if the man I married wasn't a lying, cheating snake. Last year on this date I swore I wouldn't spend this year wallowing in another self-indulgent pity party. If you leave me now, I'm liable to do just that. Besides, the way I figure it, you owe me. I saved your life, remember? You said yourself that I was a lifesaver. All I'm asking for in return is for you to sit down and make small talk with me while we share a gourmet meal and a really fine bottle of wine."

Amusement lit his eyes and she could see the subtle lessening of tension in his stance. "Small talk, huh? You don't know how much I hate small talk."

"Deal with it, Callahan. The meat needs to sit another . . ." She checked the mantel clock. "Five minutes. The powder room is beneath the stairs if you want to wash up, and if you'd like a drink before dinner, the piece of furniture against the wall behind you is a bar. I filled the ice bucket earlier, so you're good to go."

In the kitchen, Nic gave her hips a happy little wiggle

as she stirred the sauce. Okay, so this wasn't a date. No doubt about that. Nevertheless, she'd managed to upgrade her dinner companion for tonight in a substantial way, and for that she was grateful. Excited, even. She couldn't have asked for a better distraction on this unhappy anniversary. Gabe Callahan was downright hot. The scruffy, need-a-haircut-and-a-shave look suited him, and a girl could get drunk on those warm whiskey eyes of his.

Distracted by her thoughts and the man in her library, Nic neglected to use her hot pads as she went to pick up her roasting pan. "Yee-ouch!" she cried as the pan clattered back onto the stovetop.

She was shaking her left hand and staring at the venison, grateful she hadn't dropped their dinner on the floor, when Callahan appeared in the doorway to her kitchen. "What's wrong?"

"I'm an idiot. I almost dropped the roast."

"You burned yourself," he surmised as his gaze shifted from her to the pot on the stove. Crossing to the kitchen sink, he twisted the cold water faucet. "C'mere."

When she moved close, he took her arm by the wrist and studied her hand as he guided it beneath the running water. "You grabbed your pan without a pad? You don't strike me as the careless sort."

"I have my moments of ditziness," she replied.

Ditziness fast becoming dizziness. He'd yet to release her hand, so he stood close enough for her to smell the sandalwood fragrance of his soap. It was all she could do not to sway against him.

Nic had always been a sucker for ruggedly handsome men with well-defined abs, but with the wounded-soul thing he had going on . . . whoa. *My oh my, he trips my trigger.*

"It doesn't appear to be too bad a burn," he observed.

*You'd be surprised.* With a husky note to her voice, she murmured, "It's fine."

Gabe glanced up and caught her staring at the strong line of his jaw. His gaze locked onto hers, and for a long, smoldering moment time hung suspended. Nic thought he might lower his head and kiss her.

Instead he abruptly released her wrist as if it were the hot roasting-pan handle and quickly backed away.

In that moment he reminded her of a cornered animal desperately searching for escape, and the healer in her responded. This man was hurt, damaged in some fundamental way. She saw it not in those scars upon his body but in the haunted expression in his eyes.

She wanted to make him well again. If he had four legs instead of two, she'd know exactly what to do, but humans weren't her specialty, and despite his appeal, she felt out of her league where Gabe Callahan was concerned.

Gruffly he asked, "Can I, um, carry something to the table?"

"Sure. Thank you. The breadbasket is there by the coffee maker. I'll join you in just a few minutes."

He grabbed the basket in full retreat and kept his distance until Nic invited him to pour the wine as she served the meal. Once they were both seated, she attempted to dispel the lingering tension by lifting her glass in a toast. "To scintillating small talk, Mr. Callahan."

After a brief pause, Gabe gave a half smile, touched his glass to hers, and said in a droll tone of voice, "Lovely weather we're having, Dr. Sullivan."

The exchange set the tone for the meal. His interest in her library led to a discussion about reading preferences and she learned they shared an affinity for popular fiction. They both enjoyed thrillers, though he expressed disdain for spy novels and she didn't care for graphic vi-

olence. They debated favorite authors for a time, then conversation moved to the meal. He paid flattering homage to her cooking skills, both verbally and by taking second helpings. She considered it a minor victory when he asked her a question that she felt went beyond “small talk.”

Nic lifted her wineglass and swirled the ruby liquid as she contemplated her answer. “I chose to return to Eternity Springs because I have a thing for ruby slippers.”

He made the Wizard of Oz connection easily. “There’s no place like home, Dorothy?”

“Exactly. I can live other places, be happy other places. I certainly would be better off financially if I worked somewhere else. But I don’t think I’d thrive anywhere but here. It sounds corny, I know, but I believe that this is where I am meant to be.” She sipped her wine and took a risk. “How about you, Gabe Callahan? Where is home for you?”

Slowly, he set down his fork. He lifted his napkin from his lap and wiped his mouth. “The meal was excellent, Nic. I’ve never tasted venison as delicious as this.”

Okay. Great big No Trespassing sign in that window. She considered calling him on it but decided she didn’t want to spoil what had ended up being a lovely evening. “Thank you. Would you care for dessert?”

He glanced at the mantel clock and set his napkin on the table. “I should be heading back.”

“I have a plate of the Bristlecone Café’s famous brownies.”

He returned his napkin to his lap. “I guess there’s no need to hurry.”

Nic grinned as she rose to clear the dinner plates, but the smile died when she glanced out the window and spied an unusual light. “Wait. Look, Gabe. What is that?”

He responded at the moment a bell began to clang. "Fire. I think it's across the creek."

Nic stared, realized what she was looking at, then gasped. "That's Cavanaugh House."

Celeste Blessing's home was on fire.

Gabe started his Jeep and cursed the dog. If not for that dopey, crooked-tailed mange magnet, he'd be holed up on the mountain safely by himself.

He didn't belong down here in the valley having dinner with an attractive woman. He had no business rushing off to the rescue of little old ladies. Interacting with others. Joining in their efforts. He had no business doing any of this. That wasn't why he'd come to Eternity Springs.

It was all that stupid dog's fault.

Yet the moment Nic slipped into the passenger seat beside him, a medical bag in hand, he shifted into gear and headed for the fire.

She tossed a pair of work gloves into his lap. "We're a volunteer fire department here. They'll have some extra gear on the truck, but it never hurts to have your own."

He muttered a few more curses beneath his breath. He had much more experience with firefights than he did with fighting fires.

When they arrived at the scene, it quickly became obvious to Gabe that the first responders knew what they were doing. They worked efficiently and effectively beneath the direction of the man he recognized as the owner of the local lumber yard.

"There's Celeste. Thank God." Nic grabbed her medical bag and hopped out of the Jeep before Gabe switched off the ignition. As she rushed toward the elderly woman seated on the tailgate of a pickup truck, Gabe braced himself, then went to offer his assistance to

the lumberyard owner, who was barking orders into a radio. "What can I do to help?"

"You ever done this before?"

"No."

"Then stay back. Help move the hose." He pointed to a man who had the fire hose slung over his shoulder and who moved in coordination with the two men in front at the nozzle. Over the roar and crackle of the fire, the leader shouted, "Cyrus, go spell Frank for a bit. This fella will take your place."

Heat hit Gabe like a body blow as he moved closer to the fire. From the top floor of the grand old mansion, fingers of flame stabbed into the night sky. Gingerbread decorating the eaves flamed, blackened, and disappeared. An attic window popped and men scurried backward as glass rained down onto the yard.

Once the glass settled, firefighters moved forward with their hoses again, water roaring from the nozzles. Gabe hauled and hoisted and hefted. Sweat cascaded down his face and reminded him of a hot Texas summer of his youth. He turned his face away as a cloud of smoke rolled over him and stole his breath. He started to cough, so hard that he bent over double.

It was as he straightened that he recognized the potential for disaster. With the wind blowing the heat and flames away from them, a pair of knuckleheaded boys had kept inching forward, and they now stood too close to the burning house for Gabe's peace of mind. He yelled to catch their attention and tell them to move back, but between his smoke-filled lungs and the chaos of the moment, no one paid him any attention. *Who are the idiots who allow their kids to run loose this way?*

He heaved a grim sigh and set down the hose, indicating his intentions by gesture to the man in front of him. He hurried toward the boys, and he'd just captured the boys' notice when the boom of an explosion ripped

through the night. Burning debris launched like missiles into the air above the boys' heads, and Gabe launched himself at the pair.

The boys cried out as they all went down in a heap. Flaming rubble rained down around them. Something hard and hot struck Gabe's back just as a scream alerted him to the fact that one boy's fleece jacket had caught fire. Gabe frantically went to work smothering the flames, and soon other arms reached out to help. As panicked voices rose all around him, he climbed slowly to his feet, breathing heavily.

Someone shuffled the kids off for Nic to check over, but Gabe ignored the instruction that he should do the same. Instead he went back to the fire hose, back to work. The minor burns on his hands didn't rate a break, and he could tell that they were gaining ground on the fire.

All in all, the incident with the boys didn't last a minute. The fire itself hadn't burned for more than twenty. The volunteer fire department had it whipped in half an hour. When the lumberyard owner ordered the hoses shut off, a huge cheer went up from the crowd. Everyone in town must be here.

Gabe stepped away from the fire hose. The townspeople surged forward to inspect damage to a home now lit only by moonlight. Gabe remained stationary, and as a result, he soon stood at the periphery of the crowd. Scraps of conversation drifted over him.

"How did it start?"

"Who was the fella who knocked the boys to safety?"

"She bought the place lock, stock, and barrel. I heard it's still packed full of Cavanaugh stuff. Hope it wasn't all destroyed."

"Well, Celeste can't stay here. Wonder who will take her home?"

“Looks like the damage is confined to the north addition. Lucky break there.”

“Who’s that man who came with Dr. Nic? I’ve never seen him before.”

“You know, Hank, we dodged a disaster by the skin of our teeth. We have to get the pump truck fixed. Got it running tonight on a lick and a prayer. Hell, the fire could have jumped the creek and burned down the whole damn town!”

Gabe took another step back. Then another. When he saw a trio of matrons eyeing him with questions in their eyes, he pivoted on his heel and headed for the Jeep. Halfway there he stopped abruptly. He’d brought Nic here. He couldn’t up and leave without her. His mother—God rest her soul—had branded that into his bones.

Reluctantly he went to find her. A triage of sorts had been set up along the bank of Angel Creek with lanterns and flashlights and car headlights illuminating the space. Nic and a handful of other women were there tending to a variety of minor injuries.

As he approached, an older woman eyed him with interest. “You must be Gabe Callahan,” she said. “I’m Celeste Blessing. Nicole tells me that Archibald has decided you are his owner.”

*Who? Oh. The dog. Oh, no. No. No. No.* “I’m just visiting the area, Ms. Blessing. I’m a guest in someone else’s home. I can’t have a dog.”

“Hmm . . .” She offered him a beatific smile before turning to Nic. “Now that things have calmed down a bit, I need to tell you why the accident happened. I’m afraid I knocked over the candle because I was trying to run after the puppy that a fox chased into my root cellar. He was hurt, Nic, and I’m sure he’s still down there. We need to go get him.”

A pretty brunette about Nic's age shook her head. "You can't go down there tonight."

"It's a puppy," Celeste repeated. "I hope he doesn't die."

The brunette hit her forehead with her palm and groaned. "Now you've done it. Nic won't hesitate to risk life and limb for a puppy."

Celeste added, "They told me the basement wasn't affected by the fire, so the root cellar should be fine, too."

Nic stared toward the house. "I can make a quick—"

"I'll do it," Gabe announced. "Somebody give me a flashlight."

"Thanks, Gabe." She darted a smile. "Two sets of hands are better than one when working with wild animals, and I suspect she saw a coyote rather than a puppy. Let me grab my bag."

He nodded, accepted the offered flashlight, and headed for the root cellar entrance he'd noticed while fighting the fire. She caught up with him halfway to the house. "I'll go in first. If the animal needs sedation, you'll need to stay out of my way."

Gabe respected her professional abilities, but no way he'd let a woman take point position. At the root cellar door he met her gaze and said, "Dr. Sullivan? Sit. Stay."

She narrowed her eyes and said, "Careful, Callahan. I bite."

He switched on the flashlight and stepped down into the inky blackness. The air smelled musty and smoky. He stood still for a moment as he listened for puppy sounds. Nothing.

"Quiet as a tomb," he muttered, playing the light across the floor from left to right. He saw burlap bags and wooden shelves, two wooden barrels, and . . . a caved-in section of a brick wall.

He muttered a curse.

“What is it?” Nic called, descending the stairs. “What’s wrong?”

The beam from Gabe’s flashlight held steady on the skull revealed by the crumbling brick.

Behind him, Nic gasped. “Gabe? Tell me that’s fake. It’s a Halloween prop, isn’t it?”

Nope. Sure wasn’t. “Go back outside, Nicole.”

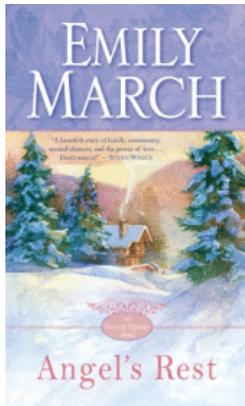
“It was in the wall? Bricked up?” Instead of exiting the root cellar, Nic Sullivan moved forward. “This is so Edgar Allan Poe.”

“Careful,” Gabe warned as she approached the crumbled wall, pulling a flashlight of her own from her medical bag. She reached out and dragged another row of loose bricks away, then another. Realizing she wasn’t about to quit, Gabe stepped up to help her.

They tore the wall halfway to the floor and stepped back. Nic let out a long, shaky sigh. “That’s the saddest thing I’ve ever seen, Gabe.”

The skeleton lay stretched out on a wooden table, what appeared to be the tattered remains of a wedding dress draped atop it.

Gabe peered behind the remnants of the wall and added, “Interesting, too. There are stacks of silver bars at her feet.”



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