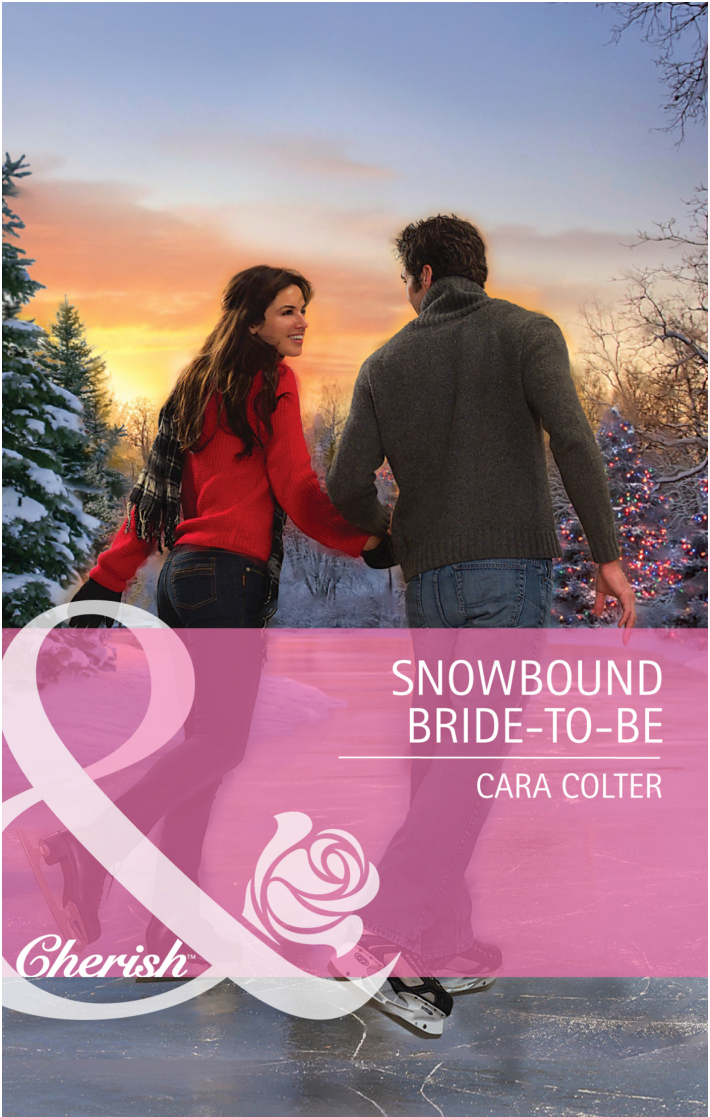
SNOWBOUND
BRIDE-TO-BE
CARA COLTER
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Cara Colter

Snowbound Bride-to-Be

Серия «Mills & Boon Cherish»

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Snowbound Bride-To-Be

Cara Colter

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Dear Reader

This story is about choices: the choice to run away from love, with all its potential for pain, or to embrace it with all its potential to give life extraordinary richness and fullness. That choice is huge—one of the biggest and most life-altering choices any of us will ever make—and it is at the heart of every romance novel.

But buried in the pages of this story is another choice, and I don't want you to overlook it as insignificant. A man makes a

choice to disconnect his smoke detector, and sets in place a series of tragic and unforeseen consequences.

And so, if you are looking for a special gift to give yourself this Christmas, do not overlook the one that may seem insignificant but could in fact be lifealtering. Check your smoke detector and make sure it is working. If you don't have one, buy one today. It is truly one of the most wonderful gifts you could ever give yourself and your family.

With warmest wishes for a safe and happy holiday, from my home to yours,

Cara Colter

Cara Colter lives on an acreage in British Columbia with her partner, Rob, and eleven horses. She has three grown children and a grandson. She is a recent recipient of the *RT Book Reviews* Career Achievement Award in the 'Love and Laughter' category. Cara loves to hear from readers, and you can contact her or learn more about her through her website: www.cara-colter.com

CHAPTER ONE

TWENTY-TWO gallons of hot chocolate.

Ten of mulled wine.

Four hundred and sixty-two painstakingly decorated Christmas cookies.

And no one was coming.

The storm battering the windows of the White Pond Inn—Emma White had rechristened it the White Christmas Inn just this morning—was being compared by the radio announcer to the Great Ice Storm of 1998 that had wreaked havoc on this region of Atlantic Canada, not to mention Quebec, Ontario, New York and New England.

Christmas was clearly going to be ruined.

"Just like always," Emma murmured out loud to herself, her voice seeming to echo through the empty inn.

Her optimism was not in the least bolstered by the fire crackling cheerfully in the hearth, by her exquisite up-country holiday decorations in the great room, or by her bright-red Santa hat and her lovely red wool sweater with the white angora snowflakes on its front.

In fact, speaking the thought out loud—that Christmas was going to be ruined, just like always—invited a little girl, the ghost of herself, to join her in the room.

The little girl had long, dark wavy hair and was staring at

an opened package that held a doll with jaggedly cut hair and blue ink stains on its face, clearly not Clara, the doll she had whispered to Santa that she coveted, but rather a castoff of one of the children her mother cleaned houses for.

"Shut up," Emma ordered herself, but for some reason the little ghost girl wanted her to remember how she had pretended to be happy. For her mother.

Her mother, Lynelle, who had finally agreed to come for Christmas. Emma could not wait to show her the refurbished house that Lynelle had grown up in but not returned to since she was sixteen, not even when Grandma had died.

Emma tried not to think that her mother had sounded backed into a corner rather than enthused about spending Christmas here. And she had agreed to come only on Christmas Eve, taking a miss on the seasonal celebrations at the inn: the ten-day pre-Christmas celebration, Holiday Happenings. But still Lynelle would be here for the culmination of all Emma's hard work and planning, Christmas Day Dream.

Lynelle's lack of enthusiasm probably meant she was distracted. In Emma's experience that usually meant a new man.

It was probably uncharitable—and unChristmas-like—but when Emma sent the bus ticket, she was sending fare for a single passenger.

The radio cut into her thoughts, but only to add to her sense of unease and gloom. "This just in, the highway closed at Harvey all the way through to the U.S. border."

Emma got up and deliberately snapped off the radio, thoughts of her mother and her memories. She tried to focus on the facts, to be pragmatic, though the inn was plenty of evidence that pragmatism did not come naturally to her. The inn was the project of a dreamer, not a realist.

Okay, she told herself, visitors would not be making the scenic drive up from Maine tonight. Maybe it was just as well. Her aging neighbor, Tim Fenshaw, had already called to say he couldn't bring the horses out in this, so there would be no sleigh rides. The phone line had gone dead before he had said good-bye.

And just before the last light had died in the evening sky, Emma had looked out her back window at her pond and seen that it was being covered with snow faster than she could hope to clear it. So, no skating, either.

"Holiday Happenings is not happening," Emma announced to herself. Or at least not happening tonight, which was to have been the opening night of ten days of skating and sleigh rides right up until Christmas Eve.

It was all adding up to a big fat zero. No sledding, no sleigh rides, no skating, no admission fees, no hot dog sales, no craft sales, no cookie sales. All the things Emma had counted on *finally* to bring the inn firmly into the black.

And to finance her Christmas Day Dream.

"Would one little miracle be so much to ask for?" she asked out loud, sending an irritated look heavenward.

The Christmas Day Dream was Emma's plan to provide

a very special Christmas for those who did not have fantasy Christmases. The disappointments of her childhood had not all occurred at Christmas. But somehow, at that time of year in particular, she had waited for the miracle that didn't come.

Last year she'd thought she had left all of that behind her. She was an adult now, and she had looked forward, finally, to the best Christmas of all. Her then fiancé, Dr. Peter Henderson, had invited her to spend Christmas with his family. The very memory tasted of bitterness. Was it possible last year had been worse than all the rest combined?

Emma had learned her lesson! She was not putting her expectations in the hands of others, not her mother, and not a man!

This year she was in charge. She was devoted to eradicating Christmas disappointments. She was determined to make Christmas joyous, not just for herself, but for a world she knew from personal experience was grimly in need of a dose of true Christmas spirit.

In collusion with several area churches and a homeless shelter, a dozen of the neediest families in this region had received invitations to spend Christmas Day at the inn.

The invitations targeted families with nothing to hope for, families who could not have Christmas, or could not have it as they dreamed it should be.

On Christmas Day Emma was throwing open the doors to fifty-one confirmed guests who would arrive on a chartered bus.

Emma *knew* the people coming: the oldest a seventy-six-year-old grandmother who was the sole guardian of her three grandchildren, one of whom was the youngest, a nine-month-old baby whose two siblings were under age five. The largest group was a family of eight whose father had been hurt in an accident early last year, and had not been able to work since; the smallest was a single mother and her handicapped son.

And, of course, her mother, who understood Christmases with nothing—one year they had not even had a tree—would be there to share in the joy. There would be gifts for everyone. Brandnew. No hairless ink-stained dolls. But more than gifts, the *feeling* would be there. Emma had been collecting skates, and having them sharpened in anticipation of skating, Tim was hooking up the Clydes to give sleigh rides.

His daughter-in-law, Mona, and two granddaughters, Sue and Peggy, who were staying with him while Tim, Jr., served with the Canadian Armed Forces overseas, had practically been living here preparing for Holiday Happenings and the Christmas Day Dream.

Not even last year, anticipating Christmas with the Hendersons, had filled Emma with this sense that by giving this gift to others, she would know the secret of the season, would share in its universal peace.

Now, her dreams felt precarious. *Naive.* She could hear Peter's voice as if he stood next to her.

"How am I going to pay for everything?" she whispered. How

was she going to pay the Fenshaws for all the time they had given her? And, indeed, for Christmas Day Dream? And the stacks of wonderful brand-new gifts she'd been foolish enough to put on credit, her optimism had been so high? She hadn't been able to see how Holiday Happenings could possibly fail. She'd been having a dozen calls a day about it since she'd put the posters up in mid-November.

The St. Martin's Church youth group had sent her the admissions in full for thirty-two kids—who were supposed to come tonight. She remembered how gleeful she had been when she had used their money to make a deposit on the chartered bus for her Christmas-Day guests.

Emma could feel a familiar headache pulling between her eyebrows, knotting above the bridge of her nose.

She'd inherited White Pond, the neglected house and overgrown eighteen acres from her grandmother last spring. It had quickly become apparent to her she couldn't afford to keep it.

By then Emma was committed to keeping it. There was something here of her family and her history that Lynelle had scorned, but that Emma *needed*. So, she'd used her life savings, not huge on her wage as a medical receptionist, given permanent notice to the job she had taken temporary leave from, and risked her engagement, which had already been on the rocks since last Christmas, and which had well and truly washed up on shore when she'd made the decision to come home and care for the grandmother who had been a virtual stranger to her.

And then on a shoe-string budget, with endless determination and elbow grease, Emma had done her best to refurbish the house. She had opened as a bed and breakfast last summer.

It had soon been woefully obvious to her that the B and B business was as tricky and as full of pitfalls as her old house. Still, she had hoped to repair all the foibles of her first summer season with Holiday Happenings.

Again, Emma could sense her former fiancé and boss, Dr. Peter Henderson, his thin face puckered with disapproval, his arms folded over the narrowness of his chest. "Emma," he was saying, "you don't have any idea what you are getting into."

She hated it that with each passing day, his predictions of doom and gloom seemed to be just a little closer to coming true.

And if I had known the full extent of what I was getting into, would I have— She wasn't allowing herself to think like that.

Emma turned an eye to the inn's tree, a Fraser fir, magnificent in completely white ribbons and ornaments and lights, the angel's wings brushing the ten-foot ceiling. Emma let her eyes rest on that angel for a moment.

"One miracle," Emma said quietly. "I wanted a perfect Christmas. I wanted to give the best gift of all, hope."

The angel gazed back at her with absolute serenity.

"Oh," Emma said, annoyed, "you aren't even a real angel. If I had glass eyes, and paper wings I could look serene, too!"

But then she cast her gaze around the room and her heart softened. The great room of the White Pond Inn had been turned

into a picture out of a Christmas fairy tale. This scene was the payoff for all her hard work, and worth the crush of bills, the exhaustion that had become her constant companion.

A fire roared and crackled in the river-rock hearth, colorful woolen socks hung at the solidslab oak mantle. Garlands of real holly were tacked to crown molding. White poinsettias shone like lights in the dark corners of the room.

Parcels wrapped in shades of white and festooned with homemade bows, containing brandnew dolls and fire trucks were already piled high under that tree, though she had to admit they didn't look quite as pretty when she wasn't sure how she was going to pay for them!

She forced her mind away from that, and finished her inventory of the room. Red-and-white cushions had replaced the ordinary ones on the sofas and chairs, vases held candy canes, the glowing dark planks of the hardwood floors were covered with white area rugs.

The room held a delicious aroma because of the continuous baking that had been happening in the house. The sweet comforting scents of cinnamon and nutmeg and pumpkin and apples had mixed with the smell of the occasional back puff of wood smoke to create a scent that could have been labeled and sold, *Christmas*.

Another great money-making idea from Emma White, she told herself sarcastically, but then she sighed, unable not to enjoy the pleasure of what she had done.

The inn was a vision of Christmas. It was going to bring great joy to many people. When her mother saw it, it would erase every bad Christmas they had ever spent together.

"Holiday Happenings and the Christmas Day Dream will still happen," Emma told herself stubbornly, but details from the ice storm of 1998 insisted on crowding into her head.

The six-day storm had caused billions of dollars in damage, left millions of people without power for periods that had varied from days to weeks. Roads had been closed, trees destroyed, power lines had snapped under the weight of rain turning to ice.

"I could not be so unlucky to have a six-day storm shut down Holiday Happenings completely," she muttered, but then she whispered, "Could I?"

The storm threw shards of ice up against her window and howled under her eaves in answer.

And then, above the howl of the wind, her doorbell chimed its one clanging, broken note, but still an answer to her question about her luck!

Emma's eyes flew to her grandfather clock. Eight o'clock! Just when people were supposed to arrive. They had come anyway! The miracle had happened! How was it she had not heard cars, slamming doors, voices?

She tried to rein in her happiness. Of course, it could just be Tim, checking to make sure she was all right in the storm.

The Fenshaws had invited her into the fold of this lovely small community as if she belonged here, as if she was one of them.

Tim had been interested in the White Pond property for his son when he returned from overseas, but when Emma had told him she had decided to keep it, he and his daughter-in-law Mona had seemed genuinely pleased, as if they had waited all their lives for her to come home to them.

Now, what if she couldn't pay them after the hours and hours they had devoted to making her dreams become a reality? She couldn't have operated the inn for one day without their constant help and support.

A shiver went down her spine. Worse, what if all these dreams, her foolishness as Peter had called it, cost her the inn?

She went and opened the door, and despite the rush of ice-cold air, her heart beat hopefully in anticipation of guests, maybe locals from Willowbrook who had braved the weather.

Only it wasn't locals.

And it wasn't Tim.

A stranger stood there, the glow from the string of white Christmas lights that illuminated the porch nearly totally blocked by his size. He was tall and impossibly broad across the shoulders. The sense of darkness was intensified by the absolute black of a knee-length wool coat, black gloves, dark, glossy hair, shot through with snowflakes.

His features were shadowed, but even so, Emma could see the perfect cast of his nose, the thrust of high cheekbones, the strength in the jut of his chin.

The stranger was astonishingly, heart-stop-pingly handsome,

even though the set of his firm mouth was grim, and his eyes were dark, intense and totally forbidding.

Emma shivered under his scrutiny, felt the sweep of his cool gaze take her in from red socks to ridiculous hat, and saw his mouth tighten into an even grimmer line.

It felt to Emma as if the devil himself had decided to pay her an early Christmas visit. In an instant she went from being an independent woman, operating her own business, to one who wished she could strip off her shapeless sweater and the added bulk of the long johns she had put on earlier in preparation for skating and sleigh-riding.

She became a woman who would have given up just about anything to take back the recent disastrous haircut. In an effort to make her life simpler—or maybe to assert it was *her* life—she had cut her long glossy black hair, one of the few things about her that Peter had approved of. In rebellion, set free, heavy waves had turned to impossible, crazy curls. At least the Santa hat would be hiding the worst of it, though Emma wished she wasn't wearing that, too.

There was something alarmingly intriguing in the to-die-for features of the stranger who blocked the light from her front door. As her eyes adjusted to the deep shadow around him, she drank in his features and the expression on his face.

The man looked as if he might have laughed once, but did no more. He was one of those men who was a puzzle that begged to be solved. Despite the remoteness in him—or maybe deepened

because of it—he was temptation personified.

But not to her, a woman sworn to put all her passion into her business and the coming Christmas. A woman who had sworn that the White Pond Inn was going to be *enough* for her, who could not trust herself to make a good decision about men if her life depended on it. No one, after all, had *looked* like a better bet than Peter.

Her intriguing visitor's eyes moved from her to the wreath on her door, taking in the sprigs of white pine interlaced with balsam and grand fir, taking in the gypsophila and tiny white bells, the glory of the homemade white satin bow. Finally, his gaze paused on the little wooden letters, red, inserted in the wreath, peeking out from under a sprig of feathery cedar.

Believe.

His expression hardened and his gaze strayed to the rest of her porch, glancing off the holly wound through the spindles, the red rag rugs, the planters filled with spruce boughs and red berries.

If she was not mistaken, it was contempt that darkened his eyes to pitch before they returned to her face.

Slam the door, she instructed herself. *Whatever he has come here for, you don't have it. And he doesn't have one thing you need, either.*

She reminded herself, sternly, of rule one: independence! Emma already knew, many thanks to her mother—a lesson reinforced by the good doctor—that a man was the easiest way to lose that sense of independence, that sense of owning your

own life.

But the weather was providing a cruel reminder that she did not always make the rules for her life. Now she was given another such reminder.

Because, in a breath, closing the door on him was no longer an option. A tiny whimper drew her attention, finally, from the mesmerizing black ice of his eyes.

She was astonished to see that nestled into the huge expanse of his shoulder, made almost invisible by utter stillness and a black blanket that matched his coat, was a baby.

It turned its face from his shoulder, and gazed at Emma with huge blue eyes, a living version of a doll she had wrapped earlier. The eyes that gazed at her with such solemn curiosity were as innocent as his were world-weary.

A girl, if the bonnet, a strangely lopsided concoction of dark wool, was any indication. Emma realized the hat was on the wrong way.

Despite the fact the visitor who had emerged from the storm looked so formidable, and so without humor, she almost smiled at the backwards hat.

But his words stole the smile and her breath.

"We need a place to stay."

Her mouth moved in protest but not a single, solitary sound emerged from it. Him? Stay here? With all his attractions and mysteries being doubled by his protective stance with the beautiful baby?

“The highway patrol just told me to get off the road. It was going to close behind me.”

Say something, she ordered herself, but no sound came out of her mouth.

“Hopefully,” he said, “it will just be for a few hours. Until the roads reopen.”

Impossible to say yes to him. Even his voice was dangerous—as unconsciously sensuous as melted chocolate clinging to a fresh strawberry. He was dangerous to a woman like her who had made vows about the course her life was now going to take. *No more begging for approval, married to the inn.* And yet here she was, wanting to snatch the Santa hat off her head *for him.*

So, impossible to say yes. And even more impossible to say no.

He had a baby with him.

And isn’t this where the age-old story began? With no room at the inn?

She, who so desperately wanted to give everyone the perfect Christmas, turning away a stranger on the flimsy excuse that her need for predictability felt threatened by his cynical look and the dark mystery that clung to him like fog clinging to a dark forest?

By the treacherous little niggling of her own attraction? The part of her she would have sworn, even seconds ago, that she had completely tamed?

A primitive longing that if she indulged it, could turn her into her mother in a horrifying blink? Prepared to throw away

everything—*everything*—for whatever it was that hard mouth promised.

She tried to reason with herself. He needed a place to stay. A few hours. That was hardly going to rock her world, mature business woman that she was now.

She pulled off the Santa hat.

His eyes went to her hair, something twitched along the firm line of his mouth, but then was gone.

"The highway patrol said you have the only accommodations in the entire Willowbrook area." The way he said it made her feel as if he would have stayed elsewhere if he'd had a choice.

A modern hotel, stylish and without character. In his eyes, she saw all her hard work judged harshly, dismissed as corny, not charming. She did not like it one bit that the judgments of a complete stranger could hurt so badly. For a moment she wanted desperately to tell him she did not let rooms in the winter, which she didn't.

But he had no choice. And neither did she. She was not sending that baby back out into the storm.

Despite the fact that none of the normal precautions were in place that protected her as a single woman running a business—the pre-visit information sheet, the credit card verification of ID—Emma felt only the danger of her attraction.

Something about the way he held the baby, protective, fierce, made her understand the only dangers he posed to her were emotional ones. But even if she were foolish enough to let forced

proximity threaten her vows of independence, one look at his shuttered face assured her he would never be foolish.

She stepped back from the door, coolly professional. “I usually don’t operate as an inn in the winter, but I can clearly see that this is an emergency.”

If she hoped her aloof graciousness would give her the upper hand, she was mistaken. Scent swept in the door with him, the deeply masculine smells of soap and aftershave, the baby scents of powder and purity, quickly overpowering all the warm cookie and Christmas smells.

When she firmly closed the door against the weather, the ancient knob came off in her hand, making her feel not professional, and not gracious, either.

Not now, she warned the old house, stuffing the knob back in the hole, hoping he hadn’t noticed.

But when she turned back to him, she could see he was a man who noticed everything. He would have noticed even if the knob had not popped back out of the door and landed with a clatter on the floor.

She bent and picked it up, thoroughly flustered. “I don’t charge extra for the rustic charm,” she said breezily, trying to ignore the cold air whooshing through the round hole in the door where the knob should have been.

No smile.

“Ah.” He glanced around her front foyer, took in the small welcoming hallway tree, decorated entirely in tiny white angels,

the garlands of white-bowed boughs that wove their way up the staircase and had, until seconds ago, filled her house with the sharp, fresh scents of pine and Christmas.

He stood directly under the sprig of mistletoe she had suspended from the ceiling, and that made her look at his lips.

And think a distressing thought, entirely inappropriate for an independent professional such as herself, about what they would taste like, and what price a woman would be willing to pay to know that.

Too much. The price would be too much. She was still reeling from her mistake in judgment about Peter. Guessing what a complete stranger's lips might taste like was just proof, as if she needed more, that she was still capable of grave errors.

He frowned. "If you don't operate as an inn at this time of year, do you do all of this decorating for your personal enjoyment?"

"I was expecting guests for the evening." She fought further evidence of her poor judgment—a ridiculous temptation to drop the professional facade and to unburden herself about the disastrous inaugural evening of Holiday Happenings. Though his shoulders looked broad enough to cry on, his eyes did not look capable of sympathy.

His next words made her glad she had kept her confidences. "Do you have any rooms without the, er, Christmas theme?"

"You don't like Christmas." She said it flatly, a statement rather than a question. Given his expression, it was already more than obvious to her he did not like Christmas. And probably not

puppies, love songs or tender movies, either.

Which was good. Very good. So much easier to get through a few hours of temptation—of her own bad decision-making abilities—if the effect of those intoxicating good looks were offset by a vile nature.

What kind of person doesn't like Christmas? Especially with a baby! He practically has an obligation to like Christmas!

The baby gurgled, reached up from under the blanket and inserted a pudgy finger in her mouth.

Nothing in the man's expression softened, but the baby didn't seem to notice.

"Mama," the baby whispered, and laid her head on his shoulder in a way that confirmed what Emma already knew. Her guest might be cynical and Christmas-hating, but she could trust him with her life, just as that baby, now slurping contentedly on her thumb, did.

"Is she wanting her mama?" Emma asked, struck by the backward bonnet again, by the incongruity of this man, seemingly without any kind of softness, being with this baby. *Of course. A mother.* That made her safe from this feeling, hot and liquid, unfurling like a sail catching a wind. He was taken. Her relief, her profound sense of *escape* was short-lived.

"No," he said, and then astonishingly, a flush of red moved up his neck, and Emma saw the tiniest hint of vulnerability in those closed features.

He hesitated, "Unfortunately, that's what she calls me."

Again, Emma felt a tickle of laughter. And again it was cut off before it materialized, because of the unwanted *softness* for him when she thought of him being called Mama. It was a startling contradiction to the forbidding presence of him, ridiculously sweet.

Even though she knew it was none of her business, she *had* to know.

"Where is her mother?"

Something shot through his eyes with such intensity it sucked all the warmth from the room. It was more than sadness, for a moment she glimpsed a soul stripped of joy, of hope. She glimpsed a man lost in a storm far worse than the one that howled outside her door.

"She's dead," he said quietly, and the window that had opened briefly to a tormented soul slammed shut. His voice was flat and calm, his eyes warned her against probing his soul any deeper.

"I'm so sorry," Emma said. "Here, let me take her while you get your coat off."

But when she held out her arms, she realized she was still holding the broken door knob.

He juggled the baby, and took the doorknob with his free hand, his gloved fingers brushing hers just long enough for her to feel the heat beneath those gloves.

Effortlessly, he turned and inserted the knob in the door, jiggled it into place and then turned back to her.

His easy competence made Emma feel more off center,

incompetent, as if her stupid doorknob was sending out messages about her every failing as an innkeeper.

"The coat rack is behind you," she said, and then added formally, as if she was the doorman. "Is there luggage?"

"I hope we won't be staying long enough to need it." He handed the baby to her.

Me, too, Emma thought. The baby was surprisingly heavy, her weight sweet and pliable as if she was made of warm pudding, boneless.

The wind picked that moment to howl and rattle the windows, and it occurred to Emma she might be fighting temptation for more than a few hours. It was quite possible her visitors would be here at least the night. Thankfully she thought of the crib she had found so that the babies who came Christmas Day would have a place to nap.

The baby regarded her warily, scrunching up her face in case terror won out over curiosity.

"How old is she?"

"Fourteen months."

"What's her name?" Emma asked softly, grateful for the baby's distraction against the man removing his jacket to reveal a dark, expensive shirt perfectly tailored to fit over those impossibly broad shoulders, dark trousers that accentuated legs that were long, hard-muscled beneath the fine fabric.

"Tess," he provided.

"Hello, Tess," she crooned. "Welcome to the White Christmas

Inn. I'm Emma."

"The White Christmas Inn?" the man said, "you aren't serious, are you?"

"Didn't you see the sign on the driveway?" Just this morning, she had placed the word *Christmas* over the word *Pond,* the letters of *Christmas* just the teensiest bit squished to make them fit.

"I saw a sign, I assumed it was for the inn, but most of it is covered in snow and ice."

"The White Christmas Inn. Seriously."

He groaned, softly.

"Is there a problem?"

His answer was rhetorical. "Do you ever feel the gods like to have a laugh at the plans of human beings?"

Even though he obviously expected no answer, Emma responded sadly, "Yes. Yes, I do."

The White Christmas Inn.

Ryder Richardson had no doubt the gods *were* enjoying a robust laugh at his expense right now. When he had headed out on the road tonight, he'd had one goal: to escape Christmas entirely. He had packed up his niece, Tess, and that amazing mountain of things that accompanied a traveling baby, with every intention of making it to his lakeside cottage by dark.

The cottage where there would be absolutely no ho-ho-ho, no colorful lights, no carols, no tree, no people and especially no phone. He had deliberately left his cell phone at home. Ryder Richardson could make Scrooge look like a bit player in the bah-

humbug department.

He was not ashamed to admit to himself he just wanted to hide out until it was all over. Until the trees were shredded into landscape pulp, the lights were down, there was not a carol to be heard, and he could walk along a sidewalk without hearing bells or having complete strangers smile at him and wish him a Merry Christmas.

Ryder looked forward to the dreary days of January like a man on a ship watching for a beacon to keep him from the rocks on the darkest night.

In January there would be fewer reminders and fewer calls offering sympathy. The invitations to holiday parties and dinners and events designed to lure him out of his memories and his misery would die down.

In his luggage, he had made a small concession to Christmas. Ryder had a few simple gifts to give Tess. He had a soft stuffed pony in an implausible shade of lavender, new pink suede shoes, for she already shared a woman's absolute delight in footwear, and a small, hardy pianolike toy that he was probably going to regret obtaining within hours of having given it to her.

He had not brought wrapping paper, and probably would not give Tess the gifts on December twenty-fifth, taking advantage of the fact that at fourteen months of age his niece was not aware enough of the concept of Christmas to know the difference.

This would be his year of reprieve. Next year, Tess would be two at Christmas. It wouldn't be so easy to pretend the season

didn't exist. Next year, she would probably have grasped the whole concept of Santa, would *want* things from Ryder. Would he be able to give them to her?

As he turned back from the coat rack, through the open archway from the foyer into the living room, he caught sight of the fire burning brightly in the hearth at the White Christmas Inn, the huge tree glowing, top to bottom, an ethereal shade of white.

Despite steeling himself against all things Christmas, the scene called to him, like the lights of home calling a warrior back to his own land. For a disturbing moment he felt almost pulled toward that room, the tree, the promise it held. *Hope.*

CHAPTER TWO

HOPE. The word burned in Ryder's heart for a second or two, not bright and warm, but painful. Because that was what he was intent on quashing in himself. He was a warrior who had glimpsed the lights of a home he could never go back to.

The socks that hung from the mantel, cheerful, were what triggered the memory.

Without warning—for the memories always came without warning, riding in on a visual clue or a scent or a sound he could not control—a picture flashed in his mind of different socks on a different mantel nearly a year ago. Those socks, bright red, with white fur cuffs, had names on them.

Drew. Tracy. Tess.

Ryder could see his brother, standing in front of those socks, holding the tiny baby way above his head, bringing her down, her round belly to his lips, blowing, the baby gurgling, and Drew looking as happy as Ryder had ever seen his brother look.

A shudder rippled through Ryder, and he looked deliberately away from the socks that hung on the mantel of the White Christmas Inn, picked up the baby bag that he had dropped on the floor, shrugged it over his shoulder.

In a few days, a year would have passed, and Ryder's pain had not been reduced. A reminder about the danger of hope. There was no sense hoping next year would be better. There was

no sense hoping life could ever be what it had been before the fire that had swept through his brother's house early Christmas morning.

"Get the baby," Drew had cried to him, as he'd stumbled out of the guest room, "I'll get Tracy."

Anyone who had not been in a fire could not understand the absolute and disorienting darkness, the heat, the smoke, the chaos intensified by the roar and shriek of it, as if the fire was a living thing, a monster, a crazed animal.

Somehow, Ryder had found the baby, and gotten her outside. Tracy had already been out there, in bad shape, burned, dazed, barely coherent. At first Ryder thought that meant his brother was safe. But then he'd realized Drew was still in there, looking for his wife, not knowing she was out here.

He'd raced back for the door, uncaring that flames roared out of it like it was the mouth of hell. He'd almost made it, too, back in there to find his brother.

But neighbors had pulled him back, four men, and then six, holding him, dodging his fists, absorbing his punches, their urgency to keep him out of there as great as his to go back in. He still woke in the night sometimes, coated in sweat, his heart beating hard, screaming his fury.

Let me go. You don't understand. Let…me…go.

When Ryder thought of that the fury was fresh. If anything, he added to it as time went on. How could he have failed so terribly? How could his strength have failed him when he needed it most?

If he could have shaken off those men, made them understand…

Then, just three months ago, more heartbreak, an intensified sense of failure, as Tracy, all out of bravery, had quit fighting her horrible injuries.

If there was a feeling Ryder hated more than any other it was that one: *powerlessness.* He'd been as powerless to save Tracy as he had been to break free of the men who had kept him from his brother.

Ryder shuddered again. He had put a wall around himself, and instead of letting it come down as time passed, brick by brick he made it stronger. He was ravaged by what had happened, destroyed by it. He could function, but not feel.

He hated it that his armor felt threatened by the fact that, ever so briefly, he had *felt* what the room had to offer. Heard the word. *Hope.* And seen that other word on her front door.

Believe.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes," he said, keeping his voice deliberately cold, protecting the coating of ice that shielded what was left of his heart.

No, he wasn't. He had tried to keep Christmas, its association with his greatest failure, at bay. Instead, at the caprice of fate, here he was at a place that appeared to have more Christmas than the North Pole. If there were no baby to think of, he would put his coat back on and take his chances with the storm.

But then, if there were no baby to think of, he was pretty sure he would have self-destructed already.

"You looked like you saw a ghost," Emma said. "Apparently we have them here, but I haven't seen one yet."

She actually sounded envious that he might have spotted one.

"I don't believe in ghosts," he said curtly. Did she notice the emphasis on *believe?* Because that was the first in a long list of things he did not believe in. He hoped he would not be here long enough to share the full extent of his disillusionment with her.

"Well, I do," she said, a hint of something stubborn in her voice. "I think there are spirits around this old house that protect it and the people in it. And I think there is a spirit of Christmas, too."

And then, having made her stand, she blushed.

He looked at her carefully. Now that she had taken the hat off, he felt much less inclined to ask to speak to her mother. How old would she be? Early twenties, probably. Too young to be running this place, and too old to be believing nonsense.

He replayed her words of earlier. *I usually don't operate as an inn in the winter. I don't charge extra for the rustic charm.*

I not *we.*

She ran a hand through the dark, wild hair revealed by the removal of the awful Santa hat, a gesture that was self-conscious. Her blush was deepening.

Despite the shard of the memory stuck in his heart like broken glass, her hair tried, for the second time, to take down a brick, to tease something out of him. A smile? Only Tess made him smile. Though her hair was worse than Tess's, which was saying

something. His hostess's hair, dark and shiny, was a tangle of dark coils, flattened by the hat, but looking as if they intended to spring back up at any moment.

He was shocked by the slipping of another brick—an impulse to touch her hair, to coax the curls up with his fingertips. He killed the impulse before it even fully formed, but not before he pictured how encouraging the wild disarray of her hair would make her sexy, rather than the adorable image the red socks and red sweater projected.

She was looking at him like a kitten ready to show claws if he chose to argue the spirit of Christmas with her, which he didn't.

If the way she held Tess and crooned to her was any indication, she was exactly as she appeared; soft, wholesome, slightly eccentric, a *believer* in goodness and light and spirits protecting her house and Christmas. Not his type at all.

Even back in the day, before *it* had happened, when he cared about such things, he'd gone for flashier women, whitened teeth, diamond rings, designer clothes. Women who would have scorned this place as hokey, and his hostess for being so naive.

Except, last year, a spectator to the domestic bliss his brother had found, Ryder had thought, briefly, *maybe I want this, too.*

But now he knew he didn't want anything that intensified that feeling of being powerless, and in his mind that's what being open to another person would do, make him weak instead of strong, slowly but surely erode the bricks of his defenses. What was behind that wall was grief and fury so strong he had no doubt

it would destroy him and whoever was close to him, if and when it ever came out.

For Tess's sake, as well as his own, he kept a lid on *feelings.* He knew he had nothing to give anyone; somehow he was hoping his niece would be the exception, though he had no idea how she would be.

"You don't run this place by yourself, do you?" he asked, suddenly needing to know, not liking the idea of being alone with all this sweetness, not trusting himself with it, especially after that renegade impulse to tease something sexy out of her hair.

He hoped, suddenly, for a family-run operation, for parents in the wings, or better yet, a husband. Someone to kill dead this enemy within him, the unexpected sizzle of attraction he felt. Someone he could talk hockey with as the night dragged on, to keep his mind off how little he wanted to be here, and how little fate cared about what he wanted.

Ryder's eyes drifted to her ring finger. Red nail polish, a bit of a surprise, but probably chosen in the spirit of the season, to match the socks. How could he possibly be finding this woman, who stood for everything he was trying to run away from, attractive?

There was no ring on her finger, so he knew the answer to his question even before she answered.

"It's all mine," she said, and her chin lifted proudly. "I inherited the house from my grandmother, restored it, named it the White Pond Inn, and have been operating it on my own ever

since."

"I thought it was the White Christmas Inn," he reminded her dryly.

"Christmas transforms everything," she said with grave dignity, "it makes all things magic, even my humble inn."

Well, she obviously *believed.*

"Uh-huh." He didn't want to get into it. He truly didn't want to know a single thing more about her. He didn't want to *like* the fact that despite her corkscrew hair waiting to pop into action, and despite her falling-off doorknob, she was trying so hard to keep her dignity.

Show me to my room. Please. But somehow, instead, Ryder found himself asking, "What makes a young woman tackle a project like this?" He didn't add, *on her own,* though that was really his question.

Ryder was an architect. He and Drew had drawn up plenty of plans to restore places like this one. Underneath all the cosmetic loveliness, he was willing to bet the abundance of decorations hid what the falling-off door handle had hinted at. Problems. Large and small. Way more than a little scrap of a woman on her own would be up to.

"I'm a dreamer," she said, fiercely unapologetic, and again, in the way she said that, he caught sight of her pride and stubbornness. And her hurt. As if someone—probably a hard-hearted jerk like him—had mocked her for being a dreamer.

Whoo boy. He bit his tongue, because it was obvious to him

this house did not need a dreamer. A carpenter, certainly. Likely an electrician. Probably a plumber.

Despite biting his tongue nearly clear through, his skepticism must have clearly shown on his face because she felt driven to convince him—or maybe herself—that the house *needed* a dreamer.

"I actually saw it for the first time when my grandmother got sick. My mother and she had been, um, estranged, but one of the neighbors called and asked me to come home to help care for her. This house was love at first sight for me. Plus, it had been in our family for generations. When Granny died, I inherited, and I had to figure out a way I could afford to keep it."

That was a warning, if he'd ever heard one. He did not like women who believed in love at first sight. As a man who lived in the wreckage of dreams, he did not like dreamers nor all their infuriating optimism.

Aside from that, the words told him an even more complete truth, whether he wanted to know it or not, and he didn't. He saw the glitter of some defense in her eyes that told him things he would have been just as happy not knowing.

Hurt. Clues in what she was telling him. Something missing in her family, that had filled her with longing? Despite the happy Christmas costume, there was a reason a woman like that took on a place like this. And he was willing to bet it had little to do with family heritage, and a whole lot to do with a broken heart. She had decided loving a house was easier than loving a person.

He heartily approved, though he wondered if a dreamer could be pragmatic enough to pull that off.

This ability to *see* people more clearly than they wanted to be seen, and certainly more clearly than he wanted to see them, was one of the things Ryder hated since the fire. He sensed things, often seeing *past* what people said, to some truth about them. It was a cruel irony, since he was desperately trying not to care about anything, that he could see things he had never seen before, things that threatened the walls and armor of the defenses that kept some things in him, and some things out.

Pre-fire, Ryder had been a typical man, happily superficial, involved totally in himself. Building a business with his brother, hanging out with his buddies, playing in a semi-serious hockey league, and never getting even semi-serious with any one woman. That had been his life: a happy, carefree place. A guy zone of self-centered hedonism.

He had never been deep. *Insensitive* probably would have described him nicely, blissfully unaware there was any other way to be.

Now, he could walk by a complete stranger, and see their tragedies in the lines around their mouths and the shadows in their eyes. It was as if he had become a member of a secret club of sadness. *Not* seeing had been a blessing he had not appreciated at the time.

A little more than a year ago, Ryder certainly wouldn't have ever been able to spot the hurt hiding in the shadows of Emma's

eyes. He realized, uncomfortably, that even with those shadows, her eyes were amazing.

A part of him, purely masculine, acknowledged that physically Emma was exquisite. Her features were small and perfect, her nose snubbed up a touch at the end, her lips formed plump bows of sensuality. And he was not sure he had ever quite seen that shade of eye color before, soft gray-green, moss and mist.

Despite the outfit—was it deliberately chosen to hide her assets? Another thing he probably would not have guessed pre-fire—he could see she was delicately curved, unconsciously sensuous.

Annoyed with himself, he realized it was the first time since the fire he had allowed the faint stir of attraction toward a member of the opposite sex to penetrate his barriers.

Strange it would be her. The women he had been attracted to in the past were as superficial as he was. He had liked women who wore clingy clothes, and push-up bras, who glittered with makeup and jewelry, and who intoxicated with expensive scents.

Emma had probably wiggled by his defenses simply because he would have never thought to erect that particular wall against someone like her: makeup-free, tangled hair, lumpy jeans, grandma sweater. And defiantly set on letting him know she *believed.*

Still, regardless of how she had done it, it had happened. That faint stirring of something, that felt like life. Trying to call him back.

To a place, he reminded himself sternly, that was gone.

He shut down what he was feeling, quickly, but he could not shut down the acknowledgment that it had been a first. He did not feel ready for firsts: to laugh again, to feel again.

Because somehow even contemplating the possibility of firsts, of returning, felt like some kind of betrayal, as if it minimized who Drew and Tracy had been and what they had meant to him. And maybe because it would require him to do what could not be done: forgive himself.

So, in a different lifetime, when he had been a different man, Ryder might have followed that thread of attraction to see where it would lead.

But he already knew Emma was hurt, had already seen secrets in her soft eyes that she probably would rather he not have known.

And the man he was now was so damaged that he knew he could only hurt her more. His hardness felt as though it would take all that was wondrous about her—such as this childlike delight in Christmas—and curdle it, like vinegar hitting milk.

It was all the smells in here, pine and pumpkin, all the decorations, her ridiculous hat making her look like an emissary from Santa, that were bringing up these uncomfortable thoughts. For the most part, Ryder was successful at warding off the worst of it.

Still, that all this had flooded in within moments of entering this place troubled him. He would probably be better off sleeping in his car than taking refuge here.

He'd known as soon as he stepped under the roof of her porch that this place posed a peculiar kind of danger to his armored heart. As if to confirm that suspicion, he had spotted the letters, peeking out from under the boughs of the wreath.

Believe.

The sign had made him want to head back to his car, find shelter elsewhere. *Believe in what?*

If he'd been by himself, he would have gone back to the car, found a pub, preferably with a pool table and a big-screen TV, to while away the hours in before the road reopened.

But he wasn't by himself, and the fact that he wasn't changed his ability to choose.

Every single decision Ryder made had to be run through the filter of what was best for Tess. Obviously it wasn't a place with a pool table, however comforting he would have found a rowdy male environment.

What was best for Tess? In the long run? He knew people wondered if he could possibly be the best guardian for her. Some of the bolder ones had even hinted that the most loving thing to do would be to find her a real family, a mother who could actually get a comb through her hair, who would enjoy the intricacies of those silly, frilly, small dresses.

But his brother and Tracy had wanted him to have her. He'd been stunned that they'd had a will, that they had appointed him guardian.

Despite the fact he knew himself to be terribly flawed, Ryder

could not ever let her go. Tess was what was left of his brother. He was fierce in his protection of her. He hired a nanny who looked after the baby details—hair, baths, clothes—but Mrs. Markle had abandoned him for Christmas to be with her own family.

His initial awkwardness with the baby had quickly given way to absolute devotion. What was left of his heart belonged firmly to that little spark of spirit that represented all that was left of Drew and Tracy's great love for each other.

"I can show you to a room, or take you through to the kitchen to get something to eat first."

Tess had nursed a bottle in the car, but could use something solid. But Ryder realized he was also starving. And exhausted from fighting with the roads. If he had something to eat and a nap, he would be ready to leave here the second there was a break in the weather and the roads reopened.

"Something to eat sounds good." He could feel his own caution, as if even agreeing to have something to eat was tampering with forces he was not ready to tamper with.

"It must have been a nightmare out there," his hostess said, still lugging Tess, leading him down a narrow hallway that ended in a swinging door. She gave it a push with her hip.

"A nightmare," he agreed. "Hell, only the cold version, decorated in white." *Something like her inn.*

She didn't miss the reference to white decorations, and he saw her take his comment like a blow, as a personal insult. Too sensitive. Was that why she'd been hurt?

“Nothing against white decorations,” he said curtly, his insincerity just making everything worse.

Vinegar and milk, he told himself.

He wanted to say he wasn’t hungry, after all. Wanted to retreat to a room, hoping it wouldn’t be too overwhelmingly Chrismasified, but the truth was, now that he was not battling his way through terrible conditions, he was ravenous.

And even if he wasn’t, the baby had to eat something out of one of those little jars of mash he carried with him.

His initial relief that the kitchen was an oasis of “not decorated” evaporated. The smells were intense in this room, as was the atmosphere of country cheer and charm: sunshine-yellow walls, white cabinets, old gray linoleum floors polished to high gloss. But, like the door handle falling off, he could see hints of problems, frost on the inside of the windows, a tap dripping.

A huge plank harvest table dominated the room and was covered in platters and platters of cookies.

On a closer look, there were cookies shaped like trees, and cookies frosted in pink, Santa cookies, and chocolate-dipped cookies, gingerbread men and gingerbread houses.

“You weren’t kidding that you were expecting guests,” he said. “How many?”

“I was hoping for a hundred.”

He shot her a wary look at the disappointment in her voice. “You were expecting a hundred people here tonight?”

“The opening night of Holiday Happenings,” she said, and he

did his best to remain expressionless at how horrifying he found that name. She took his silence, unfortunately, as an invitation to go on, even though her voice had begun to wobble.

"There's a pond out back. There was going to be skating. And bonfires. A neighbor was going to bring his team of horses. Clydesdales." Something was shining behind her eyes.

He thought, again, of the kind of women he had once dated. Five-star meals, gifts of diamonds, evenings that ended in hot tubs. Not Holiday Happenings kind of women.

Emma's disappointment was palpable. He hoped, uneasily and fervently, she wasn't going to cry. Nothing felt like a threat to him as much as a woman's tears. Tess already knew, and used it to her advantage at every opportunity.

"Sorry," he said, gruffly, whether he meant it or because he hoped saying something—anything—could curb her distress, he wasn't sure.

"Things will be back to normal by tomorrow," she said, "Holiday Happenings is going to happen."

This was said fiercely as if she was challenging him—or the gods—to disagree with her. He wasn't going to, but the gods seemed to enjoy a challenge like that one.

It was Tess who took Emma's mind off her weather woes. Apparently the baby was tired of looking at the embarrassment of riches around her, and tired of the adult chatter.

She began squealing and pointing at various cookies and nearly wiggled herself right out of Emma's arms.

"WA DAT."

"Want that?" Emma guessed, mercifully distracted. "She's hungry."

"Or could squeeze in a cookie after demolishing a ten-course meal," he said, thanking Tess for evaporating the tears that had shone so briefly behind those eyes.

"Can she have one, daddy? Or does she have to have healthy stuff first?"

He frowned. Let it go? He wasn't going to be here long enough for it to matter, was he? Correcting her meant revealing something more of the private life, fresh with tragedy, that he kept so guarded.

On the other hand, revealing the fact he was not Tess's father seemed safer than returning to the possibility the weather could ruin her plans for Holiday Happenings.

If he never heard the words *Holiday Happenings* again, he would be just as happy. It was worth it, even if it revealed a little of himself.

He realized he had not introduced himself.

"I'm Ryder Richardson," he said, not trying to disguise his reluctance, "I'm Tess's uncle. Her guardian."

"Oh."

It asked questions, none of which he intended to answer. He stuck out his hand, a diversionary tactic to stall questions and to keep her mind off her failed evening.

She juggled the baby, and took his hand. As soon as he felt

her hand in his, he knew he'd made a mistake. Her hand slipped inside his, a perfect fit, softness intermingled with surprising strength.

He felt the *zing* of the physical contact, steeled himself against it.

She felt something, too, because she froze for a moment, stared up into his eyes, blinked with startled awareness. And then she pulled her hand away, rapidly.

His eyes went to her lips. Once upon a time, a long time ago, when he was a different man in a different life, he had known other diversionary tactics. Most of them involved lips. His and hers.

Now as profoundly committed to taking his wandering mind off lips as he was to taking Emma's mind off personal questions and the weather, he held out his arms, and Emma gave Tess back to him.

Babies were the grand diversion when it came to women. One look at Tess's hair should take Emma's mind irrevocably off her crushed hopes for the evening, and maybe off that sizzling moment of awareness that had just passed between them.

He propped Tess on the edge of the plank table, removed the blanket, pulled Tess's little limbs from the car coat he'd had her in. Last he fumbled with the ridiculously hard-to-reach snap on the stupid snow hat that he had put on the baby out of a sense of wanting to do the responsible thing before they left on their road trip.

That was the worry part. A snow hat inside the car. In case. Well, that, and to cover the mess of her hair in case they stopped anywhere along the way. The cop might have even looked at him differently if he had spotted the baby's hair.

If you can't even look after her hair, how can you be trusted with the larger picture?

"I hate this hat," he muttered, though what he really hated was that question.

"Why's that?"

"It never seems to go on right."

"Ah." It was a strangled sound.

Ryder shot her a look. She was smiling, biting back a giggle.

He glared at her. He disliked merriment nearly as much as Christmas, especially when it was at his expense and made him feel self-conscious about his baby skills. "Is something funny?" he asked, annoyed.

She held up a finger, letting him know that soon she would be in control of herself. Really, she looked like an evil elf, gasping. The more she tried to stop laughing, the more she couldn't, as if his disapproval was making her nervous. Which was good.

"You…have…it…on…backwards."

He could look at it in a different way. Not that she was laughing at him, but that he'd succeeded. The sparkle of tears were gone from her eyes, replaced, that quickly, with the sparkle of laughter.

Only he hadn't really succeeded. Because he could clearly see

she didn't look like an evil elf, after all. The laughter chased some shadow from her eyes, making them even prettier, and the smile made him even more aware of the sensuous lilt of those puffy lips.

He'd been here less than ten minutes, long enough to know he hated the White Christmas Inn and everything about it.

Ryder looked away from her, frowning. He stepped back from Tess and studied the hat. "I'll be damned. It *is* on backwards. No wonder it was so hard to work with."

A respected architect and he couldn't get a hat on right. He was learning babies were an exercise in humility. Experimentally, he turned the headgear around the right way, admired it, allowed a small whisper of pleasure at this tiny discovery.

"It was the placement of the pom-pom that threw me," he decided gravely.

"Of course," she said, just as gravely.

"Now I won't have to buy another hat," he said, allowing that little whisper of pleasure to deepen.

He saw Emma's look, and was astounded at how his pride was stung at her misinterpretation. "Not because I can't afford another one," he said sharply, "because you cannot imagine how terrible it is being the sole man shopping in the baby department."

Tess was crankily trying to pull that hat back off.

"It doesn't look like she likes hats, anyway," Emma said.

"Until she lets me comb her hair, she wears hats." He took

the hat back off and stepped aside, letting Emma see for the first time what was underneath.

If she started laughing at him again, he was going to pick up the baby and head back into the storm, knock on the door of the first house in Willowbrook that had no Christmas decorations and beg for sanctuary from the storm.

But Emma didn't laugh. Her gasp of dismay was almost worse.

Hey, it's not as if your hair is all that different.

But Emma's hair *was* different from Tess's. Emma's curls looked as if she had *tried,* maybe too vigorously, to tame them. He felt that inexplicable urge to touch again, focused on his niece's hair instead.

Tess's white blonde hair did not look as if it had been combed since the day she was born, even though it had only been two days. Her hair looked like it belonged to a monster baby.

It formed fuzzy dreadlocks and tortured corkscrews. There was a clump at the back that looked like it might house mice, and two distinct hair horns stood up on either side of her head.

"No nanny for the last two days," he explained, feeling the deep sting of his own ineptitude. "And in Tess's world, Uncle is not allowed to touch the goldilocks."

Emma looked skeptical, as if he might be making up a story to explain away his own negligence.

"I know," he said dryly. "It's shameful. A twenty pound scrap of baby controlling a full grown man, but there you have it."

Emma still looked skeptical, so he demonstrated. He reached

out with one finger. He touched Tess's hair, feather-light, barely a touch at all.

The baby inhaled a deep breath, and exhaled a blood-curdling shriek, as if he dropped a red-hot coal down her diaper. He removed his finger, the shriek stopped abruptly, like a sentence stopped in the middle. Tess regarded him with her most innocent look.

"Ha," he said, moved his finger toward her, and away, shriek, stop, shriek, stop. Soon, he stopped as soon as her mouth opened wide, so she was making O's and closing them, like a fish.

Emma snorted with laughter. Not that he wanted to get her laughing again or explore the intrigue of shadows that danced away when she laughed, and flitted back when she didn't.

Again, he wondered what he was doing. He had not wanted Emma to cry. He wanted this even less. *Firsts.*

There was something tempting about being with someone who did not know his history, as if he could pretend to be a brand-new man. He contemplated that, being free, even for a moment a man unburdened, a man with no history.

But he wasn't those things and Ryder hated himself for thinking he should be free of the mantle he carried. His brother had died because he was, quite simply, not enough.

The fact that Emma could tempt him to feel otherwise made him angry at her as well as at himself, as irrational as that might have been.

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