



SO HOW MANY households does that make?” Kade Delgado shifted his sleeping toddler in his arms, but Jericho snored on.

His buddy James Carmichael tapped a pen to his notebook. “Fifteen, including seven single moms with eighteen kids under the age of ten.” He looked around the trio of cowboys. “Can we handle that many?”

“We can if Kade’s brothers are in.” Garret Morrison raised his eyebrows at Kade.

“Not sure if Sawyer is sticking around.” The onset of winter might send his kid brother south, and the weatherman had called for an early storm. A glance out the window proved the forecast correct. A swirl of blowing snow peppered the glass, faintly illuminated by the lighted coffee shop sign.

Man, Kade should have come to Saddle Springs for groceries yesterday, but an injured heifer had kept him tied

up. Or he should have denied his buddies' invitation to coffee while he was in town anyway. This could have been handled by email, couldn't it? He really needed to get going. The mountain road would be beyond sketchy and all the way to ugly soon — if it wasn't already.

"I'll have to double-check with both of them, but what's the alternative? Let some kid wake up with no gifts on Christmas morning?" Kade's arms tightened around his young son. "Let some old man or young mom struggle to shovel themselves out after a snowstorm — which, by the way, we're getting the mother of right now? Let's wrap this up."

Garret nodded. "Break them up geographically. I'll take the ones on the east side of town. That includes—" he leaned closer to James's notebook and circled part of the page with his finger "—Granny Talcott and the Yang family. Carmen Haviland. A couple more."

Geographically? Kade shook his head but didn't voice his thoughts. It only made sense, but that gave him the Mackenzies. They'd been reclusive even before their granddaughter, Cheri, had skipped town less than a week prior to her wedding to Kade and never looked back. Her choice sent her grandparents into a spin they hadn't recovered from in over six years. Neither had Kade. Not really.

He forced his mind back to the cozy coffee shop and nuzzled the top of Jericho's tousled head. It was past time to get all the way over Cheri. To man up and give her grand-

parents a good dose of Jesus' love. Mend some fences, literally and otherwise.

James angled a look at him. "That okay, Kade?"

"Sure." Maybe he could sic one of his brothers on Cheri's grandparents. "Look, I'll be back in town in a few days, but I really need to get Jer home and check the cattle before this storm blows in for real." He poked his chin toward James as he rose. "Send me an email."

The two-year-old struggled in his arms and rubbed sleep out of his eyes. "Daddy?"

"Yes, bucko?"

"I hungry."

The middle-aged barista bustled over carrying a plate of treats. "Here, little man. Let Auntie Abigail give you a cookie. Daddy won't mind."

Kade chuckled. "You're sneaky, Abigail." He slid Jericho to the floor and reached for his cowboy hat. Abigail's rules included hats off inside Java Springs. "Only one, bucko. We'll have supper when we get back to the ranch."

"Tanku," Jericho announced, helping himself to a cookie and giving Abigail a shy smile.

She held the plate toward Kade. "Have a couple for the road. I think I'll lock up behind you guys, even though it's a little early. I imagine everyone in Saddle Springs will haul in an extra armload of firewood and hunker down for the storm."

"I don't mind if I do." Kade plucked a pumpkin cookie studded with cranberries off the plate. "Thanks. These are great."

She turned toward the other guys as they shrugged into their jackets. Kade pulled out his key fob, started his truck with a press of the button, then knelt to tug Jericho's parka around the boy before zipping it.

Behind him, the coffee shop door swung open with a jingle of bells and a blast of Arctic air. He glanced over his shoulder and froze as solid as the Montana night.

Framed in the doorway stood Cheri Mackenzie. The woman couldn't be anyone else. Her long blond hair, anchored with a dark knit hat, whipped in the snow-swirled wind, and a black wool coat covered her frame. Those blue eyes lassoed his like he was a faltering calf. The force of the shock was so great it took a second to realize a little girl who looked like her clung to her hand.

Didn't that just figure?

Kade rocked back on his heels and stood, pulling the brim of his cowboy hat down a smidgen. "Cheri. What a surprise."

James strode over and pulled the carved wooden door shut, but the newcomer didn't even seem to notice.

Maybe everyone else thought it was warmer in here without winter howling in, but it made no difference to Kade. The sight of her after all these years reminded him his heart had moved to the North Pole... and not to the cozy den housing Santa's workshop.

He hoisted Jericho into his arms and tore his gaze from hers long enough to nod to his friends. "See you."

"Can I pour you a coffee? Maybe get you some cookies?" Abigail bustled closer. "I was going to close up, but I can stay

another half hour. Get you warmed up before you head back into this.”

Cheri's eyes went from Kade's to Abigail's and back again. “My car is stuck.”

Garret reached for his gloves. “Where about, ma'am? We can shovel you out. Get you on your way.”

“It kind of slid off the highway when I turned into town.” She bit her lip. “I'll need a tow truck, I think.”

“Sully's gone down to Missoula early for Thanksgiving.” Abigail glanced between the men with a worried frown. “And Danny's got a broken leg. I don't know as there's someone else who can drive that rig.”

“Can haul it out with the tractor if needed,” said Garret.

James thumbed toward the darkened window “That's a job best done in daylight.”

Everyone turned to Kade. Why, what did he have to do with this? Nothing. Nothing at all. Cheri had washed her hands of him and, after wallowing in disbelief and anger for a few weeks — okay, make that months — he'd washed his right back. He wasn't getting involved in anything within ten miles of Cheri Mackenzie ever again. In fact, he wouldn't even need to help out her grandparents for the Cowboy Santa project now that she was here. She could take care of them.

Except... didn't the mandate include single moms? But she probably wasn't single. Her husband had likely stayed by the car and sent her in to make a phone call.

Kade didn't have to lift a finger to help her. He swung Jericho to his left hip. “Sorry to hear of your troubles.” Other

than that they served her right. Being stuck in a snowbank was nothing compared to what she'd done to him.

"What brings you back to Saddle Springs?" Abigail asked.

Kade stared at Cheri, eyebrows raised. Wasn't that the question they all wanted the answer to? Other than Garret, who hadn't lived here back then.

Her gaze darted to his then back to Abigail. "Grandpa needs me. He fell and broke some ribs a few days ago and can't really manage the chores."

Cheri was a hundred pounds at most, wearing boots and soaking wet. Didn't look like she'd put on any weight in the past six years. Unless she'd been doing some serious working out, she couldn't toss bales any more than Chester could. And weren't her grandparents down to two or three horses?

He sucked in his bottom lip. So much for the Mackenzies being off his list. Unless there really was a Mr. Cheri somewhere, but she kept saying *I* and *me*. Not *us* and *we*. Dead giveaway there.

"Your grandparents' spread is halfway up River Road, right?" put in James. "Kade is going right past on his way to Eaglecrest. He can probably drop you and your daughter off, and we can dig your car out tomorrow when the snow lets up."

"I couldn't ask."

Kade choked back a snort. She didn't have to, not with his buddies and Abigail being ever so helpful. His conscience bit hard. He'd forgiven her, hadn't he? If not, he'd at least moved on, in a manner of speaking. Married Daniela. Been widowed,

which was only another way to leave a guy standing there in his sock feet with his hat off, trying to sort out what had happened. And through it all, God had quietly smoothed out rough places in his life and filled the dry creek beds.

He gave a curt nod. "We can do that. Like James says, I'm going right past anyway." Because half an hour ago, he'd signed on to fulfill God's mandate to help the widows and fatherless in their distress. Wasn't it like God to make him start with Cheri Mackenzie?



THE WARM GLOW from the windows of the coffee shop where she'd hung out so often as a teen had burned a welcoming beacon to Cheri as she struggled up the street, towing her daughter through snow that seemed to deepen even in the three blocks from the highway turnoff. It had seemed cozy and welcoming right until she'd stepped inside and seen Kade Delgado. Holding a toddler.

Then the Montana winter wind swirled around her heart once again. What had she been thinking, coming home? That she could keep on sneaking through town to the ranch as she'd done occasionally over the years? That she could hide out there for a month or two, helping her grandparents, with

neither the nosy town of Saddle Springs nor the Delgados at Eaglecrest Ranch up the road any the wiser?

Now Abigail Evening crouched in front of her daughter, offering her a cookie. Harmony whispered a thank you as she accepted.

Cheri took a deep breath. "I'll get a room at the Hats Off Motel. If it's still in business." Not that she wanted to. Not when Grandpa and Grandma were expecting her tonight, but it had to be better than spending twenty minutes in the cab of Kade's truck.

All eyes stared at her.

"But, Mama..." Harmony looked up at her, tears catching on the ends of her eyelashes.

"I can drive you." Kade's words were polite enough, but there was only steel in those brown eyes. "Chester can bring you down to get your car in a day or two. We'll leave a note for Sully and the State Patrol so they know it's not abandoned." He poked his chin toward the door. "Truck's already running just outside. Ready?"

She'd never be prepared, but she nodded anyway. "Thanks."

"That's settled, then." Abigail beamed like she'd directed the Helena Symphony. Maybe she thought she had.

Kade pushed the door open and held it, forcing Cheri to brush past him. Even with the snow battering her face, the scent she smelled was all Kade. Horses. Leather. And a hint of woody aftershave. Memories flooded her, memories she

shoved aside. He had a kid. He was married. Off limits... not that she was exactly free herself.

The other two cowboys came out behind them, slapping backs and promising to keep in touch. And here she'd thought it was women who had hen parties.

Kade opened the passenger door of the big black Chevy idling at the curb then the door behind it. "Hop in," he said to Harmony, still holding his little guy. Always the gentleman. He shut the doors behind them both then rounded the truck and tucked his boy into the car seat. A minute later he was in the driver's seat. "Need anything from your car? Suitcase? Booster, maybe?"

"That would be helpful. Thank you."

A few minutes later, her bags in the truck bed, Kade flipped on the four-wheel drive and pointed the truck west across the bridge and up the mountain road. Swirling snow blocked visibility, but Cheri relaxed. At least she didn't have to drive in this mess anymore. She could trust Kade.

"So... your daughter." Kade flicked a glance into the rearview mirror.

Some wouldn't believe she wasn't Kade's child, but he knew. She knew. "Her name is Harmony. She'll be six in April." Let him do the math.

He shot her a tight glance barely discernible in the glow of the truck's instrument panel. "Who's her father?"

Yep, he'd done the math. Harmony had been born nine months after the wedding that hadn't happened. Cheri shook her head. She wasn't ready to go there with Kade. Dredge

open the whole mess from that horrible summer. "Your son looks a lot like you."

His lips tightened. "His name is Jericho."

Jericho. Kade had always liked that name. Planned to name his first son that since he'd been a teen. Memories of long kisses in the apple orchard amid glorious fragrant blossoms blocked out the blowing snow for just a moment. They'd shared their hopes and promises and dreams. Until she'd ruined everything.

She blinked the dark night back into focus. Flakes stabbed at the windshield as the four-by-four rounded one more curve in the climb out of Saddle Springs. "Congratulations," she whispered. "I hope you're very happy."

The truck slid a little and Kade's gloved hands tightened on the wheel. Was the grim set of his chin because of the road conditions, the shock of seeing her again... or because his life wasn't full of joy?

The gates of Paradise Creek Ranch ghosted from the darkness, and Kade turned his truck to crawl down the long drive. Cheri couldn't help the worry that he wouldn't make it back out again, but he was a good driver, and the truck seemed nearly new. She dared to breathe again when the lights of the old ranch house came into view.

"Here you go." Kade lifted the bags out of the back, set them on the porch, and brushed a couple of inches of snow off them.

"Thanks." She helped Harmony down as the door opened and Grandma peered out.

“Thank goodness you made it!”

Cheri wrapped her grandmother in a hug. “More like thank Kade. My car is stuck in town, but we can get it in a day or two.”

Grandma's eyebrows shot up. “Kade Delgado?”

“Ma'am.” He tipped his hat as he turned away. “I'll be on my way home now.”

She flinched as though he'd struck her. “You can't.”

Kade swung back toward Grandma. “Pardon me?”

“Chester is listening to the scanner. There's an avalanche across the road at mile eighteen, by the hairpin curve. Won't be anyone getting through tonight. Took down all the lines, too.”

He opened his mouth, snapped it shut again, and stared at Cheri, his gaze burning into hers for a long moment. “It's too far back to town.”

It had taken them nearly an hour to crawl the twenty-minute trip. There'd been a lot of silence that matched the weather, past chilly and on to deep freeze. And now Grandma was suggesting *what* exactly?

Kade's gaze swung to Grandma. “May I borrow Chester's snowmobile?”

“It's broke down. He ordered parts last week. You and your boy will need to stay the night, I guess.”

Cheri winced at the graceless words, but Grandma was right. If the road up to Eaglecrest was blocked, he didn't have any choice. “Harmony can sleep with me tonight. That will

leave the other bedroom for Kade and Jericho. Maybe it will all look better in daylight." She could only hope.

From the truck came the bellow of an unhappy toddler. Still Kade stood, looking from one to the other. Then he pulled a cell phone out of his pocket, glanced at it, rolled his eyes, and shoved it back in. There'd never been decent coverage deep in this valley.

"I'd be obliged, ma'am. Thank you."

Wait. What? Just like that she'd be spending another twelve hours or more in the same house as Kade Delgado?

No, please, Lord. Hadn't she been punished enough?

THE
COWBOY'S
Christmas Reunion

Releases Fall 2018!