

One

A blistering cold day in early November

It had snowed overnight and a thick white blanket seemed to cover the land as far as the eye could see. The Denver weather report said the temperature would drop to ten below by mid-day and would stay that way through most of the night. It was the kind of cold you could feel deep in your bones, the kind where your breath practically froze upon exhale.

He loved it.

Riley Westmoreland opened the door to his truck and, before getting inside, paused to take in the land he owned. *Riley's Station* was the name he'd given his one-hundred-acre spread seven years ago, on his twenty-fifth birthday. He had designed the ranch house himself and had helped in the building of it, proudly hammering the first nail into the lumber. He was mighty pleased with the massive two-story structure that sat smack in the center of his snow-covered land.

He was probably the only one in his family who welcomed

the snowstorms each year. He thought the snow was what made Denver the perfect place to be in the winter and why his home had fireplaces in all five of the bedrooms, as well as in the living room and family room. There was nothing like curling up before a roaring fire or looking out the window to see the snowflakes fall from the sky, something he'd been fascinated with even as a child. He could recall being out in the thick snow with his brothers and cousins building snowmen. These days he enjoyed moving around the mountains on his snowmobile or going skiing in Aspen.

Riley got into the truck and after settling his body on the leather seat he snapped the seat belt in place. There really was no need for him to go into the office since he could work from home. But he had wanted to get out, breathe in the cold, fresh air and feel the chill in his bones. Besides, he did have an important appointment at noon.

Since his oldest brother, Dillon, had slowed down now that his wife, Pam, was close to her delivery date, a lot of the projects on Dillon's plate at their family-owned business, Blue Ridge Land Management, fell on Riley's shoulders since he was the next man in charge of the Fortune 500 company. The next thing on the agenda was the planning of the employees' holiday party next month.

The event planner that had handled their social functions for the past ten years had retired and before Riley had taken over the project, Dillon had hired Imagine, a local event planning company that opened in town less than a year ago. The owner of Imagine, a woman by the name of Alpha Blake, had put together a charity event that Dillon's wife, Pam, had attended over the summer. Pam had been so impressed with all the detailed work Imagine had done that she passed the woman's name to Dillon. As far as Riley was concerned, you couldn't come any more highly recommended than that. Dillon trusted his wife's judgment in all things.

Riley was about to start the ignition when his cell phone buzzed. He pulled the phone off his side belt. "Yes?"

"Mr. Westmoreland?"

He lifted a brow, not recognizing the ultrarich, feminine voice but definitely liking how it sounded. He figured this had to be a business call since none of the women he dated would refer to him as "Mr. Westmoreland."

"Yes, this is Riley Westmoreland. How can I help you?"

"This is Alpha Blake. We have a noon appointment at your office, but I have a flat tire and had to pull off to the side of the road. Unfortunately, I'm going to be late."

He nodded. "Have you called for road service?"

"Yes, and they said they should be here in less than thirty minutes."

Don't count on it, he thought, knowing how slow road service could be this time of the year. "Where's your location, Ms. Blake?"

"I'm on Winterberry Road, about a mile from the Edgewater intersection. There's a market not far away, but it didn't appear to be open when I drove past earlier."

"And chances are it won't be open today. Fred Martin owns that market and never opens the day after a bad snowstorm," he said.

He knew her exact location now. "Look, you're not far from where I am. I'll call my personal road service company to change your tire. In the meantime, I'll pick you up and we can do a lunch meeting at McKay's instead of meeting at my office, since McKay's is closer. And afterward, I can take you back to your car. The tire will be changed by then."

"I—I don't want to put you to any trouble."

"You won't. I know you and Dillon have gone over some ideas for the party, but since I'll be handling things from here on out, I need to be briefed on what's going on. Usually my administrative assistant handles such matters, but she's out

on maternity leave and this party is too important to hand off to anyone else.”

And what he didn't bother to say because he was certain Dillon had done so already was that this would be the fortieth anniversary of the company his father and uncle had founded. This was not just a special event for the employees, but was important to everyone in the Westmoreland family.

“All right, if you're sure it won't be an inconvenience,” she said, breaking into his thoughts.

“It won't be, and I'm on my way.”

Alpha Blake tightened her coat around her, feeling totally frustrated. What did a person who had been born in sunny Florida know about the blistering cold of Denver, especially when it had snowed all night and the roads and everything else were covered with white?

But she was so determined to keep her noon appointment with Riley Westmoreland that she'd made a mess of things. Not only would she be late for their appointment, but because of her flat tire they would have to change the location of the meeting and Mr. Westmoreland would be the one driving her there. This was totally embarrassing when she had been trying to make a good impression. Granted, she'd already been hired by Dillon Westmoreland, but when his secretary called last week to say that she would be working with the next man in charge at Blue Ridge, namely Dillon's brother, Riley, she had felt the need to make a good impression on him, as well.

She turned up the heat in her car. Even with a steady stream of hot air coming in through the car vents, she still felt cold, too cold, and wondered if she would ever get used to the Denver weather. Of course it was too late to think about that now. It was her first winter here, and she didn't have any choice but to grin and bear it. When she'd moved, she'd felt that getting as far away from Daytona Beach as she could was essential to her peace of mind, although her friends thought

she needed to have her head examined. Who in her right mind would prefer blistering cold Denver to sunny Daytona Beach? Only a person wanting to start a new life and put a painful past behind her.

Her attention was snagged when an SUV pulled off the road to park in front of her. The door swung open and long, denim-clad, boot-wearing legs appeared before a man stepped out of the truck and glanced her way. She met his gaze through the windshield and couldn't help the heart-piercing moment when she literally forgot to breathe. Walking toward her car was a man who was so dangerously masculine, so heart-stoppingly virile, that her brain went momentarily numb.

He was tall, and the Stetson on his head made him appear taller. But his height was secondary to the sharp handsomeness of the features beneath the brim of his hat. There was the coffee-and-cream color of his skin, his piercing dark brown eyes, a perfectly shaped nose, his full lips and a sculpted chin.

And she couldn't bypass his shoulders, massive and powerful-looking. It was hard to believe, with the temperature being what it was, that he seemed comfortable braving the harsh elements with a cowhide jacket instead of a heavy coat. It was in the low teens, and he was walking around like it was in the high sixties.

Her gaze slid all over him as he moved his long limbs toward her vehicle in a walk that was so agile and self-assured, she almost envied the confidence he exuded with every step. Her breasts suddenly peaked, and she could actually feel blood rushing through her veins. She didn't have to guess about what was happening to her, but still, she was surprised. This was the first time she'd reacted to a man since her breakup with Eddie.

The man made it to her car and tapped on the window. She all but held her breath as she pressed the button to roll it down. "Riley Westmoreland?" She really didn't have to ask since he favored his brother, Dillon.

“Yes. Alpha Blake?” he responded, offering her his hand through the open window while looking at her with what she thought was cool and assessing interest.

“Yes.” She took his hand and even through her leather gloves, she thought it felt warm. “Glad to meet you, Mr. Westmoreland.”

“Riley,” he corrected, smiling, and she felt her insides melt. He had a gorgeous pair of eyes. Dark and alluring. “The pleasure is all mine,” he added. “I’ve only heard exceptional things about you and your work. Both Dillon and Pam speak highly of you, Alpha. I hope it’s okay for me to call you Alpha.”

“Thank you, and yes, that’s fine.”

“I’ve made all the arrangements with my road service. Keep your emergency lights on and leave your car keys under your seat,” he said, taking a step back so she could get out of the vehicle.

She nervously gnawed her bottom lip. “Will it be safe to do that?”

He chuckled. “Yes, days like this keep thieves inside.” He opened the car door for her. “Ready to get inside my truck?”

“Yes.” She placed her key under the seat and then grabbed her purse and messenger bag. Tightening her coat around her, she walked quickly to the side of his truck. He was there to open the door and she appreciated finding the inside warm and cozy. It smelled like him, a scent that was masculine and sexy. She blushed, wondering why she was thinking such things, especially about a man she would be working for.

He closed the door just seconds before his cell phone rang, and she looked at the outside mirror as he spoke on the phone while moving around the front of the truck to get in the driver’s side.

Opening the door, he climbed inside and proceeded to adjust the seat to accommodate his long legs before snapping his seat belt in place. The call had ended. He put his phone

away and glanced over at her with a smile. She thought she would melt right then and there. “Warm?” he asked in a voice that was throatier than anything she’d ever heard.

If only you knew, she fought back saying. Instead her response was a simple “Yes. Thanks for asking.”

“No problem.” He then glanced into the rearview mirror before easing the truck onto the road.

The ensuing silence gave Riley the impression the woman was shy. And with her wrapped in a bulky coat and standing no more than five foot three, he figured she was probably short and stocky. He preferred tall, slender and curvy, but she had a pretty face that was eye-catching. She was definitely a looker. That had been the first thing he’d noticed. He was a sucker for a pretty face each and every time.

Deciding he didn’t like the silence, he reached out and switched on the CD player. Immediately the soulful sound of Jill Scott filled the air. After a few moments, he concluded the music was not enough. To get a dialogue started, he asked conversationally, “I understand you’re from Florida. What brought you to Denver?”

She tilted her head to look at him, and the first thing he noticed was her eyes. They were a chocolate brown and oval in shape. Then he was drawn to her hair, a beautiful shade of brown. The thick strands touched her shoulders and curled at the end. The coloring, whether natural or from a bottle, was perfect for her smooth, cocoa-colored complexion. And then there was that cute dimple in her chin, which was there even when she bore a serious expression.

“I’ve never been the adventurous type, but when my god-mother passed away and left me enough funds that I could make a career change without going broke, I took advantage of it.”

He nodded. “So what were you doing before you became an event planner?”

"I was a veterinarian."

"Wow. That was some career change."

She smiled. "Yes, it was."

He looked ahead, thinking that if she thought she would not have to explain why someone would stop being a veterinarian to become an event planner, she could think again. "How does a person go from being a vet to becoming a party planner?"

She pushed a lock of hair from her face and said, "Becoming a vet was my parents' idea, and I went along with it."

"Why?" He couldn't imagine going to college for anything other than what he wanted to do in life. He did, however, know how a person could get their dream career waylaid, as in the case of his cousin, Ramsey.

Ramsey had always wanted to be a sheep rancher, and he'd gone to school to study agricultural economics. The only reason Ramsey had taken a CEO position at Blue Ridge Management after school, instead of going into farming, was to work alongside Dillon to keep the company afloat when their parents had died in a plane crash. But once Ramsey and Dillon had made it into a million-dollar company, Ramsey had turned full management of Blue Ridge over to Dillon to become the sheep rancher he'd always wanted to be.

Riley's truck came to a stop at the traffic light, which gave him the opportunity to glance back over at Alpha just in time to see her gnawing her lips again and fidgeting with a sterling silver Tiffany bracelet on her wrist. *Umm, it seems "why" was another uncomfortable question*, he thought.

"I became a vet mainly to satisfy my parents. They own a veterinary clinic and figured I would join them and make it a family affair. I did so for a year, but discovered my heart just wasn't in it. They knew it, but still, they weren't happy when I decided to switch careers. However, they accepted that being an event planner was my calling when I put together their thirtieth wedding anniversary celebration."

"Did a good job of it, huh?" he asked.

She looked over at him and the smile that touched her lips extended from one corner of her mouth to the other and was simply breathtaking. “Yes, I did a bang-up job.”

He laughed. “Good for you.” He paused a second and asked, “Are you the only child?”

It seemed to take her longer than necessary to answer. “No. I have a sister.”

He didn’t say anything for a long moment and decided to change the subject. “So what do you have in mind for our employees’ holiday bash next month?”

He listened as she went into the details. Some he was able to follow and some he could not. He was a visual person and couldn’t use her words to produce mental images. He needed to see actual photographs to get the full effect.

She must have detected such from the expression on his face. “I had prepared a PowerPoint for today. But since we’re meeting at the restaurant instead of your office, I—”

“Can still show the presentation. I called ahead and asked for a private meeting room.”

“That’s great. I have everything I need in here,” she said, tapping lightly on the messenger case in her lap.

That caused him to glance down. She was wearing over-the-knee boots, a cute, dark brown leather pair. He glanced back up to her face and saw she was looking out the window, studying the scenery they were passing.

“I never come this way when going to McKay’s.”

He returned his gaze to the road. “It’s a shortcut.”

“Oh.”

She got quiet again, and this time he decided to let the silence rule. He figured whenever she had anything to say, she would say it. In the meantime, he was perfectly satisfied to sit back and listen to Jill sing her heart out.

Alpha couldn’t stop the fluttering in her stomach as she continued to look out the truck’s window, trying hard to ig-

nore the man behind the steering wheel. She would have to deal with Riley Westmoreland soon enough when they got to McKay's. She should have known he was drop-dead gorgeous, given Dillon wasn't bad on the eyes. And he seemed to be full of questions. At least he'd already asked two that she wished she could have avoided answering. The reason she had left Daytona was still too painful to think about and after the heated conversation she'd had with her parents last night, she preferred not to think of them right now, either.

Forcing thoughts of Daytona from her mind she saw that they were pulling into the parking lot of McKay's. It seemed the weather was not a deterrent for people wanting to dine at the popular restaurant. The parking lot was full, and Riley had to drive around back to find a spot.

She flexed her hands, liking how the gloves were keeping them warm, and tightened the coat around her as she prepared to get out of the vehicle and confront the cold again. She glanced over at Riley. He wasn't wearing gloves and it seemed the jacket was all he had. She couldn't help asking, "Aren't you cold?"

He smiled over at her. She wished he wouldn't do that because every time he did, he reminded her how long it had been since a man had smiled at her without her questioning his motives.

"Not really. Unlike most, I enjoy cold weather. For me, the colder the better."

She sat there and simply stared at him. He had to be kidding. "Why?"

He shrugged his massive shoulders. "Not sure. I guess I'm too hot-blooded to be bothered."

"Evidently," she said under her breath. If he heard her, he didn't let on. Instead, he opened the door to get out and she released her seat belt and opened her door to do the same. That's when she went sliding and would have fallen flat on her face if Riley hadn't acted quickly to catch her.

“I should have told you to be careful. The ice on the parking lot makes things slippery.”

Yes, he should have told her. But if he had, there would have been no reason for his arms to be wrapped around her or for her to be holding on to him for support, feeling the heat of a hot-blooded man so close to her. And that same male scent that had nearly driven her crazy on the ride over wouldn't be doing a number on her.

“I think I can make it now,” she said, releasing her tight grip on him.

He kept a firm hand on her arm. “I'll make sure of it.” He then swept her off her feet and right into his arms.