

AMY

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ANDREWS

the trouble with christmas

*This year, trouble
comes wrapped
in tinsel...*



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with
christmas

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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Entangled Publishing, LLC
2614 South Timberline Road
Suite 105, PMB 159
Fort Collins, CO 80525
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Visit our website at www.entangledpublishing.com.

Amara is an imprint of Entangled Publishing, LLC.

Edited by Liz Pelletier
Cover design by Bree Archer
Model Photographer: Wander Aguiar
Cover images by
rcreitmeyer/Depositphotos
bluejayphoto/Getty
Metallic Citizen/shutterstock
karandaev/Depositphotos
Interior design by Toni Kerr

Print ISBN 978-1-64063-819-8
ebook ISBN 978-1-64063-820-4

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Edition October 2019

AMARA

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*This book is dedicated to all the Christmas freaks
out there. You are my kind of people.*

CHAPTER ONE

Joshua Grady—Grady to all who knew him—didn't want much out of life. Just this ranch, Sunday night football, and to be left the hell alone. At thirty-five, with twelve years in the military, including a tour of Iraq and two of Afghanistan, he figured he'd earned the right.

He was a goddamn war hero. He even had a shiny medal and a fancy piece of paper from the government to prove it.

Unfortunately his uncle, who owned the ranch, had other ideas.

New tenant incoming.

Grady scowled at the text. Then scowled at the plume of dust advancing in the distance as a vehicle made its way slowly down the rutted road leading to his cabin. Jamming his Stetson on his head, he strode out to the porch, his big hands curling around the circumference of the rough-hewn wood of the railing as he sucked in the frigid December air. His scowl deepened, and Grady shoved his hands on his hips as the car rounded the bend and appeared from the center of the dust.

He blinked twice at the beat-up old van with lurid green and pink panels emblazoned with huge yellow flowers. *Jesus*. It was the Mystery Machine. And about as out of place here in rural Colorado as a tractor on Fifth Avenue. The vehicle pulled to

a halt and the engine cut, and Grady half expected Scooby and the gang to tumble out as the door opened.

They didn't.

A woman slid down from the cab. Grady had been expecting a woman—Susan something something, his uncle had informed him when he'd arrived to get the cottage ready yesterday—but it didn't mean he had to like it. Living outside Credence meant not having to be sociable with anyone, least of all a woman who filled out blue jeans in ways that made him remember how much he liked women in denim.

Grady had decided a long time ago on a solitary life and was *not*, consequently, settling-down material, despite his well-meaning uncle's assertions about the joys of holy matrimony. He'd sure as hell stayed away from Credence during the summer when a nationwide ad campaign had brought busloads of single women to the small eastern Colorado town, hoping a few might stay and make Credence their home—and some of the Credence bachelors their husbands.

A couple of dozen *had* stayed, but he wasn't interested in any of them. Or this woman, either. He'd told his uncle repeatedly the last couple of weeks that he didn't want the cottage rented to some artist, and it was hardly his fault accommodations were scarce due to the sudden spike in population.

That ridiculous ad campaign hadn't been his idea.

But the land—several thousand acres of it—including the cabin *and* the cottage belonged to his

uncle, and Burl Grady had the final say. Not that Burl had ever played that card until now, but it was the first time in three years Grady had regretted knocking back his uncle's very generous offer to sign over the ranch to him forthwith rather than waiting for it to come to him in his uncle's will.

He had enough money to buy his own damn ranch but his uncle had wanted to retire, and taking over the reins had been the one way Grady could think of to repay his aunt and uncle for stepping up during the worst time of his life.

Except now he had to put up with Little Miss Blue Jeans for a month.

She didn't see him as she walked toward the white fence that partitioned off the field to the front of the cabin, but Grady couldn't look away. She was hard to ignore. Her hair was contained in a bright-green knitted hat, so he had no idea whether she was blond, brunette, or redhead, but her knee-high Ugg-type boots and her sweet rounded ass swinging in those jeans were way more fascinating anyway.

Neither short nor tall, she was amply proportioned, a fact emphasized by her leaning on the top rail of the fence, which pushed out her ass. Grady shut his eyes. He'd never gone for skinny—he liked fullness and curves and this woman needed a flashing neon sign attached to hers.

Opening his eyes, Grady diverted his gaze, concentrating instead on seeing the vista in front, a sight of which he never tired. A couple of his horses grazed in the field on the grass that was getting sparse now, given the onset of winter. He'd need to

feed them later but, for a moment, he forgot his chores and the angst about his unwanted guest and sucked in the deep, clean air of eastern Colorado.

The sky was a brilliant cloudless blue, the winter sunshine more for show than effect, given it was a brisk forty-two, but they'd forecast snow for the next week, so he'd take the sunshine—weak or not. Too soon the sky would be bleak, tree branches would be a parched frozen gray, the fields blanketed in white.

Right now, there was still a tinge of green, and the sight of it filled him with a sense of belonging so profound it swept his breath away.

Even if there was a woman in blue jeans messing up the picture.

Blue jeans and no coat—just a thin-looking long-sleeve T-shirt. For God's sake, she was going to freeze to death out here.

As if she knew he was thinking about her, she moved back from the rail a pace or two and slowly turned in a circle, her face lifted to the sky, her arms outstretched. It was the kind of pose kids adopted when it was snowing, opening their mouths to catch some flakes. She wasn't opening her mouth, but she appeared to be trying to catch some sunshine.

There was nothing particularly remarkable about her face. She wasn't stunningly pretty or ethereally beautiful or even chipmunk cute. She was kind of average-looking. Not the sort of face that launched a thousand ships. More...girl next door.

That should have made him feel better. It didn't.

It was on her second turn that she spotted him standing with his hands on his hips, staring at her like some creeper, and she gave him a little wave. Grady didn't return it.

"God...sorry," she called. An easy grin spread over her face as she broke into a half jog.

"You must be Joshua." She pulled to a stop at the bottom of the four steps, her warm breath misting into the cool air.

Her cheeks were flushed and her nose was pink and there was absolutely nothing average about her eyes. They were lapis lazuli, and they looked at him with such frankness, like they were assessing him and not just physically but mentally, cataloging and memorizing every single detail, even the ones he didn't want anyone to see.

"Grady," he ground out, feeling exposed and pissed off that this woman who couldn't even *dress for the weather* and was driving a *cartoon car* was having such an effect on him. "People call me Grady."

If she'd picked up on his surliness, she ignored it, tramping up the stairs to stand beside him, holding out her hand to shake, which Grady took reluctantly. "I'm Suzanne St. Michelle."

She pronounced it *Su-sahn Saan Meeshell*, which sounded very posh and very French and made Grady think about French kissing and then just kissing in general. He dropped her hand.

What the ever-loving fuck?

"Man," she said, her accent 100 percent New York as she half turned to the view and inhaled deeply. "You're really living the dream out here,

aren't you?"

Grady gave a ghost of a smile. He'd learned a long time ago that dreams were made of dynamite and horseshit. She didn't appear to need an answer, though, as she chatted on.

"It's so easy to forget in the city that there's all this space and land and sky. It's so flat, and there's nothing for miles except fields and cows and horses. They're such beautiful creatures, aren't they?"

Her question appeared to, again, be rhetorical, and she barely drew breath before leaping into a change of subject.

Christ. She was a talker...

"I bet the stars are magic out here, aren't they?" She paused to look at him this time but held his gaze only for a beat or two before she glanced back at the field and kept right on going. "Yep. No light pollution out here in the middle of nowhere. I bet it's dark as pitch in the middle of the night. It's the kind of sky that would have given van Gogh wet dreams."

She faltered slightly, barely a hiccup in time, just enough for her to frown slightly, like she knew she'd just said something a little inappropriate. But, flattening her hand against her belly, she forged on.

"And it's so quiet, no horns or traffic or blinking lights or sirens or crowds, or people for that matter. No background hum of chatter all around you. It's so...serene."

Yes. *Exactly.* Serenity. Something *Su-sahn Saan Meeshell* had pierced in about two seconds. Grady strapped on some mental Kevlar.

Suddenly, she turned back to face him with

those startling blue eyes, pulling her woolen hat from her head. Fine, almost white-blond hair cascaded around her shoulders like a flurry of snow.

Yep...there went his serenity.

“So...” She inspected his face before dropping her gaze to take in his plaid flannel shirt, his well-worn Levis, and his even more worn boots. “You’re, like, a...cowboy? The real deal?”

Grady was silent for long moments. Was that another rhetorical question? When she continued to look at him expectantly, he answered. “I’m a rancher.”

She wrinkled her nose in concentration. “What’s the difference?”

“Ranchers ranch. Cowboys wrangle cows.”

“Kinda like a shepherd?”

Grady blinked. “Sure.” In the way a shark was kinda like a fish.

She was looking at him expectantly, those blue eyes trained on him as if she was waiting for him to elaborate, but Grady had just about surpassed his quota of words for the day.

“Okay then,” she said after several awkward seconds of silence that she — *hallelujah* — didn’t feel the need to fill up. “Your uncle said you’d show me the cottage?”

Grady nodded, grateful for something to do even if it did mean extending his time in Little Miss Chatty’s company. He glanced at the van and tried not to wince. “Drive your...vehicle round back.”

Thankfully she didn’t talk anymore — no more questions or inane observations — she just took

the two paces to the stairs and headed down. Maybe she'd used up her quota of words for the day, too? The thought cheered him as he followed behind her, his gaze looking anywhere but at the swing of her ass.

• • •

Van Gogh's wet dream? What the hell, Suzanne?

She cringed. But she'd always been the same when she was nervous, even as a kid. Filling silences with pointless chatter. And Cowboy Surly or *Rancher* Surly had gotten the full verbal-diarrhea treatment.

As soon as she was done unpacking, she was calling Winona to demand an explanation. Her friend, who'd come to Credence after the first single-women campaign had gone viral and decided to stay, had convinced Suzanne a change of scenery would be good for her muse and, god knew, a Christmas away from her parents' sterile, minimalist brownstone had been too good to pass up. Hell, she would have visited Winona on *Mars*. But her friend really should have warned her about Grady.

Suzanne wasn't used to speak-as-little-as-possible-while-looking-all-sexy-and-brooding men. Men in jeans with hats and big-ass belt buckles who had rough hands and looked like they knew how to chop down a tree, ride a bull, deliver a calf, light a fire, and build a rudimentary shelter.

All before breakfast.

Men with rugged faces and beautiful lips, who looked like they'd forgotten more things about the

birds and the bees than she'd ever learned.

She was going to need a handbook for Grady, and hopefully Winona had a copy.

But Winona had been right about one thing. Her muse was definitely stirring. It had crept up on her as she'd stared out over the field at the grazing horses. That itch, that...compulsion to put the scene down on canvas. To memorialize it in oil. And it had positively *slammed* into her like a sledgehammer as her gaze had connected with Joshua Grady.

Everything, from the way his height and breadth had dominated the porch, to the squareness of his jaw, the worn leather of his boots, and that shiny belt buckle riding low between his hips, had been inspirational. Suzanne hadn't painted anything original in well over a decade, but those first few seconds she'd clapped eyes on Grady had been an epiphany.

Now *there* was a subject to paint.

It was as if the heavens had opened and glories had streamed down and a giant hand with an extended index finger had pointed at Grady and whispered, "*Him*," in Suzanne's ear.

The prospect had been equal parts titillating and terrifying because landscapes were easy, portraits not so much, and she hadn't been able to decide whether to throw up or run away and hide.

The universe, however, had delivered verbal diarrhea.

Pulling her trusty old transport van up outside the cottage, Suzanne slipped out of the car as Grady was stomping his feet on the welcome mat and taking off his hat. Opening the door, he said,

“Ma’am,” indicating that she should precede him.

Hot damn. He’d *ma’amed* her. It wasn’t the first time she’d been *ma’amed* in her almost thirty years, but it had been the first time her clothes had almost fallen off at hearing it. There was something about the way this man *ma’amed* that made Suzanne aware she had ovaries.

She walked into the cozy, open-plan cottage dominated on the far side by two large windows just as Winona had indicated. She knew instantly where she would set up her easel. Crossing to the windows—drawn as only an artist can be to light—she stared out over acres and acres of brittle winter pasture and, in the distance, a large section of wooded land.

“Bedroom’s that way,” he said from behind.

She turned to find him standing in the doorway, obviously not planning to enter. He pointed with the hand that held his hat to the left where she could see a bed through an open door.

“The heating”—he swiveled his head in the opposite direction, using his hat to again point to the far wall and the modern glass-fronted freestanding fireplace—“is gas.” Switching his gaze to the kitchen area situated between the two windows, he said, “Kitchen should have everything you need. You have bags?”

Suzanne blinked at his obvious desire to be gone. It made her curious, and hell if it didn’t make her want to paint him right now. From her vantage point, with the light behind him, he wasn’t much more than a tall, dark shape taking up all the space in her doorway, but his presence was

electric, looming.

But not in a threatening way. It was...spine-tingling, and her pulse skipped a beat, which made her feel like an idiot. She'd just met the guy. How freaking *embarrassing*.

"I...have so much stuff." Suzanne crossed to where he stood, determined to be businesslike to cover for her ridiculously juvenile response. "A couple of bags, a dozen canvases of varying sizes, about a zillion different paints, a box of books because there's nothing quite like the smell of a book, don't you think? My pod coffee machine because I'm such a caffeine junkie, and heaven help anyone who talks to me before my coffee every morning. Some CDs and a player, which I know is a little old-school, but Winona said the internet can be pretty spotty out here, and I *have* to paint to music because silence drives me nuts. Some groceries I picked up in Credence and—"

Suzanne stopped abruptly, aware suddenly by the ever-flattening line of his mouth that she was babbling. He was staring at her with an expression that left her in little doubt a simple "yes" or "no" would have sufficed.

He gave a brief nod and shoved his hat on his head. "I'll give you a hand." Then he turned on his heel and strode to her van.

It took the two of them fifteen minutes to unload everything. Fifteen long, silent minutes broken only by Suzanne occasionally directing him as to where to put something down. Sliding the van door shut with a muffled *whump*, he turned, his gaze settling on her face. The brim of his hat threw

his face into shadow, which made him hard to read. But this close, she could see he had light-green eyes and some stubble. Short but enough to still feel rough.

“If that’s all, ma’am, I’ll be going?”

If that was all? Joshua Grady really *did not* want to stick around. Suzanne knew she was an average woman. Average height, average looks, average size fourteen who could probably stand to lose a few pounds from her ass and thighs—she was more pear than hourglass. Good teeth, nice smile, clear skin. She was...attractive at best. A six who could push herself to a seven, maybe an eight for a gallery opening or one of her mother’s exhibitions.

She’d had boyfriends both casual and longer term—she was no blushing virgin—and she got along well with members of the opposite sex. But she wasn’t the kind of woman to whom men *flocked*. She was pretty sure this was the first time she’d actually repelled one, though.

If only that turned off her muse. Unfortunately, *she* was a fickle little tramp and always had been. *And* she’d been MIA for a good ten years while Suzanne had reproduced other artists’ works in the very lucrative field of museum and insurance-required reproductions.

Until today.

“Thanks so much, Joshua,” Suzanne said. It would have taken her much longer to unpack the van without him, and it was appreciated. “May I call you Josh?”

The angle of his jaw tightened. “No.”

Suzanne blinked at the blatant rebuttal and the

morphing of his face from craggy and interesting to bleak and forbidding. But even more intriguing were the mental shutters slamming down behind his pale-green eyes. Shooting him her best flirty smile, she attempted to make amends. She could flirt with the best of them if required, and she'd never met a man who didn't appreciate being the object of a little flirting. "Well...anyway...I'd like to make you dinner to thank you for everything. What are you doing tomorrow night?"

Grady clearly *did not* appreciate the flirting.

His brows beetled together, a deep V forming between them. "Look, lady." He paused and drew in a breath. "I know there was a whole single-women thing that happened here over the summer and that a lot of dudes around these parts are looking to get hitched, but I'm not one of them. I don't know what my uncle told you, but I am not in the market for a woman. Not for dinner or dating or a relationship or even a quick tumble in the sheets. I like peace and quiet. I like solitude. I've said more words today than I have all week. So you stay here" — he cocked his head at the cottage — "and I'll stay there" — he pointed at the back porch of his place — "and we'll get along just fine."

He drew a breath again, and Suzanne could do nothing but stare. It was the most animated his face had been since her arrival, and it was a thing to behold, his square jaw working, his eyes glinting with cold *steel*.

Suzanne blinked as realization cut through her artistic drive. Did he think she was here to... ingratiate herself with him? To...date him? Have

sex with him? Did he think his uncle had pimped her out?

Did he think she was here to get herself *a husband*?

Jesus, what kind of Dark Ages bullshit was this? Sure, six months ago, the town may have been awash with single women looking for love, but Suzanne wasn't any part of that, and she most certainly wasn't here for a man.

A spike of indignation quickly flared into a slow, steady burn of anger. This dude's ego was as big as the whole damn ranch. And, flash of pain or no flash of pain, he could go and do something exceedingly sexual and anatomically impossible to himself. Suzanne narrowed her eyes, better to aim her death rays at him.

"Look, *mister*. This whole brooding cowboy act might work on some women, but I think I can *contain* myself around all your manly man bullshit, and here's a newsflash for you. I'm here to *paint* not *hook up* or trap some...*cowpoke* into putting a ring on it. All this *y'all* have"—she went deliberately *southern* as she gestured wildly around her—"is real charmin', but I'm a *New Yorker*. So yeah, you stay over there, and I'll try and resist the urge to leave love letters on your porch every morning."

She was breathing hard by the time she stopped, and her pulse was thumping like a jackhammer through her ears, but *man* was she ticked. He, on the other hand, appeared to be unaffected by her vitriol. Giving her a barely there nod, he pulled down on the brim of his hat.

"Ma'am," he said, then calmly walked away.

Suzanne watched him go, so damn pissed at him and his assumptions and how good his wide shoulders looked as he strode toward his cabin, she could barely see straight. Her muse, however, was popping champagne corks.

Which did not bode well.

Not for her *or* Joshua Grady.

CHAPTER TWO

Grady headed straight for his fridge and popped the tab on a Coors Light. He swallowed half the can before he drew breath, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, irritation simmering through his blood. He walked out to the front porch and sat his ass down on the top step, staring out over the front field again.

A cowpoke? The woman had called him a *cowpoke*?! Okay, her word choice had been deliberate, but he *wasn't* some hillbilly cowboy.

And why on God's green earth did her opinion even matter?

So she had the kind of body that ticked all his *hell yeah* boxes. She had curves and thighs and hips his fingers itched to explore. She had eyes he could drown in. But he'd only just met her. *And* she drove the Scooby Mobile for fuck's sake!

How could anyone who drove a cartoon car be taken remotely seriously?

Yet his skin felt tight and itchy as he grappled to understand the clash of emotions battling like gladiators inside his chest. Half an hour in *Su-sahn Saan Meeshell's* company and he was about as thrown as he'd been that time Valentine, his horse, had been spooked by a rattlesnake and tossed him on his ass.

And he didn't like it one little bit. Not from some mouthy blonde outsider who'd looked at him

like he was a piece of chewing gum on her designer Uggs.

Okay, maybe he'd asked for the cowpoke crack. He had pretty much accused her of husband hunting and had all but pulled out his dick and pissed around his house to mark his territory, but that look in her eyes just before she'd asked him what he was doing tomorrow night had scared the bejesus out of him. Her incredible eyes had lightened and gone all teasing and, on the heels of calling him Joshua, calling him *Josh*, he'd panicked.

Gone on the attack.

His mother had called him Joshua. And Bethany, his high school sweetheart, had been the last woman—girl, really—to call him Josh. And they'd both died, along with his father, in a horrific interstate pileup in terrible conditions more than seventeen years ago. *December*, seventeen years ago.

Yeah. Merry *fucking* Christmas.

His cell vibrated in his back pocket, and he grabbed it, grateful for the distraction. It was another text from his uncle.

Suzanne settling in okay?

Grady gave a soft snort. She had looked very at home standing in front of the huge picture window of the cottage, the flat, brittle landscape behind framing her curves. He, on the other hand, was seriously fucking disturbed.

He tapped *yes* and sent it.

Burl's reply was instantaneous. *What's she like?*

Grady grimaced. Unprepared. Annoying. *Disturbing*. And his kind of hot. But Grady settled

on something more neutral to send his uncle.

Chatty.

A crying tears of laughter emoji appeared on the screen. Burl may have been sixty-five, but he'd always been a gadget man. New tech had never fazed him. Grady would bet his last nickel his uncle was probably at Annie's at this time of day, enjoying his *retirement* from the ranch, eating pie and laughing his ass off, huddled over his screen.

Do you good to use your words. You're going to turn mute out there by yourself.

Grady rolled his eyes at his uncle's exaggeration. He shot off a quick reply. *People talk too damn much.*

Three little dots appeared on the screen as his uncle composed his reply. They wavered for long seconds as if Burl was writing a tome, but when the words appeared long moments later, there were only two. *Be nice.*

Grady didn't want to be nice. He wanted to get through this month like he did every December—as quickly as possible. Not entertaining some artist chick from New York City who used the words *wet dream* in casual sentences with people she'd only just met and had the most freakishly unsettling eyes.

I'll be civil.

Thanks to his military training, Grady had never promised things he couldn't deliver, and he'd already been not very nice. He'd accused her of something he had no basis for and besmirched Burl's character in the process. His uncle was a good, decent, honorable guy who'd brought Grady

to the ranch to live after his parents' tragic deaths and given him a way to channel his grief and anger that was productive instead of destructive.

He probably should apologize to both of them. But he wouldn't.

Burl sent a gif of Judge Judy rolling her eyes and, despite the situation, Grady cracked a smile as he shoved his phone back in his pocket. Somewhere behind him, he heard the sound of a car engine firing to life with a couple of sickly splutters and, a few seconds later, he was watching the dust kicked up by Suzanne's god-awful van as she left the property.

Grady perked up at the thought that maybe she'd decided her temporary landlord was too much of an asshole and to get out while the going was good. But he dismissed it quickly.

He'd never been that lucky.

• • •

Suzanne grimaced at the strong, bitter coffee a woman called Annie had just poured. It wasn't the sort she was used to; in fact, Suzanne probably hadn't ever ingested drip-filter coffee. Annie grinned and said, "Good for the digestion."

Winona introduced the women, and Suzanne blushed as her friend raved to Annie about Suzanne's talent with a paintbrush. "A painter, huh?" Annie glanced around at the beige walls that boasted some food advertising posters that looked as if they'd been there for a couple of decades and some framed black and white photographs of what

she presumed was Credence town center back in the day.

“I’d always had a hankering for paintings on my walls. Just never got around to it.”

“You’ve got a lot of places to hang art here,” Suzanne said as she took note of the wall space. In her opinion, there wasn’t a wall in existence that couldn’t be improved by adding art.

Annie nodded absently. “You take commissions?”

“I do, but...” She doubted Annie could afford her fee. “I do reproduction stuff, nothing original.” Hopefully that would all change during her time in Credence. “But I can definitely recommend someone to you if you’d like?”

“Ain’t got a lot of money.”

“That’s fine. I know where all the bargains are to be had, too.”

Annie beamed. “Thanks, I might just take you up on that. Pie’s on the house,” she added and shuffled off to her next customer.

Winona quirked an eyebrow at Suzanne. “Look at you go, babe. Already fitting in here.”

Suzanne laughed and rolled her eyes before taking another sip of coffee and remembering she wasn’t in New York anymore. “This stuff’ll put hairs on your chest.” Her voice cracked a little as the coffee coated her vocal cords on the way down.

Winona grinned across at her. “There’s better coffee at Déjà Brew—that’s Jenny Carter’s new place down a bit farther. But the pie makes up for it.”

Oh *hell yes* it did. This pecan pie was one of the

best things she'd ever put in her mouth—just as Winona had promised. Suzanne shut her eyes and moaned as the warm savory ooze of melted butter mixed with the sweet hint of maple syrup and the crunch of nuts slid over her tongue. Actually *freaking moaned*. She'd never tasted pecan pie like this, certainly never had it served with melted butter pudding on top of it, but *holy taste buds, Batman*, it was divine.

She was coming to Annie's every day for a slice of this artery-clogging heaven. Well worth the heart attack.

"So...how are you finding the cottage? Didn't I tell you those windows are perfect?"

The windows were amazing and the view spectacular. But... "I wish you'd raved less about the light and spent some more time giving me the lowdown on Grady."

Winona shoved a hand through her dark curls, scrunching her nose a little. "Burl's nephew?"

Suzanne nodded, absently wishing she had a mass of lush curls instead of fine, dead-straight fluff. She'd always envied Winona's looks and confidence and her ball-breaking attitude, refusing to be dismissed by people who were quick to disparage her for writing erotic romance fiction for a living.

"I don't really know him," she continued. "Burl was the one who showed me the cottage. I think Grady was in the barn or something. Why? Is he a pain in the ass?"

He was *something* all right. He'd sure made an impact for a guy who hadn't said a whole lot. Suzanne pursed her lips. "Let's just say for a man

of few words, he managed to convey his displeasure over me being at the cottage loud and clear.”

Winona raised an arched brow. “That doesn’t sound very neighborly of him.”

Suzanne almost laughed. “I don’t think Grady does neighborly.” Try as she might, she just couldn’t summon an image of him knocking on her door with a smile and a basket of home-cooked muffins.

On the back of a horse in fringed chaps twirling a lasso above his head? *Yes*. In a field fixing a fence, his hat pulled low? *Yes*. Driving a tractor or some other big-ass bit of machinery with no shirt on? *Yes*.

Stretched out buck-naked on her bed with the light flooding in through the windows as he watched her paint? *Yes, yes, hell freaking yes*.

“You want me to talk to Burl?”

Suzanne shook her head and opened her mouth to deny the request, but a deep voice got in before she could say a word. “Talk to Burl about what?”

Winona smiled and stood. “Burl.”

She hugged the older man, who was big and rangy, his frame still strong despite his gray hair. He had Grady’s green eyes and a nice smile. “You must be Suzanne.” He held out a weathered hand, and Suzanne shook it. “My nephew giving you grief?”

Suzanne chose her words carefully. “I...get the feeling he...prefers his own company.” Burl *was* Grady’s uncle, and he’d been good enough to rent the cottage to her, so it would have been rude to trash talk his nephew. Plus, this wasn’t high school.

Burl nodded. “Yeah. He’s a bit of a loner, I’m afraid.”

The opening strains of The Eagles' "Desperado" played in Suzanne's head as she thought about Grady, a lone figure on horseback riding fences for the next three or four decades. It made her kinda sad.

"Will that be a problem?" Winona asked. "Is he..."

Her voice trailed off, but there was no doubt what she meant. Burl clearly took her meaning with no offense. "No. He's fine. It's just a tough time of year for him is all, and he likes his space after twelve years in the military." He nodded thoughtfully at Suzanne, his astute old gaze running over her as if she were a prize mare. "Do him good to have some company for a change."

Suzanne wasn't as confident about that as good old Uncle Burl. Grady had made it clear he didn't want anything to do with her, but she smiled and said, "Why don't you join us?"

"I'd love to, but my wife's the jealous sort." He cracked himself up, which left Suzanne in zero doubt his wife was the exact opposite. "I gotta keep going. Just came in to pick up some of Annie's cobbler. Best in the county."

"Best in the state, Burl," Annie quipped in a crotchety voice from over at the counter where she was taking someone's order.

"Yes, ma'am," Burl agreed, winking at Suzanne and Winona before bidding them goodbye.

Suzanne watched Burl head for the counter, aware of the weight of Winona's gaze settling on her profile. "Are you sure you're going to be all right out there, babe?"

Dragging her gaze off Burl to face Winona, she smiled. “Of course. I’m not worried for my safety.” If anything, Suzanne felt safe as houses with Grady’s brooding presence just down the way. There was something about the man that screamed protector. Probably those twelve years in the military. “I just wish he wasn’t so...”

“Un-neighborly?”

Suzanne shook her head. Rugged. Capable. *Cowboy*. “Interesting.”

Winona leaned forward, her curls following as a light switched on behind her eyes. “Bug-under-a-microscope interesting? Or hot-piece-of-ass interesting?”

Taking another mouthful of heaven allowed Suzanne to stall and forget for a moment about Grady’s ass walking away from her earlier, cupped to perfection in a faded pair of Wranglers.

“He’s very...manly.” Which was a gross understatement. Suzanne was sure he could probably impregnate the entire female population of the United States with just one of those long, silent looks.

“Ah. *Manly*.” Winona’s lips twitched as the glint became a full-on blaze. “So a manly, surly military type? Sounds like an erotic author’s wet dream to me.”

Suzanne cringed at her friend’s word choice, reminding her how badly she’d run her mouth. He probably thought she was a ditz. Or some sexually depraved *artiste* from the city who painted abstract shapes of a vaguely sexual nature. Like her mother. But his brooding silence had made her feel too

awkward to stay quiet.

“Maybe you should take my bed at the boardinghouse,” Winona continued, her voice light and teasing. “And I’ll go live at the cottage.”

No. The word reverberated around her skull, her muse jerking at the suggestion. She had no barometer for sarcasm. “I think I want to...paint him.”

Even now, Suzanne’s muse twitched restlessly, like a tempest beneath her skin. Images and colors, light and shadow, flow and symmetry swirled through her mind in a kaleidoscope of sensation that was dizzying.

That got Winona’s attention. “Oh *really?*”

Suzanne nodded. “Yeah.”

“That’s great, babe,” Winona enthused, her hands covering Suzanne’s.

Winona, who had seen some of Suzanne’s aimless doodlings one day, had always championed Suzanne’s talent, convinced she was more than capable of being an artist in her own right. But Suzanne had been told a long time ago that she didn’t have the raw gift her mother possessed, and she’d known it was true.

Sure, Suzanne could paint, she had *talent*, but a true artist needed more. Those mad scribblings she did late at night didn’t count; hell, they weren’t even *art*. They were just...exercise. All talent needed to be exercised. But her true calling was reproduction. Give her another artist’s painting, and she could study the colors and the brushwork and the techniques and reproduce it perfectly.

Rembrandt. Gauguin. Turner. Monet. Kahlo.

Van Gogh. Cassat. Picasso. She'd done them all and more and been paid very nicely both from private collectors as well as publicly funded museums, art galleries, and other places that displayed priceless paintings.

Or copies of them anyway.

And she loved it. She loved her job. Who'd have thought art forgery could ever be a legitimate profession?

"I don't know." Suzanne withdrew her hands nervously. She didn't want to get too far ahead of herself. It had been so long since she'd painted anything original, she didn't know if she was even capable. And portraits were...tricky. It was best to stick to the landscape for now. "We'll see. Don't hold your breath."

Winona nodded, but she did an excited little squiggle in her chair anyway, and Suzanne laughed, grateful for the day they'd been introduced at one of her mother's art exhibitions in Chicago a few years ago. Suzanne had been instantly drawn to the older woman, who was loud and irreverent and spoke her mind. Winona was the real deal, and for someone who dealt in fakes for a living, it had been a refreshing change.

Suzanne usually headed to Chicago, to Winona's, in between commissions to clear her head. And this time, at Winona's urging, she'd come to Credence.

"So..." Suzanne shoveled more pie into her mouth as she glanced out the window at the afternoon shadows lengthening down the main street. "You're really going to stay here?"

Winona smiled and nodded. "I really am."

"It seems so..."

"So?"

"So *not* you. You've always been so...*Chicago*."

Winona grinned. "I *love* it here. I didn't expect to—I only came because I thought a bunch of bachelorettes coming to the ass-end of nowhere to hook up with a farmer would make a great plot for a book. But..." She shook her head. "It really crept up on me, and you should see the land I've bought at the lake. It's...everything I never knew I wanted."

Suzanne returned the grin. How could she not? Winona's was so infectious. "How long until the house is finished?"

"Benji was hoping to get it done by Christmas and before the first snow of the season, but...there are disadvantages to living in a rural area." She shrugged. "We're aiming for spring."

"And you can write in the boardinghouse?"

Winona had told her that several of the women who had chosen to make Credence home were still living at the boardinghouse that had been made available for them. "Mostly. Sometimes I go out to the lake and sit on the end of the pier if there's no one there." Her gaze drifted to the door, and Winona's expression changed. "Oh hello, here's trouble."

Suzanne frowned, turning to find a police officer—a seriously hot police officer—entering Annie's, taking off his *Top Gun* sunglasses to scan the diner. He removed his hat to reveal a buzz cut mostly black aside from the scattering of salt

coming through the spikes of pepper. He had sharp cheekbones, and the fuzz on his head was mirrored by a five-o'clock shadow along the hard cut of his jaw as his gaze flicked over Suzanne, then zeroed in.

It was the kind of gaze that compelled confession.

He was tall and broad, his stride long and determined if just ever so slightly uneven as he headed in their direction. *Holy RoboCop, Batman*. "Who is that?" she asked, turning back to face Winona.

"That is Arlo Pike."

Suzanne heard the tightness in her friend's voice. "He an asshole?"

"Nah. Just a stickler for the rules, which makes him a little too uptight for my liking." Winona was more free love and artistic expression than laws and boundaries. She grinned suddenly. "And extra-special fun to rile."

"Something tells me he's not a man who's easily riled."

Winona shrugged. "That's what makes it so much fun."

Suzanne suppressed a smile. Winona liked to toy with men, mostly because she did not suffer fools gladly and too many guys made sleazy assumptions about what she did or tried to denigrate it or both. "He's a hottie."

Winona gave a brief nod, not bothering to deny the undisputable fact. "And he knows it." She plastered a beguiling smile on her face and said, "Officer Pike," as he stopped beside their booth.

He nodded stiffly and, in a no-nonsense voice,

said, “Winona.” He clearly had no desire to tangle with her today. He turned his attention to Suzanne. “Excuse me, ma’am, I’m assuming, as you’re the only person in here who’s *not* a local, that the lurid green...vehicle in the back parking lot belongs to you?”

Suzanne bit down on a laugh at his clear distaste for her van. “Ethel? Yep, she’s mine.”

The officer blinked. “You named your vehicle *Ethel*?”

“Sure.” She shrugged. “Doesn’t she look like an Ethel to you?”

“No, ma’am.” He looked like naming cars was a damn fool idea.

“Last I checked, Officer,” Winona chimed in, “it isn’t against the law to give your car a name, is it?”

“Nope, not illegal.” Although his tone left neither of them in any doubt he considered it stupid.

“So this is a social call, then?”

Ignoring Winona’s jibe, he met Suzanne’s gaze again. “Your left passenger tire is flat.”

“Oh.” Suzanne sat up straighter. Shit... “I didn’t notice anything. It didn’t feel flat when I was driving.”

“Might be a slow leak. If you give me your keys, I can change it for you and take it to the auto shop to be fixed.”

If Suzanne’s muse hadn’t already fixated on a surly rancher, she might very well have swooned at this small-town hospitality. She couldn’t imagine a cop in New York offering to change her tire.

“Slow day, Officer?” Winona dug some more.

“No bad guys to catch?”

He shot her a tight, aloof smile. “Bad guys fear me,” he said with a confidence that bordered on arrogance but, Suzanne had to admit, was kinda hot. He held out his hand to her. “Keys, ma’am?”

“And what makes you think she can’t change her own damn tire?” Winona inquired, arching her brow.

Suzanne had never changed a tire in her life. She definitely *did not* want to change this one, and she didn’t care how un-feminist that made her. But Winona was on a roll, and Suzanne knew better than to interrupt.

“I don’t know whether you got the memo or not, but women are perfectly capable of” — Winona lowered her voice and leaned closer to him — “looking after themselves.”

“Yes. Thank you.” The angle of his jaw went white as it tightened. “I’ve been on your website.”

Winona’s face lit up. “Really?” she purred.

“There was a pornography complaint.” He smiled, obviously enjoying himself. “Just doing my job...ma’am.”

Suzanne had never seen Winona speechless until now. For a second, her mouth just hung open before she laughed. “A pornography complaint? I hope you dismissed it.”

“The Credence Police Department investigates all complaints thoroughly.”

He sounded like a public service announcement, but Winona clearly had his measure. “I hope it was educational.”

Suzanne swore she saw the faint twitch of Arlo’s

lips before he turned back to her and the original reason for his stopping. “Keys, ma’am?”

Fishing around in her bag, Suzanne handed them over. “Thank you, Officer.”

Arlo’s hand closed around them. “Ma’am,” he said and took his leave.

Suzanne watched him go. Officer Hottie’s back view was as delectable as the front. So why was it Joshua Grady’s ass and how soon she might be able to see it again, the only thing she was thinking about right now?

CHAPTER THREE

Suzanne woke the next morning from a night of disturbingly vivid dreams about her new neighbor and the compulsion to paint riding her hard. Normally her day didn't start until nine or ten and involved a lot of lazing with coffee and her favorite blueberry bagels, then a leisurely Uber to the loft studio her parents had bought for her in Greenwich. She painted until the light faded, then went home.

Next day the same. Rinse and repeat.

A commissioned piece of art could take her anywhere from a week to three months to complete, depending on the size and the purpose of the project, because Suzanne was damn good at what she did. She was careful and methodical, taking pride in every brushstroke, every color match, every subtle nuance of the original work.

Rushing wasn't an option. You rushed an artist, you got rotten art.

This was nothing like *that*. This was a wild frenzy in her blood. A jungle drum. A siren's call. She *had* to paint. Now. No lazing, no coffee, no bagels. No waiting for the sun to rise enough to create the perfect light conditions. She just had to put paint on brush, thanking God she'd decided to prep some canvases last night as she'd set the cottage up to her liking.

The subject? *Joshua Grady*.

Except Suzanne couldn't go there—she just

couldn't. He may be what her *muse* wanted Suzanne to paint, but her head and her heart did not. Could not. She'd come to Credence to tempt her muse with the kind of vastness she could see outside her windows. The faded wintery green of the grass in the field, the stark bare branches of the trees lining the drive, the lazy graze of animals, the arc of blue sky. The vista she'd been so enamored with yesterday as she'd slid out of Ethel.

She hadn't come to paint a...rancher. She certainly hadn't expected the whispers of a muse far more enamored with Grady than the starkly beautiful landscape. But she was the one in control here, damn it. She was in charge. And she would channel this sudden flush of creativity into bringing the landscape to life. Not Joshua Grady.

She *would* bend it to *her* will.

Because painting people—portraits—was difficult and, oddly, Suzanne felt like she had her training wheels on again. Sure, she'd *copied* portraits over the years, but that was easy—that was copying the artist's color palette and brushstrokes, not painting the subject. Because painting another person, re-creating their presence and their personality and that special *thing* that made them an individual was a real skill. One she didn't think she possessed anymore.

If she ever had.

One that required deep study of the subject. An intimacy that usually only grew from hours of sittings and close observation. She'd known Grady for less than a day. And just because he appeared to be imprinted on her retinas and her fevered

nighttime imaginings were remarkably detailed didn't mean she was capable of doing him justice on canvas.

So she was *not* going to paint him. She was going to go back to basics. She was going to stand in front of this window, and she was going to paint what she saw. Landscapes were far easier to portray, and she was going to paint the hell out of one—paint until her fingers bled.

Her hand poised above the large canvas, Suzanne stopped. It was quiet. *Too damn quiet.* She crossed to the CD player and flicked through the offerings. Mostly she listened to different styles of classical music because her work usually involved pieces from a few hundred years ago, and the power and passion of Mozart or Rachmaninoff fit the times and the emotion of the works. Today she chose Gregorian chants because there was a freeness to the rhythms that was very reflective of the openness of the scenery outside the window. There was also a meditative quality that seemed to fit the majesty and mood of the landscape.

Suzanne cranked them up. It probably wasn't the kind of music people listened to at high decibel ranges, but as the chanting swelled around her and filled her head, it blocked out all the white noise of her doubts and insecurities and the furious whispers of her muse. It helped her find her center, to tap into the frenzy washing through her blood, to look out the window and let the frenzy guide her brush.

And, by the end of the day, whether it was good, bad, or indifferent, she'd have something that was *hers*. A Suzanne St. Michelle original.

She took a deep breath and dipped her brush into the paint.

• • •

Grady barely felt the chill as he stripped off his freezing, sodden shirt in the equally freezing concrete shell of the mudroom. The silence was distracting. Too distracting, and he could think of little else. The last three mornings, he'd gone about his chores serenaded by *chanting monks*. Which was strange but...whatever. It didn't bother him or the animals, and it gave his ranch hands something to laugh about.

Except now there was no music. And that *was* bothering him, because he suddenly realized he was thinking about her—something he'd been trying not to do. Had her power gone out? Was she sick? Had she fallen in the cottage and smacked her head on the stone floor? Had some kind of seizure? Was she unconscious? Had she decided to up and leave?

Yeah, right...he should be so lucky.

Grady shook his head, growling to himself as he flicked off the running faucet and plunged his hands into the steaming-hot sink of water, washing off the caked-on muck from his hands and arms and chest courtesy of a calf that had gotten itself bogged in a freezing quagmire caused by recent rain and melting almost-frozen ground.

He'd managed to rope it out with the help of two of his hands, its plaintive mooing and the distress of its mother keeping everyone focused

on the job, but somehow, when they were almost there, he'd managed to lose his balance and fall into the frigid mud.

His hands had laughed their asses off as they'd dragged his out of the muck.

The hot water felt good on his chilled skin as he picked up the cake of soap and lathered his arms and chest and neck. He needed a real shower, of course, but he'd learned a long time ago to wash up before he went inside. The plumbing in the mudroom was way more forgiving than the more delicate pipes inside the cabin.

Thankfully his jeans weren't as mucky. Ordinarily he'd have stripped them off in the mudroom, too, and walked from the barn to the cabin in his underwear—isolated living did have its advantages—but he wasn't about to do that with *Suzanne St. Michelle* nearby.

And great...just great. He was thinking about her again.

He obviously wasn't getting laid enough. Just how long *had* it been since he'd been with a woman? Well over a year ago. Probably closer to two. Because that had to be it, that had to be the reason he couldn't stop thinking about the curvy New Yorker even though she'd stayed on her turf exactly as he had demanded.

Reaching with one hand for the fresh towel that hung over the hook above the sink, he pulled the plug with the other, then proceeded to towel dry. At least up until he heard a faint gasp and spun around to find the woman on his mind standing just inside the doorway, her curves hidden in a huge red

coat, that green knitted cap pulled down low over her forehead and ears.

His hands paused mid drying the back of his neck. The room wasn't big, maybe five feet by five feet, which meant she was way closer to him than he was comfortable with, given his state of undress.

"Oh...I'm...sorry." Her breath misted into the frigid air as her voice faltered. "I didn't know you were in here."

Her eyes fell to his chest, zeroed in on the nickel-size scar just beneath his right collarbone courtesy of some shrapnel, before straying to his pecs and abs for what seemed like forever, the awkward silence stretching. Normally Grady wouldn't bother filling it because silences were where he felt most comfortable and the other person generally rushed in to fill them up. But Suzanne wasn't bothering, either.

At least not with her mouth anyway.

Her eyes were a different story. They were having an entire conversation as they roved all over his chest. She was looking at him like he was a slice of one of Annie's pies, and Christ if that wasn't like a bullet straight to his dick. The kind of friendly fire he could do without.

Fucking hell. He didn't want to be pie. Not *this* woman's. Not any woman's. He wanted to be...tofu. *Nobody* lusted after tofu.

"Had some trouble with a calf." Grady felt like an explanation might help the situation, but he still felt like an idiot making small talk.

"Was it being born?" She pulled her gaze from his abs to his eyes. "Did you have to stick your

hand up inside and drag it out? I saw that on a documentary once and couldn't believe how messy it was. And how calm the mother was. I mean, I'm not sure I'd be okay to just stand there while someone stuck their entire arm up my hoo-ha, right?"

She hesitated for a moment like she'd done the first day they'd met, like she wasn't sure this was a topic for polite conversation. But her mouth had already committed, so she jutted her chin and went for it.

"I know it has to be done and, let's face it, a calf is much bigger than a man's arm—"

Her gaze dropped to his arms via the scar, his chest, and his belly button. She was looking at him like pie again. Annie's pecan pie with melted butter. Sweet and savory all at once. An orgasm for the tongue.

Not tofu. Plain, tasteless, *orgasmless* Tofu.

"Even yours," she continued, forcing her gaze back to his face, and it took Grady a moment to pick up the thread of her ramblings. She shuddered. "But no thank you. I mean, seriously, females of all species really do get a raw deal. I bet you if the males had to push out disproportionately bigger babies through the passage provided for the process, they'd have invented some kind of handy zipper system a long time ago. Some dude would have patented the bejesus out of it."

She stopped abruptly, snapping her lips closed as if her mouth had finally received the frantic *shut the fuck up* messages from her brain. Her cheeks looked pink, but then so did her nose, so it was probably just the nippy December weather.

Grady stared at her, not only at the amount of words she'd spoken but at the content of her monologue. "We..." He spoke because it felt like his turn, but he didn't even know what to do about cows with zippers. "We don't calve in winter."

"Oh, right." She nodded briskly, her cheeks definitely growing pinker now. "That makes sense. Who wants to be cold *and* in pain, right?"

She gave a funny little half smile that ended quickly and awkwardly. Then they just stood and stared at each other for several beats longer than was normal or even comfortable, their warm breaths misting into the air.

Tucking her hands into the pockets of her red coat, she said, "I hope it's okay to have a look around?"

Grady gave a brief, terse nod. "Just don't go too far or go near the animals." Last thing he needed was to rescue some damn fool city slicker who'd wandered off and gotten herself lost.

She nodded absently as her gaze drifted again, licking over his chest, lingering on the scar. He should be freezing, half naked in a room that was little more than an icebox, but with her looking at him like she was trying to commit every line and chest hair to memory, he only felt hot.

Really fucking hot. Melted butter on pecan pie hot.

"I hope—" Her voice sounded a little uneven, and she cleared her throat. "I hope my music hasn't been disturbing you the last few days."

He wasn't sure why she was making small talk—although it was preferable to incessant

observations about cow hoo-has and zippers. Nor was he sure why he was standing ramrod straight in front of her, thinking about pie when he should be grabbing the spare shirt he kept in the cupboard above the washbasin and getting decent.

But up had been down since the moment she'd arrived.

"It's fine," he dismissed. It hadn't been the music that had been disturbing him, that was for sure.

She nodded again, glancing around the room briefly before settling her eyes back on his chest. "Well...I guess I'll..." She didn't finish the sentence as her gaze once again zeroed in on the scar, and her lips rolled together in contemplation. "Do you mind—?" She stepped forward and raised her hand tentatively.

When he didn't move because he was paralyzed by the realization she was actually going to touch him, she became bolder, stepping in closer again as her fingers made contact. She was so close now, he could smell her. Coffee and snickerdoodles? And something sharp, maybe chemical. Paint, he supposed.

"Is it a bullet wound?"

Grady flinched as she touched the scar, her fingers like icicles as they sunk into the small indentation. He closed his eyes as *heat* bloomed from the center, spreading like a ripple, burning like a furnace down the length of his body.

Blood pulsed hard and thick, *everywhere*. Damn it, she might as well be wrapping that cold hand around the throbbing hardness pressing into the zipper of his fly. It was probably forty degrees in

this concrete box, but it felt like a sauna, and it was an easy 120 inside his boxers.



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