

Malinda Martin

# TENNESSEE WALTZ

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Tennessee Waltz

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## Chapter One

He watched the storm, fierce and wild close over his town. To some it was annoying or frightening but to him, it was real, raw, and harsh. A good picture of life.

The sheer force of Mother Nature unleashing her fury always seemed to give Ben Malone perspective, something that any good small town sheriff should have.

"Hey Sheriff. You out there?" The voice over the car radio broke into Ben's thoughts.

"Yeah, I'm here, Woody. What'd'ya got?"

"Pretty quiet around here. Except for a few things."

*Here it comes*, Ben thought as he braced himself for the list of concerns from his constituents, predictable when a storm blew in. "Mason Howard called in. Thought he saw someone out in his apple fields."

"What were they doing?"

"Picking apples off the ground. You know how Mason is about his apples."

"Uh-huh. What else?" Ben started his car and headed in the direction of Mason's farm just to have a look, wondering who was crazy enough to be out collecting apples in this storm.

"Mary Jo down at the diner said she thought she heard strange noises coming from out back of the building. Wanted you to come by and check it out."

"Of course she does." Ben knew Mary Jo. She was probably just lonely at the diner tonight with the storm hitting and wanted a little company. Well, he'd stop by to check on things but that was all. He was getting a little tired of her high maintenance ways.

"And finally," Woody continued. "Got a call from Mrs. Biggs. Claims she saw some transients taking cover under the bridge at Catchahall Creek. Thought you'd want to know."

Concerned, Ben turned his car toward the creek. "Yeah. If we have much more of this rain, that creek'll rise. Wouldn't be good for transients, especially if they've been drinking." Ben turned on his bright lights to see through the pouring rain. "I'm heading there now. I'll load'em up and bring'em in so they can wait out the storm at the station."

## Tennessee Waltz

“Right, chief. Over and out.”

“Yeah, Woody. Over and out.” The storm continued to drop heavy rainfall all around the small town of Ellerton, Tennessee. As he drove through the main street, Ben noticed the water standing in several places and made a mental note to inform the town council of the drainage problems. After all, this was his town. It had been for most of his life.

The wind whipped around his vehicle with a fury. In the distance he saw lightening flash followed by the sound of thunder. No, the storm wasn't going to be letting up anytime soon. By the end of his shift, he'd surely be soaked to the skin and begging for a hot shower, a hot meal, and a warm bed. In that order.

He pointed his car up the hill and over to the bridge that spanned the large creek. The last thing he wanted was to get out in this weather and help a couple of drunks into his car. Why did they always have to be a nuisance in bad weather?

Turning his car off the road, he shut it off, leaving his headlights pointing down the steep trail beside the bridge. With his rain slicker pulled on, Ben took out his flashlight from the glove department and braced himself for the wind and the rain. The trail down was slick and Ben felt himself slide a few times. The lightning flashed with a vengeance and Ben knew that the storm was intensifying. He slowly crept closer to the bridge, thinking that he must be hearing things. It sounded like a small whimper and a soothing “shhh.”

He frowned as he approached slowly. “Hello? Is anyone here?” He heard another movement although no one answered so he carefully lifted his gun out of his holster and held tightly to it. “If there's anyone here, you'd better let me know right now.”

“Ain't nobody here, mister,” a small voice said followed by another “shhh.” Ben was dumbfounded. It sounded like a child answering, but how could that be? Even more cautious and still holding his gun, he directed his flashlight towards the sound of the voice. He saw movement under the bridge but couldn't make it out so he approached carefully, shining the light as he went.

“I'm sheriff here in Boggs County. Let me see those hands.”

Four hands went up in the air followed by another pair of smaller hands. His light followed the hands down to three terrified faces.

“Are ya gonna shoot us?” a little voice called out.

“What? No!” Ben was flustered to see two little children and one small adult staring at his gun. He quickly holstered the weapon and approached. “What are you doing here?”

“We ain't been doing nothing wrong, sheriff. Just come under here to wait out the storm's all. Then we'll be heading down the road.”

Ben looked at the speaker and saw bright blue eyes, wide and scared, almost haunted. It was a woman. At least he thought it was. She wore a man's hat and had a large coat draped around her and the two children.

His eyes went back to hers and instantly recognized another hurting soul.

At a loss for words he carefully walked toward them and knelt, shining his light on the ground so as not to blind them. “Who are you?”

After a brief hesitation the woman said, “My name's Eleanor Kent. Ellie. And this here's my two children Sarah and John. We're going to Morristown to visit

family and got caught in the storm. Thought we'd sit it out here and get an early start in the morning."

A flash of lightening followed by a loud boom reminded Ben this was no place for a conversation. "That storm's only just started. This creek's going to rise quickly so you can't stay here."

A defeated expression came onto Ellie's face as her two little ones looked up at her with questions in their eyes. "I guess we'll be heading out then." She slowly moved her arms from around the children and started to help them stand. Ben noticed that each child had a small case to carry, Ellie a larger carpetbag. "Thanks for the warning, sheriff," she said as she huddled the kids close to her and peered up at the black night.

Ben was stunned. She couldn't possibly think of walking through this storm with two children. What kind of a mother was she? Maybe this situation bore his attention for a little longer.

"Wait." At the sound of his call, Ellie turned around. "You can't just go out in this weather. Why don't I take you to a hotel?"

"Much obliged, sheriff, but we'll just keep moving on."

This was not good. He didn't want to arrest the mom but he knew as a public servant he couldn't in good conscience let this little family travel in the storm. By the way, where was the husband slash father?

As the three prepared to step into the rain, Ben tried again.

"Wait." Again, they turned around. "There's a diner back about a mile towards town. At least let me get the three of you warmed up before you have to leave. I'll even buy the coffee and hot chocolate." That would work wouldn't it? Delay them and then talk them into staying until the storm was over.

"That's real nice, but we don't take charity."

Mountain people. Obviously. The pride of these people was legendary. Now Ben was faced with a dilemma. He knew if he couldn't get them to stay until the storm was over the little family would risk injury or sickness. But he'd dealt with mountain people before and he knew that dynamite wouldn't bust through that stubborn pride of theirs. He had to be imaginative here.

"Well, you may not have realized it but we have a law here in Boggs County. It's called the . . . the . . . 'Just Passing Through Law.' It entitles each family coming through Ellerton a free meal at Mountain View Café before they leave town."

Ellie narrowed her eyes at Ben. "I ain't never heard of such law."

"It's what makes Ellerton so special," Ben said smiling at the two children. "Now, my squad car is just up the hill here so as the law in Ellerton, I insist that you let me take you to redeem your free meal."

The kids looked up at their mother. Ben saw the woman struggle with her answer. He wondered how long it had been since they'd had a good meal.

A small grumble from one of the kids' stomachs apparently decided it. She smiled a wobbly smile at them and looked up at Ben. "Thank you kindly, sheriff. That's be right nice."

Ben wasn't sure why he felt so relieved. Maybe it was just the need to protect this little family. He watched as Ellie hefted the handle of her carpetbag over her shoulder and then took a hand of each of her children and set out into the storm.

## Tennessee Waltz

Ben followed closely behind wanting to help but knowing that he could easily scare them away.

The rain was steady though not quite as heavy. The little girl and boy stayed close to their mother, their wool hats clinging to their scalps. They reached the patrol car before Ben and stood there waiting. When Ben reached them, he opened the backseat door and said, "Well, go on and get in."

Both children looked up at their mother waiting.

"It's all right. Go ahead and get in," Ellie said.

Large smiles came from the children as they jumped into the backseat. Just before Ben closed the door he heard the older child say, "Just looky here, John! We're gonna get to ride in a real automobile! Ain't that just something?"

Ben couldn't help smiling. Definitely mountain people. Never been in a car before. He took the roads very carefully not wanting to scare his passengers. In his rearview mirror he saw the mother cuddle her children closer to her as their big eyes took in everything about their ride.

He wondered what their story was. He didn't buy the "just going to Morristown to visit family" story. The kids seemed too clingy. The mother seemed too alert. There was more here.

And he was going to find out what before he let them go.

The rain began to come down in buckets as Ben opened the door to the Mountain View Café. A tall, slim brunette turned toward the door, her face breaking into a huge grin. "Ben." She walked towards the foursome completely ignoring the other three. "I've been expecting you. I called the deputy over an hour ago."

"I know, Mary Jo. Something came up." He looked down at Ellie and the kids and said, "Where's the warmest seat in the house?"

Then seeing the others for the first time, Mary Jo said. "Oh, sorry. This way." She grabbed several menus and led them to a back booth close to a heating duct.

Ellie and the kids huddled together on one side and after all three were settled Ben said, "Mary Jo'll get you some coffee and some hot chocolate for the kids. I'll be back in just a couple of minutes." He walked with Mary Jo back to the front counter and pulled out his phone.

Mary Jo looked back at the small family and said, "What's the story with them?"

Ben punched in the sheriff's office and said, "I'm not sure. But I'm going to find out." When Woody picked up Ben said, "It's me. Listen, those transients under the bridge? Turns out it's a mother and her two children. I've got them over at the café getting warm and fed. Anything I need to know about?"

"No, sheriff. What are you going to do with them?"

"Don't know. If I can't think of something I guess I'll bring them back to the office. Can't have them out on a night like this."

"I hear you. Weather service says it'll be like this all night. Wouldn't want my wife and kids out in it."

Again Ben was hit with a righteous anger. Where was the husband? Where was the father? Someone had to look after this little family. "I'll be here at the café for a while and then I'll head in."

"Ten-four that."

When Ben ended his call Mary Jo hurried over to him. She moved in close to him brushing an imaginary piece of lint off his broad shoulders. "I called you yesterday. Did you get my message?"

"Yeah, I got it. I've been busy."

"Surely not too busy to talk to me. I mean after we had such a good time at the movies." She moved her lips to his ear.

Ben held back a sigh. Yes, Mary Jo had been a good time but he knew it was over. He'd been with her kind of woman before and knew they could devastate a hardworking, sincere guy. No, he wasn't going through that again.

As he tried to think of how to be firm but kind, Mary Jo surprised him by tracing his earlobe with her tongue. Shudders of pleasure rolled through Ben's body. As a low chuckle escaped his throat, his eyes came up and met the bright blue eyes of Ellie Kent. As if taking a dive into a cold pond, he straightened and sobered. "I've got to get back. Could you give us a minute and then we'll order."

"Sure, darlin'. Anything you want." She winked at Ben and then disappeared in the kitchen.

A little embarrassed, he wasn't sure why, Ben walked back to the booth and sat across from Ellie and the kids. She had her menu out in front of her, intensely studying it, obviously pretending that she hadn't seen the intimate scene between him and Mary Jo. Ben felt an overwhelming need to explain. "That's Mary Jo. She and I are . . . friends."

Ellie looked up at Ben. "Your girlfriend? She's awful pretty."

"Not exactly. I mean, yes, she's pretty. But she's not my girlfriend." To Ellie's look of confusion, he added, "I mean, we go out . . . occasionally . . . but . . ." This was very awkward. "So, you see anything on the menu that you like?"

"The vegetable soup looks good. We'll have a bowl of that, please."

"Could we get crackers with that, Mama?" the little girl asked.

"We don't want to take advantage of the good sheriff."

Ben took a moment to study the faces of the three people before him. The little girl, the older of the two children, sat close to her mom, always touching her in some way. Her round face and bright cheeks were bursting with youth. Her eyes, the same color as her mother's, were glowing with enthusiasm as she looked around the café as if it were the Taj Mahal.

The little boy had his thumb in his mouth and his blanket in his hand. He leaned into his mother and her arm held him tightly to her side. The little boy continually looked at Ben and Ben couldn't help wondering what exactly was going through that little mind. The child looked just like his sister except for the hair. His was black while hers was a pale blonde. Ben couldn't help wondering what color the mother's hair was since it was still pushed up under the hat that she wore.

Which brought Ben to the mother. What was she running from? Ben was sure that she was running away from something now. He'd been in law enforcement too long not to miss the signs—fear in the eyes, ambiguous plans, in a hurry to leave.

## Tennessee Waltz

She obviously loved these children and was doing her best to provide for them. His heart tightened with respect for the woman. And a desire to help. At least he could give them a good meal. "A bowl of soup to start. Got it. Then what?"

Ellie's raised eyebrows almost made him laugh. "You can have more than that, Ms. Kent."

"Oh no, really—"

"Here we go." Mary Jo arrived with two coffees, two hot chocolates, and four glasses of water. "Now be careful, kids, the chocolate is very hot." The kids looked with delight at the steaming mug that was topped with whipped cream.

"Oh, boy!" the little girl, Sarah, said.

"Oh, boy!" her brother John repeated.

Taking out her pad, Mary Jo said, "What can I get for you?"

"Three bowls of vegetable soup." He paused to look at Ellie. "With crackers." She smiled, causing a flicker of warmth to spread inside him. "And three hamburgers with French fries. I'll have your quarter pound bacon cheeseburger plate."

In a low voice, Ellie leaned over the table and said, "Sheriff, who is all that food for?"

"What's French fries, Mama?" Sarah asked.

Ben was shocked. How could any child not have heard about French fries? Instead of answering Ellie's question, he turned his attention to her daughter. "French fries are about the best use of the potato known to man. You're going to love them." Seeing Ellie's skeptical face he reminded her, "The town's paying. We'd all be disappointed if you didn't get a fine meal here at the café."

That seemed to placate Ellie as she began to sip her coffee, black. Ben reached for his and added one pack of sugar. He watched the kids very carefully sip their hot chocolate. Both sat up with whipped cream on their noses. Sarah squealed, "It's good." John nodded agreement. They were so cute that Ben burst out laughing.

He had a problem. He didn't know what to do with Ellie and her children. He legally couldn't hold them; no crime had been committed. However, he couldn't let them go wandering in the stormy night. If only he could get Ellie to talk to him, explain what was really going on. Maybe he could help her. But he could see by looking in Ellie's eyes that she was closed up tight. She wouldn't be sharing with any stranger.

He looked at the two kids. They may be the key. Perhaps if he could get Sarah and John comfortable then all three might confide in him. Ben looked at the little girl. "So, Sarah, how old are you? Fifteen? Sixteen?"

Peals of giggles broke out from the child. "No! I'm five!" And as if to prove it, Sarah held up her hand.

"A whole hand. That's something. Are you married?"

As Sarah broke out with more giggles and Ellie smiled, John said, "I three." He looked down at his fingers trying to manipulate them into holding up three fingers. Seeing his difficulty, Ellie helped him hold up three fingers and fold his other two down. Then proudly he held up the hand and announced again, "I three."

"Three years old. Wow. What do you do for a living, John?"

Not exactly understanding what Ben was saying, John said, "I a kid."

Ben nodded his head in understanding as Ellie stifled a giggle. Mary Jo returned at that moment. The bowls of vegetable soup were placed on the table along with several saltine crackers packages. John looked at Ellie. Sarah looked at Ellie. Ellie bowed her head and quietly said a quick prayer of thanks. Then she looked at her children and nodded. Ben watched as the three began eagerly eating the soup and crackers. He was silent, letting them enjoy and proud of himself for the idea of the meal.

A few minutes later both children's eyes grew huge as plates filled with food were set before them. Each plate held a large hamburger, a long slice of pickle, and mounds of golden French fries steaming, their delicious aroma filling the room.

With a smile for the waitress, Ben said, "Thanks Mary Jo." Then to the kids he said, "Go ahead and try those French fries. I want to know what you think of them." Again John and Sarah looked at Ellie. Ellie nodded. They each took a fry. Sarah daintily took a bite and savored it, deciding what she thought. John crammed it into his mouth and munched.

Ben could hardly stand the suspense. "Well?"

Sarah's little face beamed with joy as she looked at the sheriff. "It's good." Then she turned to Ellie and said, "It's good, Mama. And would you believe it's a tater!"

This was too much fun. He looked at John who wasn't taking time for reviews but was cramming more French fries into his mouth. Ben took the ketchup and poured a little on each of the three plates. "Dip a fry into this and then taste. It's even better." He watched as each child tried the condiment. Looking at Ellie he noticed that she hadn't started eating yet but was still watching her children. "You need to eat, Ms. Kent, before it gets cold."

Satisfied that her children were enjoying the meal, she smiled and proceeded to eat hers. As Ben watched, he was humbled by their simple pleasure of the meal. These folks apparently didn't eat too regularly. They savored and enjoyed every bite.

Halfway through the meal, Mary Jo checked on the table. Ben announced that they would be having dessert—hot fudge sundaes for everyone. Ellie and the kids didn't say anything, as they were too busy eating. Ben was sure that they had no idea what an ice cream sundae was. His joy was complete when Mary Jo brought the desserts to the table. The kids' eyes got wider, if possible, and they bounced in their seats. Ben laughed. He hadn't laughed so much in . . . he couldn't remember when.

Once the kids were finished eating, it didn't take them long before they were nodding off. Ellie was still picking at her food. Ben noticed she wasn't a big eater and as the kids napped, she took a couple of paper napkins and wrapped up her leftovers, slipping them into her carpetbag. Wanting her to relax more, talk more, he lifted Sarah over to his side of the booth and let her lay down and sleep. John was already zonked out, his head resting on his mother's lap.

Mary Jo had just refilled the coffee mugs. Ellie was picking at her ice cream. It was quiet and . . . comfortable. Time to try to get more information out of Ellie. "So, you're heading to Morristown?"

"Yes sir, that's right."

"You got people down there?"

## Tennessee Waltz

"I got an aunt. She ain't never seen the children so I thought we'd surprise her with a visit. Thought we'd stay for a spell since she's getting on in years."

Something about her story just didn't ring true. Why would she be traveling with two small children in the fall when the weather was starting to turn cold at nights? "You're walking to Morristown?"

"Yes, sir."

"Morristown's a long way from here." Ben could see the weariness in Ellie's eyes. "This isn't the best time of year to travel. Are you sure that you don't want to wait until spring?"

"No." Ellie was obviously determined. "We've got to go right now."

The phrasing of her sentence didn't go unnoticed. Seeing her expression close up again, Ben decided to change tactics. "You're from up in the mountains?"

Ellie thought for a moment and then nodded. "Just west of Cumberland Gap."

"I bet it's beautiful up there," Ben said.

"Mmm. Just now the leaves are coloring and the air's changing. It's right pretty." Ellie's expression took a thoughtful turn.

"Yeah, I bet you already miss it. Kids probably miss it too."

Ellie looked at her sleeping children and Ben marveled as he saw the loving look in her eyes harden into a steely, fierce resolve. She looked through the windows at the storm that was not letting up. Then back at the sheriff as she said, "Do you think the owner would mind if we wait out the storm here? I don't mind working for my keep, I could mop the floors and scrub the tables."

Ben knew his conversation with Ellie was over. He smiled softly and said, "Why don't I go check on it? I'll be right back." He carefully slid out of the booth so as not to disturb Sarah and walked to the counter where Mary Jo had already started to cash out. Ben pulled a bill out of his wallet and gave it to Mary Jo. "Thanks, darlin'."

"Sure, Ben." As Ben punched in a familiar number, Mary Jo said, "Hey, why don't you come by my place tonight. I think I've got some wine in the fridge. We could snuggle up together, maybe watch a movie."

Distracted Ben said, "Thanks but I've got to get these folks situated." He waited for someone to answer the phone.

"You seem really concerned with the little mother and her kids. Why?"

Ben looked at the woman confused. As if explaining a simple concept to a child he said, "It's my job, Mary Jo. Hey, Ma?" he said into the phone. Mary Jo left him to his call.

"I've got a situation here. A young mother and two young children traveling on foot, nowhere to go in this storm. I found them underneath the bridge at Catchahall Creek." Ben looked back at the table as the woman was wrapping pieces of her children's meal and packing it in her carpet bag.

"How terrible. The poor dears. What can I do to help, son?"

Ben smiled. That was his mother. Always ready to aid those less fortunate than herself. It had been her way all his life but especially the past five years since his father had passed away. His mother's only thoughts were for others. "I know it's asking a lot but do you suppose that they could stay there for the night? They seem pretty harmless and I'll bunk on the couch just to make sure everything's all right."

"Well of course it's okay. Have they eaten? Should I fix them a meal?"

Chuckling, Ben said, "We just ate at the café. In fact, the kids are so stuffed, they're sound asleep."

"Those poor little ones. You bring them on right now. I'll get beds ready for them."

"Thanks, Ma. You're the best." Ben hung up the phone and looked at the woman in the booth. Her head was lowered, obviously looking at her son. Why did he feel responsible for them? Maybe because he was the sheriff. Maybe because they seemed so helpless. Maybe because her beautiful eyes held a sadness that drew him in.

Regardless, he wasn't going to let them down.

## Chapter Two

Amidst the storm, sleeping kids, and arguing over going to the sheriff's mother's house—Ellie was sure it was too big of an imposition—they finally pulled up in front of a well-lit, red-brick home with oak trees and flower beds. Ellie couldn't see much but she instinctively knew that this was a good place.

The past few years had honed her instincts sharply. No more was she a naïve little girl, playing house with her Prince Charming. She had grown up quickly, having her eyes opened to the harsh realities of life—that she was alone, save her children, and she was their only advocate in a cruel, hard world.

The front door opened and a medium-sized woman in her sixties appeared holding her arms closely to her chest to ward off the chill of the rain. The sheriff found a couple of old blankets in his trunk and he took one, giving the other to Ellie. He covered the sleeping Sarah in the blanket and carried her up onto the porch and gave his mother a kiss on the cheek.

Ellie wrapped her son in a blanket and tenderly lifted him, carrying him to the house. Nerves began to chill her faster than the rain as she faced the woman.

"Hello, Ellie. I'm Ben's mother, Peggy Malone but everyone just calls me 'Miss Peggy.' Come on in and let's get these kids taken care of." She easily carried the conversation, which helped to ease Ellie's nerves. "Come on this way. I've got several beds made up for you—"

"Oh, that's nice but . . ."

Everyone stopped in the hall. "What is it dear?"

"Sarah and John here, they're not used to strange beds. Not that your beds is strange, Miss Peggy. But if it weren't no trouble could we all sleep in one bed?"

Peggy smiled a knowing smile. "No trouble at all." She led the way into one of the rooms with a queen-sized bed. Peggy hurried over to pull the covers down. Ben and Ellie carefully removed their coats and laid the children in the bed, removing their wet shoes.

Ellie took a moment to stroke their hair and smile at them as Peggy pulled the sheet and spread over them.

Looking at Ellie, Peggy said, "Child, you are soaked to the bone. Why don't you take a nice hot bath before you go to bed?" Walking out the bedroom door she continued, "I think Daphne left a nightgown here that you could use."

Ben and Ellie were left in the quiet of the bedroom. Her eyes looked up at him with a mixture of emotions. Finally she said, "I'll go get our things."

He stopped her with his hand on her arm. "No, that's all right. You go take your bath. I'll get them for you."

He started to walk out the door when Ellie stopped him. "Sheriff?" He turned back to her. With a wobbly smile, she said, "Much obliged."

Ben smiled. "No problem . . . Ellie."

As Ellie soaked in a hot bath, Ben phoned into his office. Peggy sat at the kitchen table nursing a cup of hot tea. When Ben hung up she said, "You're trying to find out who Ellie is?"

Ben sat at the table and rubbed his weary eyes. "Yeah. I've got Woody looking into missing persons, APB's. I'm sure it's a dead end, though. She's from the mountains."

"I could tell," Peggy said. After taking a sip, she said, "Where are they going?" "Morristown."

"Morristown? On foot?" Ben nodded. "Why?"

Ben yawned and then said, "She says she's got an aunt there. She and the kids are going for a visit."

"This time a year?" Ben couldn't hold in his chuckle. His mother would have made a great detective. Of course, she'd had plenty of practice with him, his brother, and his sister. No one ever got away with anything growing up in this house.

Ben watched his mother take another sip of tea. "You got any coffee, Ma?"

"Not for you, it's too late. Let me get you a nice cup of hot tea. It'll ease your nerves. Help you sleep just like a little baby."

"No thanks. But you can get me a pillow and a blanket. As soon as I do a little paperwork, I'm off shift. Going to get a little shut eye."

"Miss Peggy?" a small feminine voice called from the doorway.

Ben turned to see a vision in white standing before him. He wouldn't have been surprised to look up and see a halo forming and wings sprouting from her back. The transient, young, fretful mother was completely transformed in front of him. She wore a long silky white nightgown that clung to firm breasts and womanly hips. The hair that had been a complete mystery to Ben was now free, flowing in soft, wheat-colored waves around her shoulders and down her back. The pallor that had been on her face in the night was replaced with a healthy glow from a good meal and a hot bath. Ben was entranced. His heart started racing, his tongue became heavy in his salivating mouth. He couldn't have spoken if his life depended on it.

"Yes, dear." Peggy hurried over to her.

"I'm going to sleep now. Just wanted to say 'goodnight' and God bless you."

"Same to you, Ellie." Peggy patted Ellie's arm and smiled warmly at her.

Ellie returned the smile and left the room. Ben didn't see his mother watching him as his eyes followed Ellie down the hall, staring at her lower half.

"I don't know about you, but I think that woman needs some help."

"Huh?" Ben turned back around as Peggy shook her head and took her cup to the sink to rinse before loading it into the dishwasher.

"Ellie? Her kids? There's sadness behind her eyes. She needs us, Ben. Did Ellie mention a husband? A father?"

Ben shook his head in annoyance. "Not a word. She seems a little skittish. I didn't want to spook her by asking too many questions."

## Tennessee Waltz

"Understandable." Peggy stood against the counter with her arms crossed. "Maybe I can find out something tomorrow."

"Go easy on her, Ma. Remember the object is to make sure she and the kids are all right. Not to find out her sordid past."

"Of course, son," she said as if it were a given. "Now, let me get you that blanket and pillow."

Ben sat back and relaxed. He still had work to do before turning in but for this moment he knew they were all safe and dry, protected from the storm. It was a good feeling to know that he had made sure Ellie and her kids were taken care of for the night. Not the police career he had planned, but all in all he wasn't going to complain.

It was progress he supposed.

The sound of a light drizzle filled Ben's ears the next morning. At least he thought it was rain. Listening more carefully, he realized the sound was not a drizzle, but a sizzle. Bacon! Then the smell hit him. Bacon frying and fresh coffee brewing. Nothing like coffee and bacon to get a body moving in the morning.

Ben opened one eye and then the other to see the sun just peeking through the curtains into the living room. He sat up and listened. The storm was over, but his work would just be starting. There would be some flooding, muddy roads, missing animals. It would be a busy day.

He stretched up and yawned. Standing, he shuffled into the kitchen, barefoot. Sitting at the table were Sarah and John, each playing with a toy while Ellie was at the stove cooking bacon and eggs. The white nightgown was gone, replaced by a functional housedress that did nothing for the luscious figure that he knew was underneath.

Ben took a moment to observe the little family. Both children sat quietly playing. He'd never seen more behaved children than these two. He knew his two nephews whom he loved would not have sat this still and this quiet waiting for their breakfast. Ben's widowed brother Kevin called them roaring lions when it was mealtime.

At that moment Sarah looked up and with a bright smile on her face said, "Morning, sheriff!"

John echoed the greeting. "Monin, shewiff!"

Ellie turned and gave a shy smile to Ben. He returned it and walked to the table. Sitting next to John he said, "What's going on, guys?" He couldn't help ruffling John's hair causing him to grin up at the man.

"Mama told us we had to be quiet cause you were asleep but we don't have to anymore cause you're awake." Sarah turned to her mother. "Ain't that right, Mama?"

"Yes, baby but we still don't want to get too loud. The sheriff and Miss Peggy probably aren't used to having children around."

"Oh, don't worry about that. My brother has two boys that are so loud when they visit I tell you they can yell the paint off the walls."

"Really?" Sarah asked her eyes wide.

Ben chuckled. "Where's Ma this morning?" Ben was famished but didn't want to start eating without his mother present.

"She went out back to cut some flowers. She said to go ahead and eat. How do you like your coffee, sheriff?"

"Black. One teaspoon sugar. Thanks," he said as she put the coffee in front of him. Ben smelled a pleasant fragrance of gardenias as Ellie walked back to the stove. Very nice.

"So, you know your way around the kitchen, do you?" Ben asked.

"Of course," Ellie said seriously. She took a plate and loaded it with scrambled eggs and crisp bacon. Reaching into the oven, she pulled out homemade biscuits and put several on the plate. Putting the plate in front of Ben, she moved a jar of peach preserves near his plate and turned back to the stove.

He looked up to see both children looking at him. "Have they eaten," Ben said directing his comment to Ellie.

"No. I'm getting theirs."

Ben shook his head. It amazed him that Southern women still served men first. Wanting to show his manners, he waited for the children to receive their plates. When Ellie went back to the stove, Ben said, "Aren't you coming?"

"In a minute," she said absently.

Ben shrugged and then proceeded to eat the delicious breakfast. "Mama! Sheriff didn't say grace!" Ben dropped his fork as Ellie turned around.

"Sarah, this isn't our house. We don't make the rules," she gently scolded.

"No, she's right," Ben said. Then he waited as all three looked at him. "Oh, you want me to say it. Okay." He hadn't said grace in a lot of years to his mother's chagrin. He cleared his throat and then said, "Thanks for the grub."

The two children giggled and Ellie smirked as everyone began to eat.

Ben thought of how he could find out about Ellie's plans without it appearing obvious. Ellie saved him that trouble when she said, "We'll be lightin' out of here after we clean up the breakfast dishes. This sure has been a friendly place giving a body a meal and shelter from the storm according to the *Just Passing Through Law*."

Ben wasn't sure but he thought he heard a touch of sarcasm in Ellie's voice. "It's been our pleasure. But really, you don't have to rush off. Explore Ellerton. It's a nice little town." Ben's information hadn't come back yet on Ellie and he didn't want her leaving town until it did.

"Mighty nice of you, but I think we'll be moving along."

Before Ben could come back with a reason for staying, his mother provided one as she came through the back door. "That's not going to be possible, honey." Everyone looked at Peggy. "Ben, have you heard from your office this morning?" To his shake of the head she continued. "Roads east of here heading to Morrystown are flooded. The storm caused that dam back up in the mountain to burst and Route twenty-one and fifty-four are completely underwater."

"How do you know this?" Ben was always irritated when his mother knew big news before he did.

"Henry, next door. He heard it from Buster the paper boy who heard it from Mable down the block, whose son couldn't go to work because of it."

## Tennessee Waltz

Ben rolled his eyes. Small towns. They had a better communication system than any computer information highway. He looked back at Ellie to see her biting her lower lip as she thought about the problem. "There's not another way to Morristown?" she asked.

"Fraid not. But don't worry. The roads should be cleared out in a few days. It's happened before. No big deal." Knowing that Ellie would probably be thinking of excuses to try to get through, Ben added, "But it's highly dangerous for anyone walking that way and especially no place for children."

Ben knew his remark hit its spot. In the short time he'd known her, Ben was sure that Ellie wouldn't do anything to endanger her children. She sighed and said, "Is there somewhere in town that the kids and I could camp out?"

Peggy jumped in. "Don't be silly, you'll stay right here." Peggy smiled at the children. "We'll think of some fun things to do while you wait, won't we kids?" Both heads nodded up and down.

"I don't take charity, Miss Peggy," Ellie said adamantly.

"And this isn't charity, honey. You three are guests in my home and I'm delighted to have you."

As Ben watched the by-play continue, his eyes narrowed in thought. He hoped his mother wasn't getting too attached to Ellie and the kids. He had no idea who these people really were. He was going to keep a close eye on things.

The phone ringing broke into Ben's thoughts. Peggy answered and then handed it to Ben. Another deputy, Harvey, was on the line to give the sheriff a morning report. When he got to the part of the broken dam, Ben said, "Yeah, I already heard about it. Do they need our help out there with clean-up?"

"No. It wasn't that bad. Got a dozen men working on it so it should be clear by the afternoon."

Ben turned his back to the kitchen table and lowered his voice so the chatting women wouldn't hear him. "Hey, I asked Woody to look into something for me last night. Do you know if he found anything?"

"He was looking when I came on so I took over."

Ben waited for Harvey to tell him anything. "And?"

"Nothing. No records anywhere of Ellie Kent or her two children. Woody said you thought she must be from up in the mountains. I'm telling you she must be from *really* up in the mountains."

"No . . . other information?"

"No missing persons. No child abductions. No news out there that might be linked to her."

"Hmm. Okay, thanks, Harvey. I'll be in about half an hour from now." He hung up the phone and stood thinking. Should he be leaving his mother with a woman he knew nothing about?

"Everything all right, son?"

Ben looked up to see everyone staring at him. "Yeah. Not too much damage. Cleanup's started. They may even have the roads opened by this afternoon."

"Thank heavens," Ellie murmured.

"Yeah, well." Ben started towards the doorway. "I've got to head home and change before work. "Ellie, Sarah, John, I hope I get to see you before you leave," he

said to the little family. Then turning to his mother he said, "Mom, could you walk me out?"

"Sure, honey."

"Bye, sheriff," Sarah called, her round mouth oozing jam covered crumbs.

"Bye, shewiff. Thanks for gwub," John said, smiling.

Ben chuckled and waved. As soon as they were out the front door, he said, "I'm not sure I like leaving you with them, Ma."

"Oh, for crying out loud. Ellie's just a poor soul trying to find a place for herself and her children."

"Then you don't buy that story that they're visiting an aunt in Morristown?"

"She may have an aunt there, but I'll tell you this. They've packed everything they owned into those little bags they carry. They're not going for a visit. They're running away from something. Or someone."

This did not help Ben's concern. "Maybe I should stay around, maybe—"

Peggy pushed Ben towards his car. "Will you go to work? We'll be fine. If Ellie needs anything right now, it's a little kindness. Not the police around to watch her every move. We'll be fine. Really."

Ben wasn't sure. "If she makes the slightest suspicious move, you call me immediately. Got that?"

Peggy smiled. She kissed him on the cheek and said, "Got it. Now go make the town safe."

"I'll do my best," he said with a wink and a smile.

All Ben's research of the morning had been for naught. He couldn't come up with anything on Ellie and her children. Every half hour or so he was calling his mother to make sure everything was okay there.

Peggy had finally had enough of it. "For goodness sakes, Ben, there's nothing to worry about."

"Probably not but I'd just feel a whole lot better if I could get some sort of confirmation that Ellie is who she says she is."

"Well, if you're that desperate, why don't you try to track down old Doc Barnes? He knows everyone up in the mountains within a five hundred mile radius of Ellerton. I'm sure he'd know Ellie."

"Now why didn't I think of that? Gotta go." After two hours of phone calls, Ben had tracked down the elderly doctor that had dedicated his life to bringing health care to the poor people of the Tennessee Mountains. "Doc Barnes, how you doing?"

"Fine, Sheriff Ben. How's that scar on your thigh? Not giving you any trouble, I hope?"

Ben smiled. When he was thirteen, he had fallen on a ragged branch at a town picnic and Doc Barnes treated him. The old man was amazing. He clearly never forgot anything. "My leg's just fine. Due, of course, to your superb doctoring."

The doctor chuckled as Ben got on to the business on hand. "I need a little information from you."

"Be glad to help if I can. What do you need?"

## Tennessee Waltz

"Do you know a young woman by the name of Ellie Kent. She's probably about early to mid-twenties. Very attractive, blonde hair, blue eyes. Slender—"

"You don't need to go on. Of course I know Ellie. I brought her into the world. Even delivered her two young-uns. Why? She in some kind of trouble?"

This peaked Ben's interest. "Why do you think she'd be in any trouble?"

"Now don't take on so. It was a normal reaction to a sheriff asking me about someone, that's all."

"Sorry. She and the kids showed up here in Ellerton last night. Say they're on their way to visit an aunt in Morristown. The storm last night has got her staying here a little longer and I just wanted to check her out. Make sure she was who she said she was."

"Well, she is. And you'd better take good care of her and those kids while they're there. They's good people, Sheriff." As Ben thought about this, Doc continued. "They made it through the storm all right? No colds, fever?"

"No, they're fine."

Doc laughed. "I'm not surprised. Them two little sprouts are as sturdy as their daddy's family."

"So where is the father?" Ben couldn't help asking.

Doc sighed. "Died in an accident over a year ago. I guess Ellie's had a hard time of it. Her late husband's family should be taking care of her but I guess his death hit her hard."

Okay, this all made sense now. Ben felt a heavy lump in his stomach dissolve as the worry he had been carrying dissipated.

"Ellie's a good woman, sheriff. She ain't deserved such heartache at such a young age. You don't let anything happen to her, you hear?"

"Doc? I owe you lunch at the café next time you come through town."

The old doctor laughed. "I'd be plum honored. Give me a chance to check out that scarred leg of yours."

Ben grinned.

The late afternoon breeze carried the clean fall air across the backyard, along with the squeals and laughter of Sarah and John. Peggy sat in her back porch rocking chair shelling butter beans and enjoying the sounds of the children having fun. Each sat on a swing at a large swing set, their mother alternately pushing one and then the other. With each push came another giggle.

Peggy smiled contentedly. She loved having children around. Her only two grandchildren lived with her son in Knoxville, about two hours away. Their visits were sporadic. Especially since the death of his wife.

"Ma?" The back screen door creaked open and Ben came out.

"Hey. We're back here enjoying the lovely afternoon," she said as her son took a seat in the large swing next to her chair.

"I see Ellie and the kids are still here." Peggy smirked at him and he grinned. "I know, I know. She was the last time I called thirty minutes ago." He paused. "I did get confirmation on her identity. Doc Barnes knew all about her." Peggy paused in her work to give him an "I told you so" look. "Hey, you can't be too careful. After

all, you're the only mother I have." With that he leaned over and kissed the woman's cheek. Her girlish giggle made him grin.

"I am surprised to see her still here. I thought she was all afire to get going."

"She is. But I convinced her that even if the road was opened now, it was too late in the day to start walking." Peggy sighed deeply. "Sure wish I could talk her into letting me get them bus tickets. I hate the thought of them walking all the way."

"Her stubborn mountain pride would never let her."

Peggy nodded her head. "Maybe she could work, earn the money."

"Maybe." Ben could practically see the wheels turning in his mother's head.

More giggles and squeals came from the large backyard as both children were now off the swings and being chased by their mother. The love and joy was evident in their play. Ben didn't notice. He was noticing the woman running free in the yard. Her long hair was secured in a ponytail and a grin covered her face. A glow seemed to come from that face. Ben couldn't put his finger on why he thought she was so beautiful. She wouldn't be considered a classic beauty. Her face was rather thin, causing her blue eyes to stand out. Her lips were thin, but a light pink color, just like his mother's roses. Her cheekbones were high and dramatic, clearly a family trait. And she wasn't wearing a smidge of makeup. Usually Ben liked his women made up, making the most of their assets. Still, she was lovely. He could just imagine . . .

He shook his head, as the path of his thoughts disturbed him. "Why isn't she helping you with these beans? I'd think she wouldn't let you do them all by yourself."

Peggy gave her son a scolding look. "That woman hasn't stopped working since the minute she got up this morning. Besides taking care of the children, she's mopped my floors, cleaned my refrigerator, swept the driveway, and weeded my garden. I finally made her go out and play with the kids."

As Ben thought about this, Sarah turned and saw him. "Hey, sheriff! We're chasing Mama!"

Her pink cheeks and bright eyes made Ben smile. This was clearly a happy little girl. He stood and walked over to the steps leading to the big yard. "I see, darlin'. I bet you can catch her too."

"We can, can't we John." The little boy bobbed his head up and down.

Ben continued walking onto the lawn. "Well, how about *I* try to catch *you*!" And with that he started running towards the children. Their yells made both Peggy and Ellie laugh. Ben weaved back and forth letting them get a little distance ahead and then lunged forward. The screams grew louder, causing the two to run harder. After about five minutes of this, Ben decided he was tired so he gave a burst of speed and grabbed them, wrapping them up, one in each arm.

Ellie viewed the chase from the back porch. As Ben walked back carrying a squirming, giggling child under each arm, he smiled at Ellie. Her breath caught at the humor and the . . . what was it . . . tenderness that she saw there. This big man was an enigma to her. Most of the time he was very intimidating, carrying on his job of sheriff with proficiency. Then he would be so gentle and loving with his mother. Now he was playing with her children and smiling at her.

## Tennessee Waltz

She smiled at her happy children. What a blessing they were. They made her almost forget the pain of the past year. And her fear of the future. When Ben deposited them down by the porch, she said, "I'd better get ya'll cleaned up for supper."

"Oh, let them play a little longer, honey. The ham won't be ready for a while."

Ben sniffed the air. "Is that what smells heavenly? And I thought it was a new perfume you were using," he said playfully to his mother.

Chuckling, she swatted his arm. "Now all of you just stay out here enjoying the weather. I'll check on dinner."

"Miss Peggy, let me help you," Ellie said.

With the screen door closing, Peggy said, "Nonsense. You relax. You've done enough work for five people today. Stay put."

Sarah and John had already retreated back to the yard to play in the sand box. Ellie and Ben stood there, awkwardly. Their eyes met for a second.

Both were suddenly very uncomfortable.

## Chapter Three

“Well . . .” Ben motioned with his hand for Ellie to sit. The bowl of butter beans sat on the only other chair so he joined her on the swing and gently set the swing in motion.

Ellie looked out at her children. She took a breath and said, “Sarah and John enjoyed runnin’ with you. Thank you for being so kind to them.”

The sincerity in Ellie’s voice touched Ben. Had their father not been close to them? Had he been a good father? Or husband? Every time Ben thought he’d answered the questions he had about Ellie and her kids, more would pop up.

“It’s not hard to be kind to Sarah and John. They’re great kids, Ellie. You’ve done a fine job with them.” Ellie shyly smiled and looked down. “It does my heart good to see this playground equipment getting some use. Kevin, my brother, doesn’t get his kids up this way too much since his wife died.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” Ellie looked compassionately at Ben.

Looking at Ellie for some sign of her own grief over a dead spouse, Ben said, “Yeah, it’s been pretty rough on him and the boys.” When Ellie made no returning remark Ben decided to change the subject and said, “I talked to Doc Barnes today. He spoke very highly of you.”

Ellie beamed at the mention of the old doctor. “Doc Barnes is a saint. We all love him very much.” Then thinking, she added, “Gracious, no one was sick or hurt, was they?”

“No, nothing like that. We were just talking.” Ben didn’t want Ellie to know he had been checking her out. Not that there was anything wrong with that but he didn’t want to offend Ellie.

The gentle creak of the swing along with the subtle sounds of a fall evening caused Ben to lay his head back and fully relax. After a few moments he heard Ellie quietly chuckling. He opened his eyes to see Ellie’s attention locked on Sarah and John. He looked over to see John playing war games with the action figures in the sand while Sarah was trying to corral the figures into families.

“Typical woman,” Ben said with a grin.

Ellie turned to look at him. “And what would the trouble with that be, sheriff?”

Ben’s grin widened. “Nothing. Nothing. Just an observation. And it’s Ben.”

She nodded and turned back to gaze at her kids. A concern she couldn’t hide showed in her eyes.

Ben noticed. “They’re really great kids, Ellie.”

## Tennessee Waltz

"I know. It's just that sometimes I get . . . a little scared." She turned to look at Ben, and her eyes lingered a moment longer than usual. Quickly she glanced down.

Ben, a normal, red-blooded man, always appreciated an interested look from a pretty girl. He could see her chest rise and fall with her quickened heartbeat. She swallowed hard and then licked her lips. His body warmed, his blood heated, and his nerve endings seemed to awaken and tingle. When was the last time he'd felt such a strong attraction to a woman?

The laughs of the children brought him back. What was he thinking? *Take a breath, Malone. Get your bearings back.* Again he leaned back and set the swing into motion, automatically stretching his arm across the back of the chair.

Trying to pick up the thread of the conversation, Ben said, "I'm sure all parents get a little scared. Sometime."

"Do you think Miss Peggy ever got scared when she was raisin' you?"

Ben snorted. "Are you kidding? She used to tell us we cut her lifespan in half by scaring the years out of her."

"Really?" He tried, he really did, to not look at her eyes, but failed.

And couldn't be sad that he did. The smile she gave him was sweet and endearing.

Ben used his finger to make an "x" on his chest. "Cross my heart." As he looked at her, he pushed back a stray tendril of hair that had come loose from her ponytail. It was soft and silky and he had the urge to take her hair down and run his fingers through it. "I guess it comes with parenting," he said, his voice growing low and husky.

"I imagine you're right." Ellie's eyes got lost in Ben's as they continued to look at each other.

Ben was losing it. Those lips that he had compared to his mother's roses were now taunting him to partake of their softness. His eyes seemed glued to them knowing he had to have a taste. Slowly, he moved towards her. As if drawn by an invisible force, he felt her movement towards him. As their lips were a mere inch apart he had a last thought. *This is crazy!* But at that moment he didn't care. He wanted her lips on his. He *had* to have her lips on his. Just another fraction of an inch—

"Here we are," Peggy said as she brought out a tray of iced tea. "I thought ya'll might be thirsty."

She didn't know the half of it, Ben thought.

Ellie couldn't believe it. She had almost kissed Ben. No, she wouldn't think of him as Ben. She almost kissed the sheriff. What had possessed her to think she could kiss him? No, she wasn't thinking at all. One minute she'd simply been studying the man, something she hadn't allowed herself the night before at the café.

He had a broad face that held hard lines, evidence of a hard job. His hair, a dirty blonde, was falling over his forehead with the wind. His eyes were the color of the spring grass and made her think of carefree days running barefoot over the mountainside. Before she could relax at the thought, she mentally shook her head and looked at her hands, embarrassed at her thoughts.

She was not going to fall in love with anyone, least of all Sheriff Ben. She'd had enough of men to last her entire life. What she needed was to get to Morristown and fast. The longer she stayed with the generous Miss Peggy the longer she could be putting her in danger if the men happened to pick up her trail. But how could they? She had been so careful to hide their tracks down the mountain. Besides, she was as good at tracking as any mountain man. Why, they'd have to be smarter than she gave them credit for.

"Here, Mama." Little Sarah handed her mother a plate from the table. Dinner was over and everyone was helping clean up—except for Miss Peggy whom Ben had ordered to the porch to relax and enjoy the evening.

"Thank you, Sweet Pea." Ellie put the dish into the sink full of water to wash with the others. The two children happily chatted away unaware of the tension between the two remaining adults.

Since the "almost kiss" Ben and Ellie hadn't said more than four words to each other. They both let Peggy and the kids carry the conversation.

At Ben's deep sigh, Ellie turned to him. "Did you say something?"

"No," he said as he reached into the drainer to dry a clean dish. "Just content from a good supper."

Clearly thankful for a neutral topic, Ellie said, "Yes. Miss Peggy is a wonderful cook."

Awkward silence came again as the kids finished clearing the table and went to the living room to look at their books.

Ben finally decided to break the silence. "So, I guess you'll be wanting to leave soon."

"Yes. We'll leave first thing in the morning."

Just as well, Ben thought. That near kiss was too close. He respected Ellie too much to take advantage of her. It would be pure torture if he had to keep looking at her long silky hair, her cornflower blue eyes, the enticing dimple next to her inviting rosebud lips.

"I heard just before I got here that the roads were opened back up. You shouldn't have any trouble," Ben said. Ellie just nodded.

Ben frowned. He realized, just as his mother, he really didn't like the idea of Ellie and the kids walking so far. Anything could happen. He put down his dishtowel and with hands on his hips faced Ellie. "Listen, are you sure we can't float you the money to take the bus to Morristown? You could consider it a loan if you want to. You know, pay us back when you get a chance."

Ellie's brows knitted in confusion. "What does it mean to float money? I thought you said the waters were down."

Ben took a second to process what she said. He frowned hard, shaking his head. "No. No, that's not . . ." He sighed and said, "What I meant was I could give you the money for bus tickets and then sometime later, whenever you got the chance, you could pay me back."

"Oh." Ellie went back to washing the dishes. "Well suffering catfish, why didn't you say that to begin with?"

## Tennessee Waltz

“Then you’ll take the money?”

“No.” Ben gave her a look of frustration. “My daddy used to say never borrow trouble, tonic, or money. It’ll all come back up on you tomorrow.”

Ben laughed. Ellie looked up at him with big eyes and said, “I really appreciate all you and Miss Peggy’s done for us, Sheriff Ben. We’ll never forget your kindness.”

Ben smiled tenderly at Ellie. He opened his mouth to say something but he wasn’t sure what he wanted to say.

But before anything could come out, a scream came from the backyard.

Ben and Ellie ran out the back door. The night was cool and dark. “Ma? Where are you?”

“I’m here. Over by the vegetables.” Peggy kept a kitchen garden that supplied her family and most of her neighborhood with vegetables during the year. As Ben and Ellie made their way over to her, Ben’s heart started beating again at a normal rate hearing her voice so calm.

When they approached the woman sitting on the ground rubbing her ankle, Ben crouched down to investigate. “What happened?”

“I thought I saw a rabbit in the garden so I walked out to shoo it away. Then while I was stepping back I turned and twisted my ankle.” She winced, as she rubbed harder.

“I think we should take you to the emergency room,” Ben said.

“No!” Peggy was adamant. “It’s fine, I’m sure. Probably just need to rest it for several days. Keep it elevated, that kind of thing.”

“Let me look at it, Miss Peggy.” Ellie gingerly touched her right ankle. She gently moved and manipulated it as Peggy grimaced and moaned. “I don’t think it’s broken. Are you in much pain?”

“It hurts. It really hurts.”

“That does it. You’re going to the emergency room right—”

“Son. Just carry me into the house and let me rest a while. If it starts to look worse, then you can take me. Fair enough?”

Ben thought about this. “Okay.” He lifted his small mother effortlessly in his arms and carried her into the house, through the kitchen, and to the couch in the living room.

Sarah and John giggled, like it was some kind of game. Ellie shushed them and said, “Miss Peggy hurt her leg. We need to be quiet so she can rest it.”

Ben went back into the kitchen to get aspirin for his mother while Ellie went to her bedroom to grab the blanket off the bed to warm Peggy. Lovingly, the children stood next to Peggy as she lay on the couch. Little John patted her arm and Sarah knelt and laid her head on Peggy’s shoulder. Peggy’s hands went to the children, one hand rubbing John’s back and the other stroking Sarah’s hair.

And that was the tender scene that Ben and Ellie came back to—the children comforting Peggy, and Peggy returning their tenderness.

After Ben gave his mother the medicine he stood back as Ellie covered Peggy with the blanket and positioned a large pillow under the hurt ankle.

“Now Miss Peggy, is there something else we could get for you?”

“No, sweetheart. I’m fine, thank you. Why don’t you give the kids their baths and get them to bed?”

The children didn’t really want to leave Peggy but after Ellie explained they’d be able to come back and kiss her goodnight, *and* when Peggy promised them a story, they went without a word.

Ben wanted to keep his eye on Peggy, so he picked up the daily newspaper he hadn’t taken time yet to read and settled into his father’s old easy chair. Sitting there, Ben was surrounded with nostalgia. Good feelings. Many nights would be just like this—his father in this chair reading while his mother would be giving baths to the kids.

He could hear the lively chatter of Sarah and John and the soft responses of Ellie. For just a moment he closed his eyes and thought. What would it be like if he were the father? Would he feel this peaceful, this content?

Maybe, if only Jan hadn’t taken his heart and thrown it like a Frisbee into the wind—

He jerked up, not liking the direction of his thoughts. He turned to see his mother’s eyes on him. “Deep thoughts, son?”

His lips quirked up just a bit and he said, “Nothing important.” Setting the paper down, he leaned over with his elbows resting on his knees. “How’re you feeling?”

“The aspirin is kicking in, I think. I can’t believe how clumsy I am. And this just isn’t the time for this to happen. I’ve got my garden club meeting here on Friday and on Sunday is the church potluck.” Peggy sighed heavily. “I just don’t see how I’m going to get everything done.”

“Why don’t you call and cancel the meeting? And just don’t show up at church?” Ben didn’t really see the problem.

Peggy shook her head. “Because I’ve got responsibilities, son. I don’t want to let my friends down.”

“But surely they’ll understand about your ankle.”

Peggy thought about that. “If I had someone that could help me; you know, clean house, weed the garden, and do some cooking. That’s all I need, a little help.”

“Maybe you could get Mrs. Syracuse’s daughter to come after school.”

“No, no, no. Annie wouldn’t know the first thing to do in the garden. Besides, she’s in school all day and that wouldn’t help me during the meeting Friday morning.”

“Maybe one of the neighbors could volunteer. You want me to ask?”

“No. No one has the time. What I need is someone that could spare the time, who’s got the skills and would be willing to help me out just for a few days.” Peggy looked up to heaven as if the answer were written there. She chanced a sideways glance at her son who had gone back to reading the paper.

As small peals of laughter were again heard from the back bathroom, Peggy said, “Lord a mercy, it’s so nice to hear little voices in this house again. I can’t tell you how much I’ve enjoyed having those little ones here today. And that Ellie. My, she works so hard and so skillfully that if she lived in Ellerton I’d hire her in a second to help me with the house and yard.” Peggy’s eyes turned towards Ben to see if he was getting the message.

## Tennessee Waltz

"Benjamin Alistair Malone!"

"What!" Ben always hated it when his mother called him by his full name.

Peggy sat up on her elbows. "You haven't been listening to a word I've said."

"Sure I did. You wish you could find someone to help—little voices—Ellie works hard . . . What are you suggesting, Ma?" Ben's eyebrow raised.

"Well, it's pretty obvious, isn't it? Ellie is the perfect solution to our problem." Ben thought it was funny how all of a sudden it was "their" problem. "If we could just get her and the kids to stay through Sunday then everything would be settled."

"I don't know if that's such a good idea." Ben was starting to get uncomfortable. He didn't like how that young woman was beginning to make him feel. The sooner she left town, the better, in his opinion.

"It's perfect. They can stay here and keep me company, Ellie can help me with the meeting and the church dinner, and we'll pay her enough to buy bus fare for the three of them to Morristown."

Now, that did sound good to Ben. They'd have a safe way to Morristown and he'd be rid of this annoying attraction.

"I think maybe the good Lord sent them here for just this reason." Peggy pushed her "injured" ankle a little higher. When Ben didn't say anything, she said, "I think you should ask her after the kids are in bed."

"Me? Why me?"

"Because you're the sheriff. You have an authority that she respects and I'm sure if you ask her to do this favor, she'll say yes." She added the death knell by lifting wide eyes and saying, "Please?"

Women were definitely the bane of his existence. Why didn't he have more fortitude to stand against their wives? "All right," he muttered.

"Great. Now, I think I'll get some tea." Peggy started to put her feet to the ground, then sheepishly grinned. "Oops, I guess I forgot." She slowly raised her legs back to the couch, her left one high on the pillow.

Ben narrowed his eyes at her. He stood, still staring at her. "How about I get you that tea?" As he passed her on the couch, he mumbled, "Just make sure that you remember it was your right ankle that you hurt."

Once he left the room, Peggy looked down and quickly switched her right ankle onto the raised pillow.

After Ellie had the kids cleaned and dressed, they went back into the living room. Peggy was waiting for them and they carefully climbed up onto the couch, one on each side of her. As she opened the large storybook, Peggy said, "I think Ben would like a word with you, Ellie." With her head she motioned to the other room. "He's waiting for you in the kitchen."

Ellie nodded and walked into the cheery kitchen. It looked so much like Miss Peggy, happy and alive. Ben looked out of place, sitting at the kitchen table sulking into his cup of coffee. He looked up and said, "Would you like a cup?"

"No, but much obliged." She walked over and sat across from him. "Miss Peggy said you wanted to say something?" Ellie's palms started to sweat. Her

breathing was shallow. She wasn't sure if it was because the man could be so intimidating or if he could be so . . . male.

"Yeah. You see, Ma has an important meeting coming up Friday morning and then a big dinner after church on Sunday. Her *hurt ankle*," he said with a touch of sarcasm, "is going to cause her some problems."

"Poor thing. Weren't causing nobody any trouble and then this happens. She must be hurtin' something awful."

Ben shrugged. "Yeah well. She had the idea that if she could just get help until Sunday was over she'd be fine." He glanced at Ellie and quickly looked away. "We were thinking . . . that is, if you wouldn't mind . . . if maybe you could stay until then and help Ma out." Before Ellie could comment, he added, "It's just until Sunday and we would pay you. You'd really be helping us out." Not to mention saving his ear from being chewed off for his lack of help.

Ellie didn't hesitate. "You mean would I help Miss Peggy? Sheriff Ben, you don't need to ask. Of course I'll help. Why she's the nicest lady I think I ever met. And she's been so kind to me and Sarah and John. But you don't need to go paying me. Would be my pleasure."

"No, Ellie. That's got to be a condition. You say you don't take charity, well, we're going to say the same thing. You'll be doing a job after all. Believe me, that mother of mine can work you ragged."

Ellie laughed. "I look forward to it. I'll get everything done in a lick and a promise."

The sound of her laughter, the sight of her smile caused a knot to begin forming deep in Ben's gut. This was not good.

As the two walked back into the living room, Ben saw Peggy's eyes look at him as hopeful as a child asking for a puppy. At his reluctant nod, her face broke into wide smile. "Kids, guess what? Looks like you're going to stay with me for a little longer."

Sarah and John cheered and covered her face with little kisses while Peggy and Ellie laughed.

At the affectionate scene Ben decided that he'd just keep clear of the house for the next week.

## Chapter Four

The church potluck was a big success. Of course it would be when the best Southern cooks tried to outdo each other. People that hadn't even shown up for Christmas or Easter services would show up to church for potlucks.

Peggy couldn't be happier. Her pies and cakes were the first to disappear and she'd been having a ball introducing Ellie and her kids to everyone. Her only difficulty was remembering that her right ankle was still a little sore. A friend had loaned her a pair of crutches and Ellie helped Peggy learn to use them. It was a darned nuisance but Peggy was game.

Ellie and her kids sat next to Peggy eating the delicious lunch when a pretty brunette walked over to them carrying her own plate. Sarah and John immediately brightened and waved.

"Hello, Sarah and John. I wanted to come meet your mother." The woman turned her laughing brown eyes to Ellie. "Hi, I'm Stacy Angotti. I'm the Director of Children's Ministries." She offered her hand.

Ellie shook and smiled back. "How do. I know the kids enjoyed their church this morning."

"I'm so glad."

"Why don't you join us, Stacy?" Peggy asked.

"Thank you, Miss Peggy." The children scooted closer together and toward their mother so that Stacy could sit near them. "Are you new to the town or are you visiting?"

Peggy's ears perked up. Ellie replied, "We're just passing through. We're helping Miss Peggy while her ankle mends. Then we'll be moving to Morristown." *Hmm, moving to Morristown, not just visiting,* Peggy thought.

"Well, we're glad to have you and the kids as long as you're here." Looking at the two shining faces staring up at her, she said, "I was amazed at their Bible knowledge. What church are you from?"

"We're from up in the mountains. A little town called Clint. We ain't got no church rightly, the parson just visits about once a month for services at the meetinghouse. But I try to teach the Good Book to my young-uns. My daddy used to say it was never too early to learn the Bible or a toadstool from a mushroom. Either knowledge could save your life."

"Your father was a wise man," Stacy said. "As long as you're here, I hope you'll consider our church your home church."

"Much obliged, ma'am."

“Oh, it’s Stacy, please.” At Ellie’s nod, Stacy turned to Peggy. “Your family doing all right, Miss Peggy?”

“Right as rain. My daughter Daphne and her fiancé have set the date for their wedding. Next June after graduation. My son Kevin and his boys, Andy and Philip are still in Knoxville. I’m hoping to get them up for a visit soon.” Sadness welled up, solid and deep, momentarily in her soul. Quickly coming back, she said, “Ben’s so busy with ‘sheriffing’ it’s a wonder I see him at all. I tried to talk him into coming today but he’s on duty.”

“Of course. And I feel safer because he is,” Stacy said.

After that, the conversation turned to mundane things like the weather, upcoming church events, and quilting. Ellie was excited to learn that there was a regular quilting bee and that both Peggy and Stacy were regular attendees.

“Peggy Malone, what are you doing hogging all of that sweet girl’s time? I’ve got to get her recipe for those sugar cookies.” The women turned to see Peggy’s friend Suzy Dansen approaching.

Stacy leaned into Ellie and whispered, “Since my cooking is not so hot, I’m sure she must mean you.”

The woman sat next to Peggy and gave a nod to Stacy then looked straight at Ellie. “Darlin’ I was hoping that you’d be here. After all I’d seen you’d done in Peggy’s house, I must talk to you about helping me out. You see, my Simon is president of the First National Bank here in town and it seems that I’m always entertaining.” Suzy wasn’t arrogant. She was simply stating facts.

Before the conversation went further, Peggy thought she should refresh Ellie’s memory. “You remember Suzy Dansen, don’t you, Ellie? She was at the Garden Club Meeting.”

“Yes, of course. How are you ma’am?” Ellie said respectfully.

“Well, I’m just dreadful, that’s how I am! I’ve got a big party to get ready for this Tuesday night—some investors that Simon has to have over. I need help. I need you, honey!” Suzy said looking at Ellie.

“Oh, no, Suzy, don’t you monopolize all of Ellie’s talent!”

Peggy smiled watching another friend coming to stand in front of Ellie. This was good. Very good.

“I’ve got relatives coming and my home needs a desperate cleaning. I’ll double anything that Suzy offers you.”

“But my party is this Tuesday!”

“You’ve always got a party planned—”

“So that means I need Ellie more—”

Peggy, Stacy, and Ellie watched the conversation bounce back and forth between the two women like a highly entertaining tennis match. After a few minutes, more women had gathered and began adding their urgent needs.

Sarah and John crawled onto Peggy’s lap to eat their cookies. With all the commotion going on, they snuggled up tight to avoid the yapping women. Peggy happily enfolded them in her arms. With a smile she looked over at Ellie whose own face showed amusement mixed with complete bewilderment.

As the women continued to argue over who needed Ellie’s services most, Peggy leaned over to whisper into Ellie’s ear. “It looks like Ellerton needs you.”

## Tennessee Waltz

With eager eyes that looked to be filling with tears, Ellie looked up at Peggy. "Do you really think so?"

Peggy was taken back by Ellie's attitude. This woman needed friends. She needed what Ellerton could give her. Peggy smiled at the kids, their faces filled with cookie crumbs. She looked back at Ellie. "I need you, too." Ellie smiled so hard Peggy thought her face would fall off.

"Why don't you think of staying? Give Ellerton a try. You're welcome to stay with me as long as you want." As Ellie thought about that, Peggy said, "Morristown will always be there. You can always visit your aunt."

Ellie looked at her children. She looked at the women all around her. She gave a small nod.

Peggy sighed with contentment. Hugging the kids just a little tighter, she thought how right it seemed for Ellie and her family to stay. Surely Ellie could achieve a sense of peace here that she seemed to lack. She could develop some friendships and connections that would take away the hurt that hid behind her eyes.

And hopefully leave behind forever whatever made her run in the first place.

Ben was in agony. If he had a gun or a sharp object in his hand at that moment, he probably would end everything. He couldn't remember having such a bad hangover. Heck, he couldn't remember much about the current one. He knew he had gone to Haggerty's Tavern the night before. Alone. Just to drink. When a pretty little redhead had started flirting with him, he flirted back. Next thing he knew Mary Joe showed up out of the blue yelling at him, calling him some rather insulting names. Ben winced. He had no idea that Mary Joe's language could be so . . . colorful. Before he could get a word in, he had felt the sting of Mary Joe's hand hard across his cheek. The woman sure had an arm on her.

Mary Joe's brother showed up, scowling at him. Ben turned back to his third, or was it his fourth beer? Anyway, he kept drinking until he felt someone tapping him on the shoulder. He grimaced knowing when he turned around, his face would meet the brother's fist. What the heck, he hadn't been in a good rumble for a while. So, he turned but the man was so slow that before he could shove his fist in Ben's face, Ben had fallen to the ground, drunk as a skunk. He vaguely remembered Woody bringing him home using the patronizing "did 'we' get drunk tonight?" He'd have to remember to take Woody "snipe hunting" sometime soon.

Now he was paying for a miserable night. It all started when he lied to his mother about working today. He simply did not want to go to that church social. All them hens buzzing around him, the starry looks from the teenaged girls that had the mistaken idea that he was a good catch, and the disapproving looks of Pastor Tom. No thank you, there were better ways to spend a Sunday.

Like having the mother of all headaches banging at his temples.

What was happening to him? He hadn't been the same since the storm last week. Maybe there was something in the air. He had a feeling that once the bus left town that night with Ellie and her kids on it, the air would clear. He couldn't understand why he had such strong feelings about the woman. He hadn't had

feelings this intense since . . . no actually, not ever. The sooner she left town, the better.

Ben spent the rest of the day learning how to walk, think, and eat again. His mood was greatly improved by the late afternoon. He took a hot shower, changed into jeans and a chambray shirt, along with his most comfortable boots and drove over to his mother's house. Since he had avoided the house for the past few days, the least he could do was to drive Ellie and the kids to the bus station and see them safely on their way to Morristown. Ben whistled during his drive down the familiar street of his youth. As he got out of his car, he heard laughter coming from the backyard. Maybe Sarah and John were getting in a little last minute playtime. Probably a good idea before they boarded a bus.

He walked through the front door, through the living room, through the dining room, and then to the kitchen. No one was in the house. He looked out the kitchen window and saw his mother and Ellie sitting on the porch talking. Each had a bowl of snap peas, breaking off the ends, preparing them to be boiled. Ben straightened and thought. No one looked like they were preparing for a trip to him.

Opening the back door along with the screen, he said, "Ma?"

"Oh, Ben. Where have you been hiding?" She set her bowl down and walked over to give her son a hug and a quick peck on the cheek.

With a confused look, Ben draped his arm around his mother and said, "I told you. I've been working." His eyes seemed to zero in on Ellie and stopped. She smiled shyly and looked back at her work.

"That's right. Well, did you miss a good potluck today. We had the best time, didn't we Ellie?"

"Yes ma'am. I ain't never seen so many vittles. Why, I don't reckon I'll need to eat for a week."

Peggy chuckled. "Well, I know I *shouldn't* eat for a week."

Ben wasn't listening. He was mesmerized by the gentle beauty of Ellie as she sat on the swing, efficiently shelling the peas. Just as quickly he became irritated. "I thought I'd come over and take Ellie and the kids to the bus depot. Since your ankle . . ." Ben noticed that his mother was standing on both her feet. A slight pink rose on Peggy's neck as Ben smirked. "I see you've made a remarkable recovery."

With a nervous laugh, Peggy said, "I told you it wasn't serious. I just needed to rest it a while."

"Wouldn't hurt none to stay on those walking sticks a few more days, Miss Peggy," said Ellie.

To Ben's confused look, Peggy said, "Stella from down the street brought her old crutches over for me. I've been using them."

Thinking it wiser not to comment, he got back to the subject at hand. "Ellie, if you and the kids are ready, we can leave now." He was rather proud of himself for speaking in an even, calm tone.

Ellie looked at Peggy, not sure what to say. Peggy took over by saying, "Ben, why don't you help me into the kitchen. I saved you some dessert from today."

"Like you need any help," Ben muttered under his breath. "What's going on here, Ma?" he said as soon as the door was closed.

## Tennessee Waltz

"Shhh!" Peggy gave her son the look. After glancing out the window to see Ellie alternately watching her children and working with the peas, Peggy turned back to Ben. "I don't want Ellie's feelings to be hurt." She grabbed a plate and fork and cut a huge slice of chocolate cake for her son.

"About what? I thought I was doing a good deed by coming over here to take them to catch their bus. Thank you," he said as he took the cake and sat at the kitchen table.

Peggy wiped her hands with a dishtowel and said, "She's not leaving."

"What?" The vehemence with which Ben answered surprised even him. After another look from his mother, he lowered his voice. "What do you mean she's not leaving?"

Peggy joined him at the table. "I mean she and the kids are staying here. With me. For how long, I don't know."

Ben sat back and just looked at his mother as if she had sprouted two heads. "You can't be serious."

"Oh, yes. I'm very serious."

"But Ma, we don't know anything about this woman."

"Oh, fiddlesticks. You had her checked out, didn't you? We know she's from the mountains. Doc Barnes vouched for her. That's good enough for me."

This was not good. Ben had to think of something. "But where's her husband? Don't you think he's missing her about now?" Ben knew that she was a widow but perhaps his mother didn't.

"Her husband died a while back." To Ben's raised eyebrow, she added, "Ellie told me. Maybe that's why she left the mountains, she was lonely."

"But Ma, what's she going to do here? Mooch off of you until the kids grow up?" Ben was in no mood to be civil about the matter.

"Why, I'm surprised at you. You're supposed to be a trained observer, Benjamin. Can't you see how that woman is hurting? Can't you see how she needs friendly folks to come along side her and help? Today at the potluck you should have heard all the women making a fuss about the way Ellie had my house and gardens looking for the meeting last week. How they went on about her cooking.

"And don't worry about Ellie 'mooching' off me. She's already got so many houses and parties lined up to work that pretty soon she'll be making more money than you do."

This wasn't going well. "But what about Morristown? What about that aunt?"

"I don't know about the aunt but I do know that it can't be urgent for her to get there. I really wonder if there's an aunt at all."

"You mean you think she's lying? And you want her living here with you?"

"When does telling a lie make a person an abomination? Seems to me if it did, you'd be condemned before she would." Ben tried to look innocently at his mother. "Oh, don't even try it. Jason Haggerty was in church this morning and suggested that I pray for your soul. Said it was a good thing you weren't on duty today so you could sleep off your drunk."

Ben opened his mouth several times to reply but closed it, admitting to himself that he had nothing.

“Now, although I would be glad to have you sit here and eat crow, I’m heating leftovers in the oven. So, if you’d be so good to set the table, I’ll let you eat dinner instead.”

Feeling like a ten-year old boy caught with his ball and bat near a broken window, Ben stood up. He smiled weakly and bent to plant a kiss on his mother’s cheek. “I love you, Ma.”

“I know. Now get busy.”

Ben was typing out a report when the front door of the sheriff’s office opened and in walked Peggy holding hands with Sarah and John. Ellie was behind them and carefully closed the door. “Ma?”

“Hey. We were in town and I thought the kids would like to see where Sheriff Ben works.”

Carefully avoiding Ellie, Ben looked down at the beaming faces. He couldn’t help smiling back. Opening his arms to them, he said, “I think I can spare a couple of minutes for a tour.” The children eagerly ran into his arms. He lifted each one and set them on his knees.

“Have you caught any bad men today, Sheriff Ben?” Sarah asked, her eyes wide.

“Can’t say that I have, Princess. Business is slow today.”

“Is there a jail here, Shewif Ben?” John asked.

“Sure is. It’s empty right now. You want to see it?” Their heads bobbed in excited affirmation. He set them down and said, “Okay, let’s go.” He grabbed a set of keys and walked to the back of the building. Peggy and Ellie followed behind watching the children as they asked all their questions.

Ben opened one of the two cells and let the children walk in.

“Don’t you be sitting on that old bed, Sarah and John. You don’t know who’s been there.”

“Yes, Mama,” they both echoed.

“What’s that?” Sarah asked pointing to a round basin in the floor back in the corner of the cell.

“That’s the, ah, the toilet,” Ben muttered.

“The what?” Sarah said.

“The privy,” Ellie supplied. To that Sarah made a face while John laughed and pointed. Ellie just rolled her eyes.

“Yeah, it’s not a nice place. Not a place anybody ever wants to come to,” Ben said.

“Don’t worry, Sheriff Ben. I ain’t never ever gonna be inside one of these places ever in my life,” Sarah assured him.

“I am,” John said. All eyes went to him. “I gonna be a shewiff so I can put bad men here!” he said adamantly.

While the others cheered for the young boy, Ben felt a certain pride that John felt that way. He ruffled John’s hair as the children left the cell. “So, what are ya’ll doing in town today?”

## Tennessee Waltz

"I was showing Ellie a little more of our town while we picked up some steaks for tonight. And I was thinking, we should plan a picnic out at Lee's Pond one day before it gets cold. I bet the kids would love to go swimming there. Just like you, Kevin, and Daphne used to."

"Oh, they don't know how to swim, Miss Peggy."

Ben and Peggy were stunned. "They don't? Why I thought all kids learned how to swim," she said.

"There weren't no place to swim back home so they just never learned."

"Well, we can't have that." Peggy turned to her son. "You could teach them, couldn't you, Ben."

"I don't know. I—"

"Well of course you can. You were a lifeguard at that camp you used to go to for how many years?"

"I don't remem—"

"Why Ben wouldn't mind at all teaching Sarah and John. Would you like that, kids?"

Sarah and John started jumping up and down chanting, "Yes, yes, yes."

Ellie turned her big eyes up at Ben. "I'd be beholding to you if you could teach the young-uns."

Ben felt his insides melt like butter. How did she do that to him? He didn't like it. Not one bit. Then he looked at the little faces staring up at him. What would it hurt? It might even be fun. He sincerely liked these kids. He grinned at them and said, "Sure. Why not?" He laughed at their loud cheers.

"Oh, my! That means we need to get to the store and buy the kids bathing suits," Peggy exclaimed. Then turning to Ben she said, "How about Saturday morning?"

"I can handle that." Ben was actually looking forward to it. He wouldn't mind spending a few hours with these kids. Plus he wouldn't have to worry about their mother since Saturday was a busy day for the women of Ellerton, with parties that night and church the next day. Surely Ellie would be so busy working that she wouldn't be within ten miles of him.

Saturday morning Ben walked up to his mother's door ready for a good time with the kids. He had even purchased a few toys for the pond they could play with. As the door opened he had a smile on his face, ready to receive his pupils. The smile stopped short when Ellie appeared before him, dressed in one of her housedresses, a smile on her face. "Morning, Sheriff."

Ben took a second to choose his words and said, "Didn't I hear Miz Dansen say she was having guests over tonight? I thought for sure that you'd be helping her out," Ben mumbled.

Sarah and John hurried out of the house, calling out a quick greeting, and jumping into Ben's car. Ellie grabbed a large basket and a blanket and followed after the children. "Her house's ready and all the food is in the icebox ready to heat up." She called back over her shoulder, "You didn't think I was going to miss seeing my babies learn to swim, did ya?"

Ben slowly turned to face the three sitting in his car waiting.

*Perfect. Just perfect.*

## Chapter Five

Ben tried hard to control his irritation. He had planned a fun morning teaching Sarah and John the joys of swimming. The last thing he wanted was to be distracted by a pretty face.

And what a pretty face it was. A bright glow emanated from Ellie's eyes and smile. Her hair was long and flowing over her shoulders but pulled back from her face with tiny combs. Ben glanced at her as she spoke to Sarah and John sitting in the backseat. He hadn't realized until then how her face made the shape of a delicate heart. As he waited at a traffic light, he let his glance drift lower. Even with the dreadful housedress that Ellie wore, Ben could see the toned muscles in her arms, the sleekness of her calves. For a brief moment he had an overwhelming desire to cloth Ellie in a short, sleeveless silk dress.

And then take it off her.

Irritated again, his mind rebuked him. This was the kind of thing he was trying to avoid. Ben listened in on the chatter of the little family. Ellie was giving instructions to the kids in her gentle way, reminding them to obey Ben. Their polite responses again showed him the love and respect that Sarah and John had for their mom. At that moment Ben thought he'd do just about anything to find out the whole story of these three.

"... is it, sheriff?"

Ben blinked and looked at Ellie. "I'm sorry. What were you saying?"

"My goodness. You looked like you were all the way in Timbuktu." The kids giggled. "I just asked if it was much farther out to the pond."

"Oh." Ben cleared his throat. "Just another three miles or so." Ellie smiled at him and he immediately looked straight ahead, willing the traffic light to turn green.

It was a beautiful day to be at the pond. Ellie's comment about there not being anyone else there was explained by Ben. Since school had started, everyone had fallen into the rhythm of the fall, staying home on Saturdays, doing chores and such.

While Ellie spread out a blanket and sat, Ben took the two children out into the pond. They squealed at the cold water but after Ben splashed them a few times they adjusted fine.

Ellie stretched out her long legs and watched, appreciating the warm sun on her face. She watched with interest as the sheriff patiently went about his task of teaching her kids to swim. Every few minutes, Sarah or John would yell over to her to watch what they were doing. Ellie would smile and wave.

"Mama! I a whale! Watch me!" John said and proceeded to float on his back and blow water out of his mouth.

## Tennessee Waltz

She chuckled. "Very good, honey."

After an hour, both children were picking up the basics very well. Ben praised them and said, "Now that you've done the hard part, it's time for a little fun." He grabbed John and threw him up, letting him splash down into the water a few feet from him. Sarah was holding her sides from laughing so hard.

John surfaced and blew out the water from his nose. "John. Swim over to me now," Ben encouraged. The little boy stretched out his arms and pushed through the water to be pulled close by the sheriff. "Excellent. I think I'll call you 'Johnny Trout' from now on."

"My turn! My turn!" Sarah yelled. As Ben let John hold on to his back, he accommodated Sarah by lifting her up and throwing her as she shrieked. After her large splash, Ben said, "Come on, 'Sarah Bass.' Swim over to me." Sarah worked her arms and legs hard and swam to Ben who was waiting for her to give her a big hug. "Great!"

"Did you see me, Mama? I'm 'Sarah Bass now.' The sheriff said."

Ben turned towards the shore to see that Ellie had taken off her shoes and was wading in the water. Her smile was serene, as she made sure that Sarah knew she had seen her.

"Why didn't you bring a swimsuit?" Ben yelled over to Ellie.

She looked at him and was momentarily frozen. "I—I didn't think to." She quickly averted her eyes.

As Ben was puzzling this response, Sarah, whose arms were still around Ben's neck leaned over and whispered in his ear, "She can't swim."

A wicked smile came over Ben's face. "Really," he said drawing out the word. "Well, I think it's about time she learned, don't you think, kids?" Sarah and John agreed as he walked them to their mother. Ellie reached down to take the hands of her children but Ben stopped her. "No, no, no. It has come to my attention, Mrs. Kent, that you need lessons as much as your children do."

Ellie's eyes shot up. "Thank you just the same, Sheriff Ben, but I don't think so."

Ben placed his hands on his hips and considered the woman. "Are we going to let her get away with that kids?"

"No!" Sarah yelled.

"No!" John copied.

Before Ellie could respond, Ben scooped her up into his arms and headed back into the pond.

"Sherrriff! Stop! Please put me down! Now!"

"Oh, you want me to put you down? Now?" Ben started to drop her into the water. Ellie jerked up and threw her arms around his neck. Ben pretended to drop her several times causing her to tuck her head into his shoulder and hold on harder. Ben felt her heart racing against his chest. He smelled the light scent from her shampoo. Of its own volition, his heart began to catch up to hers. His grasp became tighter as he whispered, "It's okay, Ellie. I'm not going to let you go."

Ellie looked up at him and all thought left his brain. His throat was heavy as he saw trust, adoration, and interest in her deep blue eyes. All he had to do was make the move and he'd surely have anything he wanted from Eleanor Kent. The

strange thing was the reasons for this being a bad idea were getting a little fuzzy. And that shocked him back to his senses.

He frowned and trudged up to the banks of the pond, saying gruffly, "Well, you really should learn to swim, Ellie. You wouldn't be any good to your children if you were watching them in the water but couldn't help them if they were in trouble." He put her back on the blanket.

After catching her breath, Ellie said, "Sarah and John, come have your lunch."

He joined them and the foursome feasted on cold fried chicken, homemade pickles, potato salad, and chocolate chip cookies. Sarah and John chatted away about their swimming fun as Ellie and Ben listened. Without warning, the two children laid down on the blanket and fell fast asleep, exhausted. Ben was still eating, Ellie was putting away food. Her movements were jerky and quick. Ben could tell something was on her mind. Something not the least bit pleasant.

Trying to ease the way to ask, he said, "That was a wonderful meal. Especially the cookies. Chocolate chip cookies are my favorite."

"I know. Your mama told me."

Ben frowned. "Is that why you made them?"

"What?" Ellie looked up from what she was doing. "I ain't never made cookies with chocolate in them. Your mama made them last night. Said we should take them with us today."

"Oh." Ben wasn't sure if he was disappointed or relieved that Ellie hadn't brought his favorite cookies to impress him. He dismissed it and finished the two cookies on his plate. His eyes went to Ellie who was muttering under her breath. "Is something wrong, Ellie?" he asked.

She started to shake her head but then paused and glanced at the man. She turned and looked out at the pond, thinking for a good ten seconds. "My daddy used to say that if you've a mind to say something it's best to just come out with it."

"I agree," Ben said.

Taking a breath, Ellie said, "I'd like to know why you don't like me, sheriff?"

Ben's eyes grew wide with surprise. "Why would you think that, Ellie?"

"Sheriff, a person knows when someone doesn't like them. They don't look 'em directly in the eye, they try to get them to go away, they ain't friendly." After a pause, Ellie speared him with a direct glare and asked, "Why don't you like me?"

Ben didn't know what to say. He couldn't say, *Well, Ellie, it's because I keep having promiscuous thoughts about you.*

While he was thinking of something coherent to say, Ellie said, "It's because I don't talk so well, ain't it?"

Ben's heart cinched. He looked into the deep blue eyes of the woman in front of him and saw a window into her soul. The hardworking, loving mother felt self-conscious about herself. "No, Ellie, I—"

"Because I'm trying to change. Really. I don't want to embarrass you or Miss Peggy none. I'm very observant. I've been listening to the other women talk and I am learning, I really am."

Feeling like a major clod, Ben gently rubbed her shoulder. "Ellie. You're fine just the way you are. If I've been unkind to you, I apologize. You certainly haven't

## Tennessee Waltz

deserved it, nor have I meant it. I just . . ." He dropped his hand and looked out over the pond.

"You just what?" Ellie asked, clearly wanting to know what was on his mind.

*No, you really don't want to know*, Ben thought. How could he get her to see that he didn't want to be around her, for her own sake.

His mother. That was a subject that they could both agree on.

"It's my mom," he finally said.

"Miss Peggy? What's wrong with her, there ain't nothing wrong with her, is there?" Suddenly Ellie was speaking quickly, showing her concern for the woman.

"No. It's just that . . . well, she's had a lot of sadness in her life. My father passed away, Kevin's wife passed away, her daughter lives far off at college, her grandchildren don't visit much. Unfortunately, I'm about all she's got here." All that was true. Now he would bend the truth a tad to suit his purposes. "She's lost so much, that I'm afraid that her poor old heart won't be able to take losing someone else."

"She has a weak heart?" Ben gave a slight nod. "Poor Miss Peggy." Looking confused, Ellie said, "But what has that got to do with me?"

Sighing, Ben said, "How do you think she's going to react when she grows to love you and the kids and you decide to move on? Why, it's going to kill her to let you three go. She's probably halfway there already."

Ellie shuddered. "We can't let anything happen to Miss Peggy. She's one of the best women I ever know." Staring at the ground and talking to herself, Ellie said, "This just ain't right. We'd better leave before something terrible happens."

Ben was pleased with himself. Or he thought he was. It was what he wanted, after all, to get Ellie out of town before he did something uncalled for like kiss her senseless.

"Perhaps we should be getting back to the house," Ben said, not knowing if he had won or lost.

He kept waiting to hear from his mother. He kept waiting to hear that Ellie and the kids had taken the Sunday night bus out of town.

Ben had pulled a double shift working Saturday night and Sunday morning and was trying to catch up on his sleep when the pounding on the door came. Through his sleep-deprived brain Ben somehow knew it was his mother. Maybe it was the steady beat of the knocks. Maybe it was the fierceness of the pounding. But probably it was the loud "Benjamin Alistair Malone. Open this door" that gave him his first clue.

Trying to shake the cobwebs out of his mind, Ben opened his front door. Peggy stormed in not even taking the time to look at the disheveled living room of her son's home. "How could you have done it? How could you have lied? Why I ought to drag you out to the woodshed over this!" Furious, she paced back and forth.

"Good morning to you too, Ma," Ben said closing the door and shuffling back to his kitchen to put on a pot of coffee. Obviously he wasn't going to be getting any more sleep in the near future.

"It's not morning, it's afternoon. Almost evening," Peggy said as she followed him. "And don't change the subject."

Ben carefully measured the coffee granules, added water, and started the machine while his mother continued her pacing in his small kitchen. He looked in the cupboard for two mugs and seeing none, reached in his sink full of dishes and pulled out two. Grabbing a nearby towel, he started to wipe them off.

Knowing his mother was watching with annoyance, he counted off a couple of seconds. Finally, she stomped over and pushed him away. "Give me those." She put them on the counter and started hot water running into the sink, then added dishwashing liquid. Washing dishes was probably a good outlet for her frustration. Ben smiled. He could endure a good scolding if it meant it got his dishes washed.

"You have a dishwasher right here. Is it too hard to simply put the dirty dishes in it, add some cleaner, and turn it on? I know they didn't teach that at the police academy but surely anyone skilled enough to handle a gun could turn on a dishwasher!"

Ben thought maybe the scolding wasn't worth it.

"Of course if you had a lick of sense you'd be looking for a wife to make this pigpen into a nice home for you. Maybe she could even wash your dishes *and* cook your meals."

Definitely not worth it. Ben, who had been leaning against the counter with his arms crossed, stood straight now. "Mom, let's not beat a dead horse, okay?"

"Fine," Peggy said as she scrubbed a plate before rinsing it. "That wasn't why I came, anyway."

"Then for Pete's sake would you say what you wanted to say, have a cup of coffee, and then let me get back to bed?"

Peggy set the dishes down and turned to look at her son. "How dare you. How dare you think you can run my life and lie to that sweet girl who has done nothing but be kind and caring since she got here?"

Uh oh. "Ma."

"Don't 'Ma' me. Whatever possessed you to tell Ellie that I had a bad heart? Yes it may be bruised a little, life has a way of doing that as you well know, but I'll remind you that my heart is very healthy and plans to still be kicking when my grandchildren get married."

"Ma, it's just . . ."

"What, Ben? Why in the world would you be so set on getting that sweet family away from me? Are you afraid that I'd be happy, full of purpose? What?"

Moms just had a way of turning grown men into shy little eight-year olds. Ben felt like he'd not only done something foolish but had also hurt his mother, the one female that he knew loved him unconditionally. In a quiet voice he said, "I just don't want to see you hurt."

"That's a bunch of bull and you know it. I've been through a lot of harder things than saying goodbye to friends. Now let's have it. Why are you trying to get rid of Ellie?"

Now Ben was the one that was pacing. "I'm not quite sure if you want to know the truth. I know that there's a lot of things that we don't know about her."

## Tennessee Waltz

That concerns me. And, okay shoot me, but I am concerned that you'll grow too attached to them before they decide to leave."

Somewhat placated, Peggy said softly, "Son, I'm not the one at risk here." Ben was momentarily scared that his mother was going to guess the line of his true thoughts. But she added, "Ellie is. I can't help feeling that she really needs us right now. It's not that she'll let me down, it's that I can't let her down."

Ben sighed. His mother was the most generous, caring woman he knew. Of course she would want to help Ellie. Well, all right, he'd just have to figure out a way to avoid Ellie. With admiration shining in his eyes, he looked at his mother and said, "You know, Ma? You're something else." He walked forward and kissed her cheek. "I'll lay off trying to get Ellie to leave, all right?"

"That would be appreciated, son," she said. Seeing that the coffee was finished brewing, Peggy took the two clean mugs and filled them. Before reaching the kitchen table she glanced around at the cluttered, dirty kitchen. Without really thinking she said, "Maybe Ellie might find a nice man to settle down with here in Ellerton. She'd make a wonderful wife."

Ben could feel his gut tightening. He was afraid of this. "Don't even think about it, Ma," he said joining her at the table.

"Huh?" Peggy looked up at him and chuckled. "Oh, I wasn't thinking of Ellie for you. No, not at all. Ellie needs someone gentle and loving, someone who'll spoil her. I don't think she's had an easy life so far. You've still got too much resentment. I wouldn't wish that on Ellie."

"Good," Ben finally said. *I think.*

Sitting on the back porch quilting, Ellie sighed in contentment. It was quiet as the kids were napping and she had a calm moment to listen to the sounds of nature. She'd once had this up in the mountains but no more. The past year had taught her to appreciate moments of peace.

Miss Peggy didn't have a bad heart after all, one more thing to be thankful for. Although that made her wonder why the sheriff had lied to her. Obviously the man still didn't like her. But why would he tell her that story about Miss Peggy?

There were times when he'd look at her and his green eyes would go soft, making her breath catch. At those times she felt like the most special woman in the world having an important man like him paying any attention to her. She remembered she'd felt the same way when her Jeremiah was courting her. He'd look deeply in her eyes, the desire to kiss her too strong to deny. Then he'd lean toward her and . . .

She dropped her quilting in her lap and stared into space. Did Sheriff Ben desire her? Could that even be possible? Her pulse accelerated with the idea. Taking a breath to calm herself, she tried to see reason. What a ridiculous thought. She was a woman raising two children, cleaning and cooking to provide for her family. He was an influential citizen of the town whom people looked up to and admired. There could never be a relationship between them.

Maybe that's why he told the lie. She mulled the idea over, picking up her quilting again and working the tiny stitches through the fabric. That would explain

so much, she thought. He appeared to not like her because . . . maybe he did. A little too much. He was trying to let her down easily. What a sweet man.

Well, next chance she had she'd gather all her courage and tell him there was no need. She was no more wanting a relationship than he was.

A giggle escaped her lips. She bet he was enduring a good sound thrashing from Miss Peggy for lying about her heart. Oh, to be a fly on the wall!

"Mama?"

"Well, look who's here. You have a good nap, sweet pea?" She set her quilting aside and pulled Sarah onto her lap. She was growing so fast, any moment she could get cuddling her daughter was golden.

"Yes'm. John's still sleeping. He was snoring," she said with a giggle.

They rocked and snuggled as Peggy's sedan pulled into the driveway, followed by Sheriff Ben's SUV. "Looky here, Mama. It's the sheriff." Sarah hopped down and said, "I'm gonna go tell him that John's snoring." Ellie chuckled as Sarah ran down the porch steps and to Ben.

She stood and waited, crossing her arms in front of her, hoping for her turn to give the sheriff a thrashing. Her eyes narrowed as the three walked up onto the porch, Sarah still talking a mile a minute, Ben's gentle hand around her, stroking her little shoulder. The action softened Ellie's heart, though she was still irritated.

"I think I straightened out the little . . . misunderstanding with Ben," Miss Peggy said. Regardless of her statement, Ellie detected a slight sarcasm in her tone. "John's still asleep?"

"Yes'm. I'll go get him up. Wouldn't want him not sleepy tonight."

"You relax, honey, I'll get him." Miss Peggy took Sarah's hand and said, "How about you and me get John and then we'll make some banana pudding for dessert tonight?"

With excitement ringing from her cheers, Sarah followed Miss Peggy into the house.

"Thank you," Ellie called out. She turned to face Ben, raising one eyebrow. Waiting.

She couldn't help enjoy the sheepish grin he had as he leaned back against the porch railing. Or the cough he gave to clear his throat. This should be good.

"All right, I apologize." He shoved his hands deep into his pockets, shoulders slouched. "I shouldn't have lead you to believe that Ma has a heart problem. Although, metaphorically I could be considered right." Ellie scrunched her brows in confusion.

"What I mean is, she's had a lot of heartache. I wouldn't want her to experience more."

"Well Sheriff, I understand that. You couldn't possibly think I'd want to add to it."

"No." He shook his head. "I don't." Clearing his throat again, he said, "In fact, to be honest, you and the kids have probably been good for her. Given her purpose, companionship. I should probably be thanking you."

"You're welcome."

Ben grinned. "How about we start over again. Try to be friends?"

## Tennessee Waltz

"I think that would be a good idea, Sheriff." She stretched out her hand and said, "Eleanor Kent. My friends call me 'Ellie.'"

"This is going to be so much fun, Ellie. You'll love it!"

Ellie wasn't so sure as she stared at the bright white building with pink shutters, pink striped awning, and flower boxes filled with hydrangeas and carnations. The wooden shingle next to the door said, "Heavenly Hair." She'd never been to a hair salon before and wasn't sure she wanted to now.

When she hesitated, Miss Peggy touched her shoulder and said, "Now Ellie, you deserve a little pampering. Marcie's the best with young women. She knows just what to do." As she opened her car door she added, "Trust me, you'll love it."

It wasn't that she was ungrateful, it was just that she'd never had anyone messing with her hair before. It was an intimidating idea. With a sigh, she joined Miss Peggy on the sidewalk. Just before she entered the salon, she noticed two men standing in front of the hardware store a few doors down watching her. They were tall, large, and made her skin crawl. She hurried into the salon.

Immediately, the place erupted with greetings for Miss Peggy. Ellie smiled at her reception and was shocked to see so many of the women calling out to her as well—women she'd met at church, or had worked for.

A petite, smiling woman with big auburn curls walked over to her. "Hi, honey. You must be Ellie. I'm Marcie and I don't mind telling you I can't wait to get into your hair." She giggled, leading Ellie over to a large chair.

Before Ellie could say anything, Marcie continued. "Now, you just sit right down here and we'll fix you right up." As she fingered through Ellie's blonde tresses, Marcie said, "I heard you have two little ones. A girl and boy. That's so sweet. Junior and me, that's my man, we go back and forth about having kids. Sometimes I think I want 'em and then sometimes I just want to go home to Junior, you know what I mean? But I heard tell your kids is sweet as honey. Wouldn't mind having a pair if mine were as good."

Ellie's head was spinning. She hadn't been able to get a word in and trying to keep up with the conversation as well as what Marcie was doing with her hair was exhausting.

"What you need, honey, is some golden highlights. With your hair's soft color the highlights would make the color stand out."

"Highlights?"

Marcie glanced at Ellie in the large mirror in front of her chair and smiled. "Don't worry, honey. I promise you when I'm finished, you'll be even lovelier than you are now. How you doing, Miss Peggy?"

Next to her chair, Miss Peggy sat, her wet hair wrapped in a towel. Ellie watched as a big woman with the reddest and tallest hair she'd ever seen rubbed the towel over Miss Peggy's hair, the horn-rimmed, jeweled spectacles she wore perched precariously on her nose.

"Everybody's fine, Marcie. You okay?"

"Couldn't be better. Junior saw Ben the other night at Haggerty's. Said you hurt your ankle."

Ellie thought she saw a slight blush on Miss Peggy's face. "Just turned it a bit. It's fine now."

As Marcie tore small aluminum pieces and then mixed something in a bowl (Ellie couldn't imagine what she was doing) she said to Miss Peggy, "When's Ben going to settle down, you think? Find himself a nice woman to take care of him?"

Miss Peggy heaved a sigh. "I don't know. Actually, I don't think he's looking."

Marcie laughed as she combed Ellie's hair and began sectioning it off. "That's just when you get hit with the love bug, you know. When you're not looking." She gave the mixture in the bowl one more stir and said, "You think he's still hurting from Jan?" Ellie's ears perked up at that.

When Marcie met Ellie's eyes in the mirror, she said, "Jan was Ben's high school sweetheart. They went to college together, everyone assumed they'd marry. But for no reason they broke up and Ben came back here. Hasn't been interested in any one girl since."

"I really don't think he's pining over Jan," Miss Peggy said. "I'm hoping that the right woman just hasn't come along for him."

Ellie thought about that. Ben had helped her and the kids so much, she hoped he would find happiness for himself. She jerked when Marcie plastered some of the goo from the bowl onto her hair, causing Marcie to giggle.

"You just close your eyes and relax, honey." She leaned in and whispered in Ellie's ear, "Before you know it, you'll be more beautiful than Jan could ever hope to be."

Ben was feeling pretty good as he strolled down the street whistling. Nothing like a good lunch from the soda fountain at the drug store. He looked around the town, his town, enjoying the familiar sights and sounds. Despite the circumstances that had led him to this point in his life, he supposed he should be thankful.

Then he saw her.

His legs froze in place as Ellie came out of the beauty parlor and walked down to the hardware store. It was obvious that her hair had been washed and trimmed but her light blonde mane had a golden glow about it. Nice.

Ellie had her hair long around her shoulders. Very attractive. If only his mother could talk Ellie into getting rid of those hideous housedresses.

As he stood there thinking about the woman, she hurried out of the store, a small bag in her hand. Ben's grin instantly left at the expression on her face—fear.

Two men also came out of the store, following Ellie. Ben knew them, knew they worked out at old man Henley's farm. He had seen them a time or two at Haggerty's. They were real rough customers.

Ben watched as they elbowed each other and then approached Ellie. He was too far away from hearing what they were saying, but noticed that Ellie was trying to evade them, her face ashen, her eyes staring. Her hands gripped her bag tightly in front of her, as if a shield. Even from a distance, Ben could see her shaking. One of them took her arm and whispered in her ear while the other man was laughing. Ben's blood boiled.

## Tennessee Waltz

He hurried across the street to break up whatever was going on when the men pulled Ellie into the alley next to the salon.

Something immediately welled up in Ben that was all consuming. It was something he had never felt before. Blood rushed to his brain, to his legs, to his fists. His feet were suddenly racing and in a matter of seconds he had rounded the corner of the alley and head butted one of the men in the back knocking him over.

The other man had Ellie up against one wall trying to kiss her. Ellie was squirming trying to get out his grasp. Ben stretched out his big hand and yanked him away and with his other hand clipped him in the jaw with all his might. The man never saw it coming but slumped to the ground unconscious.

Convinced that the man wouldn't be getting up anytime soon, Ben looked around. The other man had already hightailed it out of the alley. Probably out of the county. Ben turned to look at Ellie and his heart sunk into his stomach. She stood crying, her back still against the wall, and her face in her hands. Her sobs were wrenching, sounding like a hurt animal. Her body was shaking uncontrollably as her sobs grew louder.

Ben went to her and carefully enfolded her in his arms. Ellie continued to weep, keeping her face covered by her hands. Ben gently rubbed her back, offering her words of encouragement, his own heart still racing from the attack. They stood like that for several minutes before Ben heard his mother's voice calling for Ellie.

"Over her, Ma," he called.

Peggy rounded the corner into the alley and upon surveying the man lying on the ground and Ellie crying in Ben's arms said, "My goodness, what in the world happened here?"

"Walk down the street to my office. Tell Woody I need him here right away, please Ma. Then we need to get Ellie back to the house." He looked around and seeing only Peggy said, "Where are the kids?"

"Stacy Angotti took them for the afternoon."

"Good." Ben continued rubbing Ellie's back. Seeing his mother still watching them, Ben said, "Ma! Go get Woody."

## Chapter Six

Back at Peggy's house, Ellie sat on the living room couch wrapped in a blanket, sipping a cup of herbal tea. She was finally starting to settle down. Ben had held her in Peggy's car all the way back home. As he sat across from her, he waited, his arms rested on his knees. It was time for Ellie to talk to them. Really talk to them. Let them know where she had come from, what she was dealing with. Ben had known after the attack that her reaction had been the result of another, maybe even multiple attacks.

Peggy came back in from the kitchen with her own cup of tea. "Are you sure I can't get you something, Ben?" He shook his head and continued to wait. "Ellie, honey, is there anything else I can get for you?" She shook her head.

Ben rubbed his hands together, looking down. He had to ask. Now. "Ellie, why don't you tell us about it?"

Ellie looked at him, questions in her eyes. "I told you what happened, sheriff. I gave you my statement."

His dark eyes pierced her. "That's not what I'm talking about." He paused watching her carefully. "What happened to you? Did your husband abuse you?"

"Oh, no," Ellie asserted. "Jeremiah was a good husband, God rest his soul. He loved me and loved his children."

"Someone else then?" Ben waited. Ellie hesitated.

Peggy sat close to her on the couch and taking her hand said, "It's okay, honey. We only want to help. It won't go past this room."

Ellie looked into the understanding eyes of the older woman. It had been a long time since she'd had a mother figure. Her own mother had died when she was a child and she had never known her mother-in-law. The caring eyes of Peggy gave Ellie confidence to speak what she had not told anyone.

She took another tissue, blew her nose, and took a deep breath. "Yes ma'am," Ellie said to Peggy. "I probably should have said something before now since we're under your roof, but it's been so nice not to remember . . . things."

"It's all right, honey. You go ahead. We'll listen." Peggy gave a sharp look to Ben indicating that he should be quiet until Ellie had the opportunity to tell her story.

Taking another breath, Ellie said, "Jeremiah and I always loved each other, even when we was kids. As soon as we were a respectable age, he asked my daddy for my hand in marriage. The next time the parson come through he married us.

"We had a good life. Didn't have much but we were happy. Sarah came soon and then John. We were as happy as June bugs on a warm day. Then Daddy took ill

and died. Not long after that Jeremiah had a accident when he went huntin'. Fell down a hill and hit his head hard. By the time Doc Barnes could get to him . . ." Ellie's voice was cracking. "He couldn't do nothing for him. He was already gone." Peggy put her arm around Ellie and rubbed her shoulder.

Ellie took another tissue and continued. "I thought me and the kids would just continue on, living in the little house that Jeremiah built for us." Her eyes took on a fear. "But Obadiah wouldn't hear of it."

"Obadiah?" Peggy asked.

"Jeremiah's daddy. You see, Hezekiah, the firstborn, had already been through two wives. Both died without giving him a son. They figured I was already a Kent. I had proven that I could bear children. I was their dead kin's wife. In their eyes I now belonged to Hezekiah."

"What!" Ben said jumping to his feet. "What planet do these bozos live on?"

"I don't rightly know what you mean, Sheriff Ben, we're from Clint back up in the mountains," Ellie asked confused.

"No . . . I mean . . . never mind. Go on, Ellie," he said as he paced.

"Well, I flat out told them that I belonged to Jeremiah but now that he had passed on I don't belong to nobody." Ellie's eyes got misty. "They just laughed at me. Hezekiah grabbed me and began . . . touching me." Ellie rubbed her trembling arms. "I yelled that I weren't married to him but he said I was his dead brother's wife so in the eyes of God I was his. He put me over his shoulder and carried me all the way to his house." Tears were flowing now. "He didn't even stop to ask about Sarah and John." She sniffed. "Thank the good Lord they were taking naps at the time.

"Obadiah followed us and told Hezekiah that he needed to wait until the parson made his visit to pronounce us man and wife before he could rightly take me. He didn't agree but he respected his daddy and agreed that he'd wait but I would stay in his house."

"Good gracious, what about Sarah and John?" Peggy couldn't hide her outrage.

"Hezekiah don't care none for my kids. But Obadiah does love them in his own way. He went with me to pack up a few things for us so we could move into Hezekiah's house. I didn't want to," she asserted. "I told the men I wasn't going nowhere without my children so Obadiah packed their bags." Her voice lowered as she added, "And Hezekiah said something bad might happen to them if I refused him."

Ben continued to pace, his breathing heavy and labored. He wanted so much to get this Hezekiah within punching distance.

"What happened next, Ellie?" Peggy asked.

"We got word that the parson was real sick. He wouldn't be coming for a while. So we just lived in Hezekiah's house like that for a year. I cooked and cleaned for Hezekiah. He went hunting a lot and went drinking a lot. Sometimes he was mad because he couldn't have me. Mad and mean." Ellie flinched a bit. Ben wanted to punch a hole through the wall.

Peggy gently laid her hand on Ellie's hands that were now fidgeting in her lap. "Did he hit you, Ellie?" she asked softly. Ellie nodded as more tears slipped away. "Did he hit the children?"

Ellie sniffed and said, "No. I mostly kept them out of his way. But I knew it was just a matter of time. I kept looking for a good chance for us to leave. When I got word that the parson was all well and on his way, I knew we had to leave then, no matter what." She looked at Peggy. "So we left."

Peggy gave her a hug. "You did the right thing." She squeezed the somber woman a little harder and murmured, "You poor little thing."

The front door opened and slammed shut. Both Peggy and Ellie looked up. Ben had left.

To Ellie's sad look, Peggy said, "Don't worry about Ben. He just needs to vent his frustration. As an officer of the law he hates when a woman is mistreated. And as a good man, he hates what you went through."

"He don't think less of me then?"

Miss Peggy smiled gently at her. "Of course not. But I think you should know that you and the kids are as safe as can be with my son as sheriff."

Ellie returned the smile thinking for the first time that maybe she and the kids were out of danger.

She could only hope.

After telling the sheriff and Miss Peggy everything, she finally felt free. She was enjoying the little town of Ellerton. The people respected her, respected her hard work, were nice to her children. Maybe they could make a life here.

Ellie hadn't seen Ben since he had walked out furious, but Peggy had assured her that she had talked to him and everything was fine.

It had been a wonderful day. Ellie had cleaned two houses, baked for the church's bingo tournament, and played with her children. Peggy had taken the kids for a walk so Ellie had decided to start dinner. She stood at the stove frying cube steaks and singing a hymn. Funny, she hadn't sung in a long time. She used to sing all the time, while she gardened, while she cooked, while she rocked her babies. But the stress of the past year had taken the joy of singing away from her.

She had forgotten. But with her new found freedom, she felt able to sing at the top of her lungs. While the heat from the stove caused the tendrils falling from her bun to curl, she sang her favorite song, realizing that for the first time in a really long time she was happy.

He could handle going by his mother's house. It wouldn't take but a few minutes.

Mrs. Dansen had seen Ben leaving his office in town and waved him down. She said that his mother needed the club forms tonight so couldn't he just run them over. Small towns. You got to love them.

Besides, he figured that his rage over Ellie's story had cooled now. He could surely see her without feeling his anger towards her in-laws. He wanted to see her, make sure she was okay. The kids too. Maybe see if they wanted another swimming lesson.

## Tennessee Waltz

He'd do all of that and be out in ten minutes. Fifteen minutes tops. After that he could head over to Haggerty's for a cold one before going home to his quiet house. His lonely house. Funny, he wouldn't normally use the term lonely whenever thinking of his house. Or himself.

When Jan had dumped him and he'd come back to Ellerton he'd been thankful to be by himself. He'd enjoyed going out when he wanted company, enjoyed putting his heart and soul into his job, and had enjoyed coming home to an empty home.

But being alone didn't seem to have the appeal it used to. Ever since Ellie and the kids had come to town he'd started having different interests, different desires. It was uncomfortable, he thought squirming in his seat. All the more reason to be in and out of his mother's house quickly.

And return to his normal life.

He pulled in the driveway and as he got out he heard a voice coming from the kitchen. Heading to the back entrance, he saw the heavy door open, letting the cool air through the screen door. He recognized the song he heard, a hymn from his church days when he was a boy. What a beautiful voice.

Not wanting to disturb the singer, he carefully walked up the steps and pulled open the screen door, entering the kitchen quietly.

Ellie was standing at the stove cooking, wearing one of those housedresses. Ben could just see her profile as she faced the frying pan on the stove. The heat from the stove was oppressive even across the room where Ben stood. But it had caused a sheen of perspiration to cover Ellie's exposed skin. As he watched, a drop of sweat started from her neck and flowed down the front of her body disappearing into the bodice of her dress. Beautiful pale strands of her hair had escaped the knot on her head and spiraled gracefully around her face. She had taken off her shoes so she stood there barefoot.

Ben started to drool.

As Ellie continued to sing, she moved her hand to her forehead to wipe off sweat and arched her back at the same time, which caused her body to twist in a delicious way.

Ben stared.

Ellie stretched up and down on her toes, causing her calves to flex revealing deeply defined leg muscles.

Ben moaned.

He honestly could not keep from gazing at the woman before him. His eyes moved back to her face and he was shocked to see her standing still, staring at him, almost mirroring his expression.

It was as if time stood still. No one spoke, no one moved. The only sounds were the sizzle and pop of the steaks frying in the pan. To Ben's surprise, his feet started moving. He walked towards her purposefully. His mind didn't know why, but his body did. When he was standing beside her, he carefully cupped her chin with one hand while his other hand went to her waist. Gently he pulled her to him. Giving her all the time in the world to stop him, Ben lowered his mouth until it stopped just above Ellie's mouth. He glanced away from her lips to her eyes and saw all he

needed to see there. Ellie's eyes were a midnight blue now, deep, almost hypnotic. Ben knew Ellie wanted to be kissed.

And he would be glad to oblige her.

Ben touched her lips with his softly and his first thought was *finally!* Finally those rosebud lips were on his and it was better than any of his previous fantasies. She tasted not just of roses but of a whole garden of different flowers—honeysuckle, jasmine, and gardenias. His lips explored hers, his hand drifted to her waist and pulled her closer.

Ellie had experience. After all, she had given birth to two children. But the feel of Ben's lips on hers made her think she really didn't know anything. How could a simple action like a kiss render her powerless? While his hands enfolded her, hers wrapped around his neck and her fingers dug into his hair—the beautiful dark blonde hair that fascinated her. She toyed with the silky strands. Ben deepened the kiss touching her tongue with his sending shivers shooting down her spine. Her mind spun as if on a merry-go-round gone haywire.

But she never wanted to get off.

The sound of a dog barking down the street made Ellie jump and pull away. What was she doing? She was a mother, for goodness sake and here she was kissing a man in the kitchen in front of a hot stove. Her surprised eyes stayed on Ben.

"Ellie?" he whispered.

"Yes?" she replied.

"I think you're steaks are burning." Ben gave a small smile.

Ellie quickly pulled the pan with the steaks off the burner. However, the pan handle was hot and she yelped when her hand felt the searing heat.

"Here, let me help you." Ben took her hand and led her to the kitchen sink where he turned on the cold water and put her hand underneath it.

Ellie felt like a fool. A silly little schoolgirl. She tugged to get her hand out of Ben's not wanting the embarrassment to last, but he wouldn't let her. "Let it stay for another minute," he said softly.

When Ben massaged her shaking hand she pulled it away. "It's fine now," she said turning back to examine the steaks.

Not wanting this moment between them to end, Ben walked over and stood behind her, rubbing her upper arms. He couldn't help dropping a few kisses on Ellie's delectable neck and was rewarded by her shuddering response.

"Sheriff," Ellie whispered.

"You're beautiful. Do you know that, Ellie?" Ben said so softly that Ellie wasn't sure she had heard him. He kissed her neck again and murmured, "I've wanted to kiss you ever since that first night when you walked in here in that white nightgown to say goodnight. You've caused me a lot of restless nights, I've got to tell you."

Not knowing what to say, Ellie mumbled, "I'm sorry."

"Maybe we can replace the dreams with real life," Ben said turning Ellie around and wrapping her tightly in his arms. This time his lips weren't gentle. They were urgent, ardent. He wasn't wasting time with subtleties. He knew what he wanted.

Ellie.

## Tennessee Waltz

Ben forgot all the reasons that this wasn't a good idea and simply listened to the dictates of his body. The sound of giggles coming through the front door didn't invade his conscious until the swinging kitchen door started to move.

Ellie pushed him away as her children came into the room, busy chattering about their walk with Miss Peggy. Ellie tried to discreetly fix her disheveled hair and grab hold of her senses.

The children turned their attention to him and eagerly asked him when their next swimming lesson would be.

Having reclaimed his composure, Ben said, "Well, I think you two are doing great with swimming." His expression turned mischievous. "However, I think your mama could do with a lesson or two."

Both kids squealed and applauded. "Yes, Mama. You need a lesson from Sheriff Ben. He'll teach you real good," Sarah said.

As the devil stood there grinning at her, Ellie was sure that this man could teach her a thing or two.

If she dared to take a lesson.

She was talked into taking that lesson the next Saturday morning. This time when Ben showed up at the door and escorted Ellie out, she was the one wondering about who was going to the pond when the kids merely stood at the door watching her leave. "Sarah? John? Aren't you coming?" They just smiled back at her.

"Ma's taking them to some party at the church. Stacy Angotti wanted them to come and Ma thought they'd enjoy it."

Ellie wasn't sure, but she thought she heard a touch of humor in his voice. Almost like he was smug with the arrangements. Ellie told herself she was just being silly as Ben helped her into his car.

She'd spend a lot of time in the past two days thinking about what had happened between them in the kitchen. It had been wonderful, she could still feel his lips on hers. His intensity had captured her and held her hostage as he'd done wicked things to her lips. Her tongue, her neck—

"Are you comfortable?"

"What?" Ellie asked quickly snapping out of her thoughts.

"You look a little hot. Do you want me to turn on the air in the car?"

Ellie blinked hard and then almost laughed. If only he knew what she had been thinking. Judging by the hint of a smile of his face, maybe he did. Mortified, Ellie turned to look back out the front window. "No, I'm right fine, thank you."

There was little traffic this Saturday morning in Ellerton. Ever the vigilant sheriff, Ben scanned the town making sure that nothing was amiss. Remembering that he hadn't talked to the office that morning, he picked up the radio and called Harvey, letting him know that he would be out at the pond if needed.

When he put the radio back, Ellie said, "You have a real important job."

Ben looked back at her, "Yeah. I think so."

"My granddaddy was a peacekeeper in the mountains. He took his job seriously, just like you." Ben smiled. "He said you have to love the people to be good at it. I see that in you Sheriff Ben. I see your love for Ellerton."

Ben was a little taken aback. He'd never really thought about it. Ellerton hadn't been his goal. He had decided to go to the police academy and pursue a position in a big city—Cincinnati, Baltimore, even New York. But things happen, unwanted things, and suddenly you find yourself back in your hometown where you never expected to be. But that was all water under the bridge.

Ben looked at Ellie. "It's a good town. A lot of good people. Always things going on, community events that knit the town together."

"I like that. It's nice."

"Yeah. In fact, there's a town dance coming up in a couple of weeks. Sorta like a celebration of autumn arriving."

"What fun."

"Would you like to go?" Now where did that come from? Ben had no intention of taking a date to the dance. The last thing he wanted was for the gossip brigade to see him with Ellie.

Maybe it was Ben's protectiveness coming out. He still remembered those two losers manhandling Ellie in that alley. Maybe he just wanted to take her, enjoy the excited look in her lovely blue eyes, and hold her in his arms. Ben realized that it was important for him to take her. He wanted to take her.

He looked directly at her waiting for her answer. "Well?"

Ellie couldn't catch her breath. This big handsome knight in shining armor was asking her to the ball. It seemed like a fairy tale, and she was the princess. His eager face added to her joy. "I'd be right proud to go with you, Sheriff Ben."

Taking a breath, Ben smiled. "Really, Ellie, you can leave off the sheriff part. Just call me Ben."

"All right. Ben," she said almost reverently.

They drove along in silence for a while as Ben occasionally stole glances at Ellie. He knew his mother had helped Ellie buy a swimsuit. She had it on now, he was sure, under her housedress. Boy, he couldn't wait to help her out of that awful housedress. "So, Ma told me you got a new swimsuit." Ellie nodded. Just to play with her, he asked, "Is it a bikini?"

"No. It's a swimsuit."

Ben looked at her confused. After a beat he laughed. "I mean is it a tiny two-piece that'll make my heart skip a beat?"

Ellie's mind jumped back to the store and all the swimsuits that she saw. She remembered some of the small suits, just two strips of cloth really. Ben was asking if she had one of those on? She immediately blushed profusely. "Good gracious, of course not! Why, I couldn't wear one of those!"

He laughed. "Well, a man can always hope."

"Hope all you want. I ain't gonna be putting on only a couple of scraps to hide my nakedness anytime soon," Ellie said adamantly as she folded her arms in front of her.

The woman was really fun to tease. He had missed that in his life. Ben remembered when he and Jan . . . His jaw suddenly tightened at the thought of the woman he used to think was "it" for him. His breathing started to quicken as he remembered the lessons learned and vowed again never to make the same mistake.

## Tennessee Waltz

They walked to the banks of the pond, spreading out a big blanket to put their stuff on. Apparently over his sulkiness now, Ben grinned and said, "Okay. Now I get to see the swimsuit you did pick."

Her cheeks becoming very pink, Ellie looked down at her dress. She started unbuttoning the front, too slow in Ben's mind.

When she finally peeled the dress away, she stood there in an elegant white one-piece that showed her curves. It had a v-cut in front and high cuts at the thighs. Very tasteful and very flattering.

Ben sighed. "It's very nice, Ellie. You look lovely," he said quietly.

Ellie smiled looking down at the suit. "I'm glad you like it."

Ben took Ellie's hand and led her to the water. Her pulse racing, he massaged her wrist with his thumb and said, "Don't worry, Ellie. I'm right here. I'm not going to let anything happen to you."

Unfortunately it wasn't the swimming that had her anxious. She had seen that look in a man's eyes before. However, the fear that she normally had wasn't there. She trusted Ben.

The lesson went well. Ellie was getting the hang of things although she did hate to put her head underwater. Even with her hair pulled back in a ponytail the loose strands still would get in her eyes as she surfaced, causing her to impatiently push it away.

After working together for a while, Ben surprised her by saying, "Want to go for a ride?" Ellie raised her eyebrows in question. Ben turned his back towards her and said, "Put your arms around my neck." When she did, he sank his shoulders under the water and began swimming into deeper water.

Ellie let out a little squeal as she felt her body floating above Ben's. He carried her in lazy figure eights through the pond. She could feel the tension floating away with the gently moving water. She loosened her hold on Ben and looked around truly enjoying the ride. Several times Ben dropped into the water taking Ellie with him.

She closed her eyes and tightened her grip on him, her head resting on his back. Enjoying the scent of the country mixed with the soap and aftershave of the man, she took a deep breath. If only life could be so easy, so peaceful, so . . .

Ben turned to face her and looked directly into her eyes.

So wonderful.

The eyes that had been so playful while teaching her to swim had become serious. He tread water for both of them, leaned over, and softly touched his lips to hers. Once, twice, and then again.

Ellie could hardly breathe. This strong, vibrant man was interested in her. It was almost more than she could believe. Her grip tightened, as she wantonly pulled him closer.

Ben deepened the kiss, tangling his legs with hers, causing them to sink into the pond, their lips still mated.

Ellie didn't mind since she wasn't breathing to begin with. He only let them submerge for a second before he brought her back to the surface. She sputtered and swiped the hair out of her face, making Ben laugh.

His arm still around her, he swam back to shallow water and surprised her by quickly scooping her up into his arms. She shrieked but held on tightly.

She clung to him as he carried her to the blanket. Gently, he lay her down and followed, pulling her tighter into his embrace. This time when their lips met, he kissed Ellie with desire, with hunger. She eagerly returned the sentiments.

He gradually released his hold until her back was on the blanket and he was smiling, leaning over her. His kisses began on her forehead and rained down her face to her throat, her neck, and her shoulders.

Ellie loved the feeling of Ben kissing her. It was as addictive as the sugar candy Miss Peggy had given her kids. She reveled in the feel of his hot lips on her skin. She would have to start breathing again some time, she thought. He trailed lower with his kisses to the skin revealed in the “v” next to Ellie’s breasts. He moved his legs so that they crossed over Ellie, straddling her. Slowly he lowered his body to hers.

Now, it hadn’t been that long ago that Ellie had been married. She could remember how a man’s body worked. She knew if he wanted more than kissing and right now Ben was thinking about a lot more than kissing.

She lifted up which only aided in moving his lips closer to one breast.

“Ben.”

Nothing. Apparently he was so involved in what he was doing, he didn’t hear her. Or else, he thought she was just sighing his name.

“Ben.” When he didn’t answer she thought she would try one more time and then she would go with the move her daddy had taught her—hit ‘em where it hurts.

“Ben!”

“What?” He looked up, his eyes unfocused.

“What in tarnation are you doing?”

He smiled a lascivious smile and said, “If you don’t know then I’m not doing it right.” He leaned in towards her. “I’ll just have to try harder.”

Ellie put her palm firmly on his chest. “Ben, you’re behaving like you want to do ‘the act’ with me.”

Ben narrowed his eyes. “The act?”

Lowering her voice as if anyone was around that could hear her, Ellie said, “You know . . . ‘the act.’ How babies are made. Is that what you want, to make a baby with me?”

## Chapter Seven

It wasn't too often that Ben was without words but this was certainly one of those times. He cleared his throat. "Well, we won't have a baby. I've got something here in my wallet that we can use."

"I don't think no baby cares what you got in your wallet."

Ben looked at Ellie as if she were speaking an unknown tongue. "No, I . . ." How could he explain this. All of a sudden the enjoyable morning that Ben was so sure they'd have turned into a comedy of errors. Ben did not want to explain the invention of condoms to Ellie. Especially when he had other things on his mind. "Never mind. Just let me handle it, okay?" He leaned back over Ellie to pick up where he left off.

When his lips were an inch away from Ellie's she said, "We can't do 'the act' Ben. It just wouldn't be right."

Ben slowly sat back up and looked at her. "Why not. We're two healthy, single adults. We wouldn't be hurting anyone. In fact, we'd probably be better citizens since we'd be returning much more relaxed and in better moods." Even Ben winced inside at that absurd logic. But he wanted Ellie. He wanted her real bad.

"But we ain't married. It would be wrong."

She looked up at him, her blue eyes burning a hole into his soul, her eyelashes still wet from the pond fluttering against her face. She was, in a word, adorable. Ben hadn't had adorable in a very long time. It only made him burn more for her. "But Ellie, I—"

"No, Ben. I'm not going to do it," she said primly as she stood and grabbed her dress.

Ben just sat there looking at her as she pulled the dress over her head covering her wet body and buttoned up. He should have been philosophical about the whole thing. He should have been thankful that she had stopped him. He should have been understanding enough to know that one of them had had the good sense to stop something before they had gotten physical with each other.

He was livid.

"You were all for it a few minutes ago," he said as he stood to face her.

"Is that what you think?" Ellie was blushing as she tried to button up the many buttons on her dress.

"Yeah. I never would have pegged you to be a tease, Ellie Kent," Ben said harshly.

Her head snapped up. "I'm not sure what you mean, sheriff, but I don't like it at all."

His hands on his hips, Ben leaned over, getting in her face. “What I’m saying is you pretended to want *the act*, and in fact wanted to get me all hot and bothered, so you could say no and see me all frustrated.”

She was stunned. “Now, why would I want to do that?”

“I don’t know. Maybe cause you’re a woman. That’s what ya’ll do.” Ben’s voice had been getting steadily louder until he was yelling.

Ellie just looked at him. In a very quiet voice, she said, “She must have hurt you some kind of terrible.”

Like a balloon with the air suddenly escaping, Ben’s anger deflated. After a sigh he looked around and said, “We’d better get back.”

Walking to the car, Ben faced Ellie. “I’ll understand if you’d rather not go to the dance with me, Ellie.” Her face seemed to drop in disappointment, so Ben added, “But if you still want to go, I promise to be the perfect gentleman.”

A smile started to spread over her face. “I know you will.”

Ben wondered what he had gotten himself into.

The Main Street Community Center was decorated in browns, oranges, and yellows to welcome autumn to the town of Ellerton. Most everyone in the little town had shown up to partake in the festivities.

Since Ben had to work just before the party began, Peggy volunteered to bring Ellie, along with Sarah and John. They would enjoy the party for a while and then Peggy would take the kids home.

Ellie was nervous. It wasn’t because of the huge crowd or her hope that they’d like the desserts she’d made for the event. It was Ben. Peggy had gone with her to buy a new dress for tonight and Ellie wanted Ben to like it. The light blue dress skimmed her shoulders and fit tight in the waist before flaring out in different lengths reaching to the top of her knees. The silver heels she was wearing made her feel like she was much taller than her five feet three inches. Peggy had done her hair and makeup and even her children had told her she looked “bee-u-tiful.”

Since the morning at the pond, Ellie had continuously thought about Ben. He was everything she could have wanted in a husband—strong, protective, handsome, and passionate. However, he had no intention of being a husband, not to her, not to anyone. It was such a shame to lose a heart to someone who didn’t want a lifelong commitment.

Ellie knew that she was on the way to losing her heart to Ben.

If she had been wise, she would have told him they should just be friends. That way she wouldn’t be so nervous, looking everywhere for him. But no, when had she been wise? Certainly not where Ben Malone was concerned.

Smiling at several women, Ellie looked at the door just as Ben was making his way through it. Her eyes widened and she gasped. Dressed in a black suit with a dark red tie, his hair slicked back, expression serious, he was quite possibly the most handsome man she had ever laid eyes on. She was frozen in place as he walked to her, a genuine smile curving his face. Without uttering a sound, he took Ellie’s hand and led her to the middle of the dance floor as a soft ballad began to play.

## Tennessee Waltz

Ellie was so dazzled, she forgot to even ask what kind of dance they'd be doing. But it didn't matter. Ben placed one hand on the small of her back and the other gripped her hand. He pulled her gently towards him and they just seemed to sway back and forth.

Her breath stopped in her throat and stayed there. She was almost afraid that if she breathed everything around her would disappear and she'd be back in Hezekiah's cabin. She sighed and got a good whiff of Ben's aftershave, the one that tended to cloud her senses. Yes sir, that heart was now more Ben's than hers.

"Good evening," Ben said as he grinned to her.

"Good evening, Ben," Ellie mumbled.

"You are . . . stunning, Ellie. Like a gorgeous star plucked from the sky and sent to dance with me." He chuckled and said, "And that was a very cheesy line."

Ellie's whole body hummed with happiness. "It sounded real nice to me, Ben. You can go on, if you like."

He laughed again. "I'm really glad I'm here with you." His thumb caressed the pulse point on her wrist.

"Me, too." Her eyes studied him with appreciation, glad to make him laugh, glad to have him dancing with her.

"The kids having a good time?" he asked as they continued to sway.

"Oh my, yes. Miss Peggy has been so sweet, showing them around. They're having so much fun."

"That's good. I want them to be at home here in Ellerton." His eyes grew serious as he said, "You too, Ellie."

It was a reverse of how he'd felt when she first came. Her heart raced with possibilities. "Do you really, Ben?" she whispered.

Giving her a heart-melting smile, he nodded. Puller her closer, he rested his head against hers. Ellie sighed and relaxed into him.

When the song ended, he asked, "How about some cider?" Ellie nodded and he took her elbow, leading her to the drink table.

Peggy was there along with Sarah and John. The kids were delighted to see the sheriff and excitedly told them all about the dance and the refreshments. Ellie watched as her children's faces beamed while they talked with Ben. He knelt down to their level and gave them his full attention.

Yes, it was a real shame that he wasn't in the market for a wife. And family.

By Ellerton standards, the dance was a smashing success, the only casualty being when a couple of teenage boys were caught trying to spike the cider. Ellie had danced with several other men, mostly husbands of the women Ellie worked for, who profusely thanked her for making their wives' lives easier, hence making their lives easier. Ellie was delighted.

Ben took little Sarah out on the dance floor and let her stand on his feet while the music played. Ellie did the same with John. After that, Peggy took the children home telling Ben and Ellie to take their time.

Ben danced with a few of the elderly women, which tickled Ellie. He really was a caring, patient man. Every time she was around him she found more to like about him.

The evening went on and after dancing with others, Ben again took Ellie in his arms. They were on the dance floor, Ben making her giggle, when the front doors opened and two very large, very hairy men appeared. They looked almost like conquering Vikings from a different era. They scanned the room, a deadly serious expression on their face.

Ellie saw them and she felt the blood drain from her face. She grabbed Ben's hand and led him to the hallway leading to the back kitchen.

He leaned one hand against the wall over Ellie's head and said, "What's this about?" His grin disappeared when he saw the terror on her face. "Ellie? What's wrong?"

Seized by fear, she couldn't speak but merely sputtered a few syllables.

That's when he heard it. The band stopped playing and everyone was quiet except for quiet murmurings. Frowning, Ben took Ellie's hand and they walked back to the doorway and looked into the dance.

Like a bad wind blowing, two big ugly men were walking through the room, heading for the stage, oblivious to anyone in their way. They both stepped up onto the stage and turned to face the audience.

The older one said, "I'm looking for my son's wife. Took off a while back. Little thing with two young-uns with her. Her name's Ellie Kent."

A collective gasp from the audience filled the room. Both men looked around. The younger man with the mean eyes began to smile, the humor not touching his hard eyes.

Ben stood in the archway of the hall watching the scene. Ellie was behind him grabbing his coat and whispering, "Ben, please. Could you take me back to Miss Peggy's house? I'd like to go. Now!"

"Maybe you'd better wait in the back," he whispered over his shoulder to her. When he knew Ellie was out of sight, he called out, "What do you want with her?"

The older man nodded towards the other man. "She belongs with Hezekiah, her husband back up the mountain. It's time she came home."

"I ain't Hezekiah's wife. We never said no vows and you can't make me go back with him," Ellie yelled as she stepped into view.

The crowd murmured some more. Hezekiah started to jump off from the stage and head for Ellie but his father's hand stayed him. Ellie crouched back behind Ben.

"So there you are. We've been looking all over kingdom come for you, girl. You ain't gonna forget your duty to Hezekiah. We're going home now. Do as I say, Ellie Kent."

Both men now stepped down from the stage and stopped when Ben spoke. "Just a moment there, gentlemen. I believe the lady said that she didn't want to go with you."

The men looked at each other and then burst out laughing. Ben just waited until they got the mirth out of their systems, his fists clenching and unclenching at his sides.

The younger man finally spoke. "And who are you?"

"I'm the law around here. Sheriff Malone. And I can tell you boys now that you're not taking Ellie anywhere she doesn't want to go."

## Tennessee Waltz

"Says who?" Hezekiah said.

"Me, the state of Tennessee . . ." Ben looked around at the furious townspeople. "And everyone of these fine folks of Ellerton.

The two looked around. Hezekiah began pounding his fist into his hand but his father Obadiah, laid his hand on Hezekiah's arm. With his eyes he told his son, not here, not now.

Obadiah said, "All right, Sheriff. She's not going with us. Right now." He turned and looked hard at Ellie.

"Get out of the county, gentlemen. If I see either of you here again I'll arrest you for harassment. I've got enough witnesses here to make a charge stick."

Ellie could feel the tension coming from Ben. His posture was erect, his arms at his sides ready to defend. She thought he was simply magnificent. She turned to look at Hezekiah and Obadiah. They both shared a look and glanced her way. She could feel her skin crawl with their eyes on her.

"Besides, shouldn't you fellows be heading back up in the mountains? Winter's coming. You don't want to be trapped down here until spring."

Obadiah appeared to consider Ben's words. "Perhaps you're right, Sheriff. Ellie, you think hard. You'll do as I say. Eventually."

To her surprise, they walked away, through the doors, and out into the night. She almost fainted with relief when the door closed behind them.

Releasing the breath she was holding, Ellie looked down at the ground. This had been what she was afraid of. The Kents had ruined everything. She had brought trouble to the town and now everyone would be leery of her. She couldn't even begin to think of what Ben must think of her.

A hand gently lifted her chin. "Are you all right?" Ben asked.

What did Ellie see in his face? Concern? Compassion? It was amazing. And then the shaking started. At first Ellie had been incensed at the men's arrival. Now she remembered. She remembered the horror of facing every day with Hezekiah. Never knowing if she was going to get a beating or if Hezekiah would go against his father and rape her. Never knowing if he'd attack her children. Bile formed in the back of her throat and Ellie felt that she might throw up.

Others began to approach, hugging her, patting her back, expressing words of encouragement and solidarity. It should have made her feel better but the utter dread coursing through her body gave her no comfort.

"Come on, we're leaving." Ben wrapped his arm around her and headed for the door.

The support continued as they made their way out, everyone promising to take care of her and her children. Their kindness brought tears to her eyes.

Once outside, Ben looked both ways to make sure the two men were nowhere in sight. When they were safely in his car and he pulled out onto the street, Ben called the office and explained the situation so they could keep an eye out for the two men.

"They didn't seem too concerned about the children," Ben said more of a question than a comment.

"No. Their daddy was second born. Hezekiah is first born so they believe he needs an heir to carry on the family name," she mumbled.

"That's just insane."

"Could we hurry, Ben? I really want to hold my babies."

Ellie's pained expression cut to Ben's heart. He smiled at her and said, "Sure, honey. We'll be there in a couple of minutes."

At Peggy's house, Ellie hurried in and ran into the bedroom to see her sleeping children.

"Why are you two back so early?"

Ben sighed heavily before dropping into an armchair. "Because Ellie's in-laws showed up at the dance."

"No! What happened?"

"I convinced them that she didn't have to go with them." Ben closed his eyes and tilted his head back, resting.

"You convinced them, huh?" Peggy raised her eyebrows. "Did an ambulance have to be called?"

"Thankfully not. For them or me. You should have seen them, Ma. I've never seen too bigger or scarier men in all my life. They must eat oak trees for breakfast."

"Poor Ellie. How did she take it?"

"It scared her pretty bad." Ben chuckled. "That is, after she told them they couldn't make her go back with them."

"Well, good for her. What happens now?"

"We keep an eye out for them in town. If I see them, I'll arrest them for harassment. I think I convinced them to go back to the mountains and wait out the winter. We probably don't have anything to worry about until spring."

Peggy sighed. "I hate to think of them out there. Do you think they're dangerous?"

Ben opened his eyes and leaned over, his arms on his legs. "Ma, they could probably snap the neck of anyone in this town faster than a person could call for help."

"Gracious." Peggy said massaging her own neck.

"I just hope it doesn't come to that. I'd hate to see what damage they could do."

*You won't have to*, Ellie thought. She had heard the conversation between Ben and his mother from the hall. The people of Ellerton had been so good to her. The last thing she wanted to do was to bring trouble to them. She couldn't do that.

She and the children would leave. First thing in the morning.

The next morning Ben was in the office doing paperwork when the phone rang. "Sheriff's office," Ben answered.

"They're gone, Ben. Ellie and the kids. They're gone."

"What? Slow down, Ma. Take a breath and start at the beginning."

"We don't have time to slow down. I tell you they're gone. They packed up their little suitcases and left. They must have left before daylight."

Ben jumped from his chair, his mind pulling him in all different directions. *Settle down, be calm. Do your job here, Malone.* "Okay, Mom. Let's think this through. Does anything look out of place like there was some kind of struggle?"

## Tennessee Waltz

"Oh my Lord! You don't think those men came here and took them, do you?"

"Peggy Malone, you've got to get a grip. Let's work this through so that we can find them, okay?" Ben said speaking to himself as much as to his mother.

"Okay. And don't call me Peggy Malone. Son."

"It got your attention. Now, was anything out of place?"

"No. Everything was neat as a pin. Their bed was made, even."

"Good. That's good. That means that the men probably aren't involved. They didn't seem like the kind that would let Ellie make the bed before they left. Or pack a bag. You said their suitcases were gone?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Now think. Did you hear anything strange in the night or this morning?"

"No, nothing. But you know those kids. They're as good as gold. If their mother told them to be quiet, they would have been as quiet as mice."

"Right. Now, do this for me. I want you to carefully look around the house. Ellie seems to be very conscientious. I can't believe she'd just leave without some kind of a note, some way of saying thank you."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'll go out on the road and look for them. If they were heading for Morristown before, that'd mean they were heading east out route twenty-one. I'll go in that direction."

"Not before you come and pick me up." Peggy said.

"Ma, I really don't have time for—"

"Ben, I'm not kidding. I want to help find them. Now, if you don't come get me, I'll go looking on my own."

With a frustrated sigh, Ben said, "All right. I'll be there in five minutes. Look for that note."

He made it in three minutes.

Peggy came running out of the house waving a small piece of paper. She got into the passenger seat and Ben took off.

"I probably would have missed it. Ellie must have put it by the coffee maker and when the back door closed, the draft sent it on the floor under the counter."

"What's it say?"

Peggy cleared her throat. "Miss Peggy. Many thanks for all you did for me, Sarah, and John. We will never forget your kindness."

Ben waited for more. "That's it?"

"That's it. Why in heaven's name do you think she left? I thought she was happy here." Peggy paused and then said, "You didn't do anything to—"

"No, I didn't." Ben wasn't about to discuss the nature of his relationship with Ellie with his mother. "It had to be because of the in-laws showing up. She was fine before then."

"Of course, that's it. Oh my, I hope they don't run into those men while they're out there."

"I doubt they will. Ellie seems too smart to let them catch her on the road. It took them so long to find her that they apparently didn't know which way she was heading." Ben sincerely hoped he was right.

Glancing at his mother's worried face, he said, "We'll find them. We will."

They followed route twenty-one all the way into Bevinsville, a little town just east of Ellerton. They headed straight to the sheriff's office and explained the situation, giving them descriptions of Ellie and the kids. After doing that, they returned to Ben's car.

"What now?" Peggy asked.

Ben thought for a moment, looking out the front window. "Let's try and think like Ellie. Now we know they left early in the morning. That would mean they've been walking for a while."

"The kids would probably be tired," Peggy said picking up his line of thinking. "If they came to a town, they'd probably take a break and rest a little."

"Exactly. Now, where in the town would Ellie take the kids to rest?"

Peggy thought about it and said with confidence, "A park. She wouldn't want to go inside any place thinking that since they wouldn't be buying anything they shouldn't be taking up chairs. She'd find a bench or a shady area of grass to let the kids stretch out and rest."

Ben turned on his car. "You know where the parks are in Bevinsville?" They drove slowly around town looking for quiet areas with grass, trees, and benches.

After about half an hour of doing that Peggy excitedly said, "There! Ben, look over across the way there."

A large city park came into view with a huge fountain in the middle. At the far edge along a line of trees they could just make out a woman sitting on a bench and two children stretched out on the bench with their heads on her lap.

"It's them," Ben said hoping the incredible lump in his throat was not detectable by his mother. He would never admit how scared he had been for Ellie and the kids. Quickly finding a place to park, he followed his mother across the large yard, neither of them speaking until they were close to Ellie.

She was sitting with her head tilted back, eyes closed, obviously taking a little nap. As if sensing a change in the air, she jerked up, her eyes opening quickly, her arms around her children tightening. Her face held a mixture of emotions when she saw them, and quickly faded to a casualness that Ben didn't believe for a minute.

"Miss Peggy? Sheriff Ben? What are you doing here?"

The light tone of her voice was about to cause Ben's head to explode. How dare she just take off and leave them worried sick. His first inclination was to tell her a thing or two, but thankfully his mother started talking first.

"Ellie, honey, what are you doing? Why in heaven's name would you run off like that? We were worried sick that something had happened to you."

"You found my note, didn't you?"

"Yes, but that didn't explain anything. You could have—"

Peggy was interrupted when Sarah woke up and blinked at her. "Miss Peggy!" Before Peggy could say anything Sarah was off the bench and in her arms.

"Oh, my little Sarah," she whispered and held her tight, tears starting to fall down her face.

"Miss Peggy, I missed you so much. Come and run away with us." A stab went into Ellie's heart.

## Tennessee Waltz

Hearing the commotion, John sat up and rubbed his little eyes. As Ellie smoothed his hair he looked over and seeing Peggy, was off the bench in a second and in her arms next to Sarah.

As Ellie watched her children love on the woman, the guilt kept piling on. She felt the beginnings of a headache.

"Ma. How about you take Sarah and John out for a burger? I think I saw a McDonalds just down the road," Ben said.

Sarah looked up at Peggy. "Could we get 'Happy Meals'?"

Peggy laughed and said, "Of course you can," Glancing back at Ellie she added, "That is, if it's okay with your mom."

Both children were looking at Ellie, their eyes big as saucers. What was a mother to say? "Yes, you may."

Clapping, the kids left Peggy's arms and flew to Ben's. "Sheriff Ben, I'm so glad you found us!" Sarah squealed.

"Me, too," John said.

Sarah looked up at Ben, her big blue eyes too much like her mom's. "Would you come get a 'Happy Meal' with us?"

Ben smiled and stroked her cheek lovingly. "Thanks, princess, but how about you and John go with Miss Peggy and let me talk to your mom for a few minutes. We'll catch up with you, okay?"

Satisfied with the answer, Sarah took one of Peggy's hands in both of hers and pulled. John took the other. Peggy chuckled as they led her away, chattering nonstop to the woman.

Ellie watched them go until she had no choice but to look up at the scowling man in front of her. Neither spoke. Ellie felt as if she had swallowed her fist. If only he would say something. The silence was terrible.

Clearly using all his self-control to contain his emotions—outrage, fear, overwhelming relief—Ben walked to the park bench and sat next to Ellie. He leaned over, his arms resting on his knees, still not speaking.

Ellie could sense the turbulence in the man. She wasn't afraid. As long as she'd known Ben she'd never been afraid of him. She was uneasy. Her plan had been to simply leave Ellerton, taking with her the threats of her in-laws.

Along with the memory of his kisses.

On the long walk, she had had time to think. And wonder. What came over her, kissing a fine man like Ben? It was wrong. He should be out with a pretty woman that could make heads turn, that could do him proud, not a hillbilly with two children. Over and over this morning she had told herself that she had done the right thing

But over and over she had also admitted that she already missed him.

"Why?"

Ellie looked at Ben waiting for him to say more. When he didn't she said, "Why what?"

Slowly, he turned pinning her with the intensity of his dark eyes. "Why'd you just take off like you did? Why didn't you talk to us first?"

Ellie detected a little hurt behind the questions, which surprised her. She turned her body to completely face him and tell the truth. "It's because ya'll mean so

much to me that we had to leave.” Ben frowned and she continued. “I know Obadiah and Hezekiah. They won’t give up, they’ll be back. They are cruel men. They won’t put up with anyone standing in their way.” Ellie shook her head. “I couldn’t stay and let anyone get hurt because of me.”

Ben narrowed his eyes. “Don’t you think we know how to protect our own? You and the kids have become part of our town, by the way. Everyone loves you and Sarah and John. Why, when we left Ellerton, the word had gone out you were missing and everyone was combing the town looking for you.”

Ellie sighed heavily. She worried her fingers in front of her and looking down said, “I didn’t want to cause no trouble.”

“Well, because of your silly stunt, you did.” Ben’s control was slipping. “Instead of staying in a safe environment where we could all keep an eye on you, you high-tail it out where anything could have happened to you and the kids,” he said his voice low and tight.

Yep, he was mad. Ellie really should have been repentant but at the moment all she felt was a warmth spread all over her body. He had been worried. Not just about her but about her children. Why did the man keep getting more attractive to her?

“You dragged those poor kids out in the dark, to walk for miles when there wasn’t a need for it. They were happy with Ma, as I had assumed you were,” he said, his voice rising.

Ellie watched while his eyes crinkled and a muscle twitched in his neck. His lips became thin and hard. She was fascinated.

“You had us all so worried sick that we . . . we . . . Ellie are you listening to me?”

Ellie’s eyes shot up to his. A small smile curved her lips. In a soft voice, she said, “You were worried. Weren’t you, Ben?”

The tone of her voice stopped Ben cold. His expression instantly morphed from angry and fierce to compassion and . . . was that longing?

He cleared his throat and ignoring her question, said, “So, are you going to come home with us?”

Getting serious again, Ellie said, “I can’t put anyone in danger. Especially Miss Peggy. I’d never forgive myself if Hezekiah hurt her.” Whispering, she said, “I just can’t do it.”

Ben took a breath and looked straight ahead. “I can appreciate that, Ellie. And thank you for considering my mother. But there’s got to be another solution.”

“Like what?” she said softly.

“I think you should come back to Ellerton and . . .”

When he didn’t continue Ellie said, “What Ben?”

He turned and his eyes, turbulent as a storm on a mountain lake, pinned her, taking her breath away. His gaze roamed her face as if memorizing every feature. Her pulse thumped in her chest. She sat still, watching him, waiting.

He took her arms in his strong hands and said, “Marry me.”

## Chapter Eight

Ellie's impossibly big eyes grew even bigger. Her mouth dropped open and slightly moved as if she were trying to force words out. But none would come.

Amazingly, Ben felt the same way. He hadn't in a million years thought he would propose marriage to anyone, ever again. But at that moment, it not only seemed a good thing to do, it seemed like the right thing.

"But . . . but . . ." Ellie still could not speak.

"I know. Sounds pretty crazy, but let's think about this. You need protection from these Kent men. I can give you that Ellie, for you and the kids. You know that I will not allow them to hurt any of you in any way."

"But . . . but . . ." Her words still wouldn't come.

"Also, if you marry me, they couldn't take you back to the mountains for the parson to marry you and Hezekiah. You'd already be married. Another problem solved."

"I understand all those things. But what about you, Ben?" Ellie asked, her eyes still wide as a little girl. "Why would you want to marry me?"

Ben could see her uncertainty. He wanted to erase all the self-doubt that Ellie had and help her see what a treasure she was. Easing his grip on her arms he took her hand and held it between his. "I'll be honest with you. I never intended to marry. In fact, I've fought my mom for years about the very issue."

"Because of Jan?" she asked quietly.

He blew out a breath. "Yeah, Jan. We were engaged." Ben's eyes filled with regret and sadness. "I thought we had it all. Went out and bought a big diamond ring and gave it to her over a romantic, candlelit dinner. We started planning out our life together. After college, I'd go to the police academy while she worked. Once I graduated we'd head to the big city to settle down."

Ben's eyes started to harden as he visibly relived the pain of that period of his life. When he didn't say anything, Ellie whispered, "What happened?"

"She found somebody else. Just that quick it was over between us and she was leaving college to run off with the guy. After I got over the shock, I figured he could have her. I didn't want her or her kind ever again."

"I'm sorry," Ellie said softly.

This brought Ben's eyes back to hers. "Forget it," he said, shrugging. "Look, I'll admit it can get lonely. I don't have the desire to go out to bars looking for companionship anymore. I want . . . well, I'm not exactly sure what, but I'll tell you this. Those kids are important to me. I feel responsible for their safety. I haven't

exactly been a Boy Scout in my life, but helping you raise those kids would make up for a lot of things I've done."

"I'm glad Sarah and John are important to you. But . . . just them?"

He allowed himself to sink into the depths of her crystal clear blue eyes and couldn't help saying, "You are important to me, Ellie." But in the spirit of total honesty, he said, "Now, I can't say it's love and if you're looking for a fairy tale story with a prince who's professing undying adoration, well, I can't give you that."

Gently caressing her hand, he said, "You know I'm very attracted to you. It won't be a hardship having a physical relationship with you, and if we marry we *will* have a true marriage. No marriage of convenience."

Ellie thought this over as Ben continued. "I'd be a faithful husband. I've already sown my wild oats. All I want in life is to do my job, help raise those kids, and have you in my bed. I'll be happy with that."

A slight heat crept up Ellie's neck. She looked deep into Ben's eyes and saw need, desire, and something she thought she would never see in the strong sheriff—a vulnerable, bruised heart. Her own heart began to melt. How could she say no to this man—this man that had helped her so much, had loved her children, who had protected and defended her time and time again?

An idea hit Ellie. She firmly believed in everything happening for a reason. Perhaps she and the kids had been sent to Ellerton to help mend this broken man. Maybe they were in his life to help him find hope and love again.

Did she love him? It was obvious that she'd slowly been losing her heart to him since he'd found them underneath that bridge and taken care of them. He didn't love her but he wanted her, felt affection, wanted to work with her to raise her children.

He respected her and that was the biggest reason yet for her to love him. No, he didn't love her but in time maybe that would come. She hoped it would.

Suddenly her heart was filled with a purpose and a determination. She would accept Ben's help and in turn help him to love again. "Are you sure?" She had to give Ben one last out.

He took a deep breath. "I'm very sure."

A smile blossomed across her face as she stretched her arms up and around his neck. She held on tight, wishing that the love and joy she felt could be transferred to the man.

Ben grinned from ear-to-ear as he held Ellie tight. Turning his boyish grin to face her, he said, "I think we should seal this agreement with a kiss, don't you?"

Breathless, Ellie just nodded.

Ben leaned down and kissed her lightly. The kiss deepened as his hands began to roam along her back. His tongue plunged into Ellie's mouth, savoring, exploring, and delighting in the unique taste that was Ellie.

Ellie's hands went up to Ben's hair, loving the feel of it through her fingers. Not wanting to stop, she grasped his head and returned his kiss with the same ardor.

Neither noticed they had an audience. Neither noticed the three polite coughs. Finally, Peggy said, "For crying out loud, Ben, the food's getting cold here."

Ben and Ellie continued to hold on to each other as they turned to see three beaming smiles.

## Tennessee Waltz

Peggy held up two bags of food and said, “We decided to bring lunch back for you.” Smiling, she added, “But looks like you already started on dessert.”

Sarah started giggling. “Ya’ll were kissing!”

John shared his thoughts with a loud, “Ewww!”

The most amazing thing happened. Ben actually blushed. Ellie laughed out loud and kissed his cheek.

Ellie’s head was spinning with details of her (gulp) wedding. For such a simple ceremony there still seemed a lot to do. Doc Barnes was called to supply Ellie’s birth certificate so they could apply for a license, wedding rings and a wedding cake had to be picked out, the church and pastor had to be scheduled. It was all enough to completely shatter Ellie’s nerves.

The worst part was when she was told that Ben’s sister and fiancé, as well as Ben’s brother and two kids would be coming for the Saturday morning ceremony. What would they think of her? Would they like her? Would she make a complete fool of herself?

Friday came too soon and sensing Ellie’s nervousness, Peggy sent her with Stacy to the mall in Cumberland to shop. Stacy had been given explicit instructions to help Ellie pick out a few negligees and casual outfits for her honeymoon. It would be Peggy’s wedding present. Meanwhile, Peggy ran some errands of her own, taking the kids to the salon to have their hair trimmed and checking on a few last minute details.

“Hello? Anyone home?” Ben called as he came through the back door of his mother’s house. His siblings were due to arrive at any moment and he wanted to be with Ellie when she met them. Daphne and Peter would fly in from Florida and Kevin and the boys would pick them up at the airport in Knoxville and drive up together.

The house quiet around him, Ben decided to make a pot of coffee and wait. As it brewed, he sat at the kitchen table and let his thoughts wander. He was getting married tomorrow. How did that happen? He should be a nervous wreck, he should have cold feet. He should be dreading the ceremony tomorrow morning.

But it was the strangest thing—he had a peace, a peace like he hadn’t known in a long time. He was going to marry Ellie and take Sarah and John into his home to be his family. He grinned. He was looking forward to it, in fact, he couldn’t wait. A chuckle escaped him. Would wonders never cease.

He heard car doors slamming in the driveway just as the coffee stopped brewing. Hmm? Go help his family with luggage or have a cup of fresh, hot coffee? *No contest*, he thought as he pulled out a mug and poured himself a cup.

After two sips, the back door opened followed by pandemonium. Two six-year old boys came running into the house, followed by a large golden retriever. “Andy! Philip! Wait just a darn minute!” A taller, leaner, and darker haired version of Ben walked in carrying one suitcase and two duffel bags just as the twins jumped into the waiting arms of their uncle. The dog just stood there and barked. Loudly.

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“Didn’t I tell you two to wait for me? Samson! Hush.” The man dropped the luggage and smiled at Ben. “Always thought it’d be a cold day in hell before I was coming to your wedding, brother.”

Ben put both squealing boys down and walked over to his brother and gave him a combination handshake shoulder bump. “Apparently Ma’s prayers are stronger than my resistance.” As Andy and Philip began whooping and hollering, running in circles around the table with the dog, Ben said a little louder, “Hey, where are Daphne and Peter?”

At the question, Andy stopped, causing his brother to bump into him. “They’re outside kissing and stuff. It’s really gross, Uncle Ben.”

“Yeah, gross! Aaaugh!” Philip made a choking noise, putting his hands on his throat.

Ben laughed as Kevin shook his head. “Better get used to it fellows. Your uncle here is leaving the paradise of the blissfully single adult and attaching his own ball and chain.” Both little boys looked up at their dad confused. Kevin leaned down towards them and said, “In other words, he’s going to be doing his own kissing tomorrow.”

Both boys yelled and began running again.

Knowing that his mother would not like to see her grandchildren running wild, especially in her kitchen, Ben said, “You guys want cookies and milk to tie you over until supper?”

Andy and Philip gave up the chase and pulled out chairs. “Hold it, monkeys. Hands washed first. Go,” their father instructed. He pulled out a chair and watched his brother intently while he made the boys a snack.

Shaking his head, Kevin said, “I guess she’s already got you domesticated.” Grabbing a cookie for himself, he continued. “She must be something in the sack to have you marrying so fast. Or is there a little bun in the oven.”

Ben could feel his irritation building. Of course, Kevin knew nothing about Ellie, but still. He felt as if Kevin had maligned her good name. Ben speared Kevin with a hot look. “It’s not that way. And I’ll thank you to watch your tongue when Ellie gets here.”

Stunned, Kevin sat up straight and held his palms up. “Sorry, Ben. Didn’t mean nothing by it, you know that.”

“Yeah, I know. But Ellie doesn’t know you like I do. She might be offended.”

Kevin narrowed his eyes. “You aren’t marrying somebody that I’ll have to walk on eggshells around, are you?”

Smiling, Ben said, “Not at all. But please do me a favor and let Ellie get to know the nice side of you before you completely shatter all her opinions of her brother-in-law.”

Kevin was prevented from answering by the return of the boys and their dog. “Okay, let me see ‘em.” Both boys held up their hands. “All right. Proceed.”

Ben handed a couple of cookies and a glass of milk to each child. Philip looked up and said, “What about Samson? He washed his hands, too.”

“Oh, no,” Kevin said as he ran back to the bathroom to survey the damage. Ben coughed, smothering a laugh.

## Tennessee Waltz

The door opened and Ben turned to see his sister, with the same chestnut colored hair as Kevin but eyes like his, walk in. On her arm was her fiancé, staring adoringly at her.

“Daph! How are you, darlin’?” Ben walked over and pulled her into a big hug.

“Ben, I’m so excited for you.”

“Thanks for coming, shortstuff.” Ben let her go to shake the hand of the man standing next to her. “Peter, good to see you.”

“You too, Ben. Especially under these circumstances.”

Daphne took her brother’s arm and held it tight. “There’s no way I would miss this wedding. I never thought I’d see the day after—”

“Yeah, Daph. I get it. You’re surprised.” He was getting married. So what? No need to take out an ad in the *New York Times* about it.

“Now don’t be mad. I’m really very proud of you. I can’t wait to meet my new sister-in-law. Where is she, by the way?”

“Yeah. Are we sure she really exists? How do we know you haven’t made up the whole story?” Kevin said as he walked back into the kitchen and poured himself a cup of coffee.

Daphne and Peter snickered as they made their way next to Kevin and helped themselves to the coffee.

“Very funny. Ellie went shopping with a friend. And before you ask where Ma is to validate my story, she took the kids for haircuts.”

“That’s right. You’re going to be a stepfather. Oh, that’s so sweet,” Daphne crooned. Ben thought he’d be sick. “How old are they?”

“Sarah’s five and John is three,” Ben replied.

This got the twins attention as they both looked up sporting handsome milk mustaches. Philip voiced their concern. “Sarah? A girl?” Ben smiled and nodded.

The boys looked at each other and moaned, “Nooooooooo!”

The sound of a car pulling up in the driveway attracted everyone’s attention. Ben said, “Well, boys, look like you’re about to meet your new cousins.”

Seconds later Sarah and John walked in followed by Peggy. When the kids spied Ben, they rushed over to him forgetting there were other people in the room. “Sheriff Ben!” Sarah squealed. John laughed in delight.

Ben scooped them up in his arms. “Hey princess.” He gave Sarah a noisy kiss on her cheek. “Hey partner.” He repeated the gesture on John’s cheek. Both children clung to him, causing Ben’s heart to soar.

Unbeknownst to Ben, Peggy paused in greeting, hugging, and kissing her family to smile at the scene in front of her, putting her hand over her heart. Daphne took Peter’s arm and sniffed. Peter smiled. Kevin and his boys looked as if they were in shock.

Gently, Ben lowered the children but kept his arms around them. “Kids, I’d like you to meet my family—your family now.” He went around the room making the introductions. Sarah and John were very polite, saying “hello” when appropriate and making eye contact like their mother had taught them. Ben was very proud.

When they were introduced to the twins, Philip said, “We don’t like girls.”

“Philip—” Kevin started to speak.

Sarah shot back, "We don't like rude little boys." The room was so quiet you could hear the proverbial pin drop. Everyone held their breath and watched to see how this would play out.

Instead of feeling insulted, both boys looked at each other and shrugged. "Want some cookies?" Andy asked. The adults grinned at each other.

"Yes, much obliged," Sarah said as she and John took seats at the table. Kevin got two more plates along with glasses of milk and placed them in front of the children. Kevin gave Sarah a wink which made her smile.

Everyone chatted away. Peggy reprimanded Kevin for getting out the cookies, which was expected. Daphne told everyone of the plans that she and Peter had made for their wedding next summer. Also expected. Kevin told everyone about the twins' latest hijinks. Everyone laughed.

Ben sat, pulling John onto his lap. Watching Sarah and John carefully, he was glad to see their little faces filled with joy. Again, he was faced with the feeling that this was good. Marrying their mom, making a stable home for them was the right thing for him to do.

"Hello?" a voice called from the front door.

"Come on back, we're in the kitchen," Peggy answered.

Ellie stood rooted to the spot. She was too nervous to move.

Clearly sensing this, Stacy said, "It's all right, Ellie, I'm sure they'll love you." She turned and said, "I'll see you tomorrow morning."

"No!" Ellie grabbed Stacy's arm. "You have to come with me."

"No, Ellie. This is a family thing. I don't want to intrude."

"Stacy, please. I ain't never met these people and I want them to like me so much."

"They will. You don't need me for that," Stacy said, trying to extricate her arm from Ellie's grab.

"But I need you there. To act like a . . . a . . . you know, a go-between." Stacy was about to speak, surely to refuse again when Ellie widened her pleading eyes and said, "Please?"

Stacy sighed and gave her a smile. "Okay." As they started to walk towards the kitchen, she said, "But if they don't fall head over heels in love with you I can't say much for their intelligence."

Ellie smiled even though she wasn't quite sure she knew what Stacy meant.

The kitchen was comfortably crowded when they pushed through the swinging door and entered the room. The chatter stopped and all eyes went to Ellie. She surveyed the room and quickly found Ben and smiled timidly.

Ben's eyes lit up. He immediately stood, setting John down in the chair and went over to Ellie, placing his arm around her and kissing her tenderly. Ellie's eyes flew to his, adoring him for his tenderness.

Smiling at her, Ben finally noticed that the room was quiet. Keeping Ellie firmly under his arm, he said, "Well, family. I'd like to introduce you to Ellie." Nodding to Daphne and Peter, Ben said, "This is my sister Daphne and her fiancé Peter. They're getting married next summer." They exchanged greetings. "And

## Tennessee Waltz

sitting at the table are my incredibly busy nephews Andy and Philip. Boys, say hello to your Aunt Ellie.”

“Hello, Aunt Ellie,” the twins said in unison creating a ripple of chuckles from the adults.

Ellie noticed that her two children just sat at the table and grinned. They hadn’t felt the need to ambush her with hugs after not seeing her all afternoon. Even though she missed the hugs, she knew this was good. They obviously felt comfortable with their new family. She swallowed hard, feeling grateful.

“That ugly fellow standing next to Ma is my little brother, Kevin.”

“Ah, Ellie. I must say that my brother has exquisite taste.” Kevin walked to her. “Although he is mistaken as to which brother possesses the looks in this family.” Kevin looked at Ben and said, “May I kiss the bride, brother dear?”

Ben narrowed his eyes and nodded. Very gently, Kevin took Ellie’s upper arms and gave her a kiss on each cheek.

“It’s nice to meet you, Kevin,” Ellie said, as her cheeks heated.

“The pleasure is all—” Looking behind Ellie, Kevin froze. After a brief hesitation, a frown creased his forehead followed by a tight smile as he said, “And who is this?”

Ellie followed his gaze and said, “Oh, good Lord, Stacy, I’m so sorry.” She moved over to her friend and pulled her into the room. “Everyone, this here is my good friend Stacy Angotti. She’ll be standing up for me tomorrow.” Stacy nodded to everyone.

“That reminds me, Kev. How about standing up for me?” Ben asked.

“Sure, no problem,” Kevin said, his eyes remaining on Stacy.

Stacy returned Kevin’s frown and turned to Ellie. “I think I’ll be leaving now. I’ll be over by nine tomorrow to help you get ready, okay?”

Ellie smiled and gave her friend a big hug. “You are a good friend, Stacy. Thank you for everything. And I mean everything.”

“No problem,” Stacy said hurrying out of the room.

Silence fell over the room, as no one knew quite what to say. Peggy took control of the situation. “How about dinner? I got some nice steaks marinating in the refrigerator.” She quickly moved to take the meat out.

“Grandma? I’m not hungry,” Andy said.

“Neither am I,” Philip said.

Peggy glared at Kevin.

## Chapter Nine

The wedding was beautiful. And short. And small. Still it was everything Ellie could have hoped for. Peggy and Stacy made a beautiful bouquet of hydrangeas, Queen Anne's lace, and chamomile. It reminded Ellie of the wildflowers up in the mountains. Stacy left Ellie's hair around her shoulders but pulled it away from her face and secured it with combs covered in baby's breath. Daphne did Ellie's makeup going very light on the cheeks and lips and highlighting her lovely blue eyes with eye shadow in earth tones.

But the best part was the wedding dress. It was the most beautiful dress Ellie had ever seen. It was a cream colored silk with a low neckline that skimmed Ellie's curves and flowed to just below her knees. The matching pumps showcased her toned ankles. Ellie had been hesitant to even try on the dress but Peggy had insisted and when Stacy and Peggy looked bug-eyed at her in the dress shop, she knew the dress looked as good as it felt.

Even now as she was getting ready to walk down the aisle she felt like a fairy princess. The pastor's wife began playing the wedding march on the organ as John, carrying a pillow with two rings attached, and Sarah, holding a basket filled with rose petals started walking down the aisle. Stacy was next, wearing a lovely blue silk dress. Ellie took a deep breath and waited her turn.

Ben was having a moment. *What am I doing here?* It was as if he was awakening from a dream and realized he was in the wrong house or something. He looked down at his beaming mother sitting between Andy and Philip. Daphne and Peter next to them. Looking to the back of the church, Sarah and John started down the aisle. John had a big grin on his face while Sarah was concentrating very hard, trying to spread the rose petals and at the same time keeping John at her side in the center of the aisle. Ben smiled.

Stacy came next. Ben was happy that Ellie had found a good friend. And with Stacy's strength of character and easy, fun-loving spirit, she was a nice complement to Ellie's quiet demeanor.

Ben heard a groan and turned to see his brother looking at Stacy with a scowl on his face. He wondered what that was about.

Suddenly, there was Ellie. His bride. He sighed with appreciation. Had he thought her an angel before? A shining star? Now she was totally a woman, walking towards him to join her life to his. His doubts flew to the wayside, just like the rose petals that Sarah continued to spread.

Everything would be all right. It had to be for Ellie's sake. He'd make it so.

## Tennessee Waltz

After a reception at the church the town of Ellerton hosted for their sheriff, the newlyweds headed off for their wedding night, to be spent at Ben's small house down a side street from the sheriff's office. Ben had tried to clean the place as best as he could, but he still wished he were bringing Ellie to a big, beautiful home.

Ellie had never been to Ben's residence but the minute she saw it she let out a gasp of surprise. It was perfect. It was a small wood paneled dwelling with a front porch that spanned the width of the house. A small white picket fence enclosed the front yard, giving the house a homey feel. She had always wanted one of those fences. There was plenty of room for flowers to border the fence and house. Her heart started beating fast with excitement.

Misinterpreting her gasp, Ben shut off his car and faced her. "I know it's not much, Ellie, but you must know that a sheriff's salary isn't that big."

Ellie turned to him and said, "It's wonderful. I love it, Ben."

Ben looked into her sparkling, happy eyes. She was serious. He thought she couldn't amaze him anymore but he had been wrong. He pulled her to him and wrapped his arms around her. His mouth hungrily came down on hers, taking, tasting, enjoying. His soft moan told him he'd better get Ellie in the house fast before he took her right then and there. In a husky voice he whispered, "Let's go inside and get this marriage started off right."

With a smile she didn't feel, she replied, "All right." She knew what was coming. The act. Not that she minded it so much and she knew that Ben wouldn't be rough with her. It was just something that she had always endured with marriage, not something that she particularly looked forward to.

When they stepped up onto the porch, Ben scooped her into his arms as Ellie giggled. He kissed her as he was unlocking the door. He kissed her as they entered the house. Ellie tried to look around but Ben was still kissing her as he walked down the hall to his bedroom. He was still kissing her as he laid her gently on top of his bed and removed her shoes.

Ben went to the bedroom door and closed it. As he turned around he began to remove his tie and then his shirt, his eyes staying on his wife. Ellie sat up and watched him, enjoying the view of his naked chest. Ben leaned down on the bed and kissed her tenderly. His hand caressed her cheek, loving the feel of her soft skin. Both his hands went to the combs in her hair and removed them, setting them on the bedside table. He reached behind Ellie and slowly unzipped her dress as he spread kisses on her neck.

He gently lowered the dress. Ellie lay down flat on the bed taking a deep breath and closing her eyes.

Ben stopped.

He frowned as he watched her. Her breath was a bit shallow, but her body was pulled tight as a bow, almost in anticipation of something unpleasant, possibly painful, like visiting a dentist or a principal.

In a perplexed voice, Ben said, "Ellie?"

"Hmm?"

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Go ahead." Her eyes stayed closed.

It really was the darndest thing. Ben lay on his side propped on his elbow, his head resting in his hand watching her. He hadn't a clue as to what was going on inside her head.

Finally, Ellie opened one eye and looked at him. "Well, go ahead. I give you permission."

"What exactly are you talking about?"

"You know. The act. Go ahead, you can take your pleasure. I don't mind."

"You. Don't. Mind." Ben sat up and leaned his arms over his legs. It wasn't that his desire for Ellie was gone, it was just that he hadn't a clue how to proceed now. He thought long and hard before choosing his words carefully. "Ellie. Sweetheart . . . Sex is . . . I mean 'the act' . . . actually I prefer to call it 'making love'—"

"Oh, that's so pretty. Making love." Ellie let the phrase roll off her tongue. "I think I'll call it that from now on."

"Fine. Whatever," Ben said, irritated that already they were off the subject. "Making love is not supposed to be just about me 'taking my pleasure.'" Ellie looked confused. "It's about taking your pleasure also."

"I don't know what you mean."

Ben's eyes widened. This beautiful, vibrant woman had been married before. She had two children and she didn't know what it was to receive pleasure? He knew that her late husband Jeremiah had been kind to her but at the moment he could have throttled him.

Now Ben looked at Ellie with challenge in his eyes. He suddenly had an important mission. Tonight would not be about him and his pleasure. It would be all about Ellie. He was determined to give her a wedding night she would never forget. He would teach her wonderful things. And she would never be a nonparticipant in 'the act' again.

With renewed vigor, Ben leaned back down next to Ellie. He softly began to kiss her temple, her cheeks, her ears, and the soft spot under her ears. Ben smiled as he heard little mewling sounds involuntarily coming from Ellie's throat.

Catching herself, Ellie finally said, "Ben? Why don't you go ahead and do it?"

With the smile of a predator, Ben said, "Oh, my sweet little Eleanor. We're just getting started." Ellie's eyes grew wide. "You see, I know that eventually I'll get my pleasure. But my whole objective now is to see that you get your pleasure."

Ellie's pulse point in her throat started to throb as she glimpsed the intensity in Ben's eyes.

"I'm going to make your body sing, darlin'. I'm going to make you scream my name in desire. I'm going to make you feel as if you are shattering into a million different pieces with pleasure." While Ben spoke, his voice low and threatening, his hands slowly started roaming all over her body.

Ellie shivered as his hands spread heat all over. Ben grinned and said, "Ah, so you're ticklish. Even better. Tell me Eleanor Malone. Are you ready for a little adventure?"

Ben's low voice had already lulled Ellie into a hypnotic state in which her mind was on hold and she just wanted to feel . . . she wasn't sure. She just wanted to feel more. With the last shred of cognition, she answered Ben's question.

"Yes," she murmured, dreamily.

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Ellie felt like a cloud floating in the sky.

Much later, she lay nestled in the arms of her husband, she tilted her head against his strong chest.

Ellie liked what Ben called it—lovemaking. It was the perfect name. Not because of the act but because it was her and Ben. She couldn't imagine being with anyone else like this. She snuggled closer, listening to the calming beat of his heart, the warmth of his skin against hers, and pondered.

This man, this wonderful man, had given everything for her and her children. He'd given up his freedom as a bachelor. Given her his name, his protection, his home. Now the gift of true intimacy. How could she not love him?

And she did love him. She had no doubts that she would love him for her whole life, giving him everything she could to return the love he'd shown her.

Ben kissed Ellie's forehead. "Are you all right, honey?"

"Hmm," Ellie murmured. She loved it when he used an endearment.

Chuckling, he pulled Ellie closer. They were both quiet for a long while before Ellie spoke. "Is it always supposed to be like that?"

"Yeah, it is," he said as he lazily stroked Ellie's naked back. He kissed her hair and said, "So, you liked it, did you?"

"I did." After a slight pause, Ellie said, "It was almost spiritual." She sighed heavily and added, "I never knew it could be like that. I really hope we made a baby just now, don't you?"

Ben's roving hand stopped. When he didn't comment, she wondered if she'd said something wrong. "Ben?"

"It's in God's hands. Are you hungry?"

"Not really." Then with a smile, Ellie sat up and looked at him. The sheet had fallen to his waist, giving her an unobstructed view of a strong, masculine chest. She shivered. "Can we do it again?"

Ben laughed and shifted, pulling Ellie until she was underneath him.

"Absolutely," he said capturing her mouth in a hungry kiss.

And again she floated.

The sheriff's office never closed so that meant there would be no time for a long honeymoon. Ben had arranged a couple of days for him and Ellie to spend in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. So the newlyweds headed south to the small town nestled in the Smoky Mountains.

Ellie was excited. She had not stopped talking since they left Ellerton. She'd never been to the tourist town before, never really been out of her little mountain village until she and the kids had left. Now she was going on a vacation with her new husband. Taking a breath, Ellie looked over at his handsome profile. He was smiling widely, Ellie hoped happy to be going away with her.

"How far is it, Ben?"

"Just about another hour, honey."

"Did I tell you I ain't never been? I mean, I haven't ever been."

Ben chuckled and gave her a wink. "Yes, I think you mentioned it."

She sat back with a contented sigh. "What are we gonna do there?"

"Well, I thought we'd go to some nice restaurants, take a hike in the state park, visit the stores." He gave her a sideways glance and added, "Maybe check out a few ladies' clothing stores."

"Why?"

"Darlin', you're too pretty a woman to go around in those ugly housedresses."

Ellie glanced down at the simple knit dress she wore, one of several that Stacy had helped her purchase. Part of her "trousseau," she thought they called it.

"Maybe even get you a few pairs of slacks. I think you'd be more comfortable working in those than a big dress."

She sat up straighter and said, "I've worn dresses all my life and plan to continue to. After all, I am a woman."

A slow, sensual smile curved his lips just before saying, "You don't need to remind me of that, honey."

Ellie moved closer to Ben. Growing more outgoing, she reached over and began playing with a strand of Ben's hair that curled over his ear. "When you was mentioning what we'd do, you forgot something that we could do together."

Pretending to not know what she was talking about, Ben said, "I did? I can't imagine what."

"Let me give you a hint." Ellie moved closer and started nibbling on Ben's earlobe.

He tried to continue the charade. "Cards? Dominos? Bingo?"

Ellie stopped what she was doing and looked at him. Her look of exasperation caused him to laugh out loud. Quickly, he maneuvered to the side of the road, took Ellie into his arms, and kissed her passionately. "My sweet Ellie. Didn't you know that was first on the list?"

Marriage was working out extremely well for Ben, he thought as he and Ellie walked arm-in-arm down the main street of the little mountain town. Their hikes into the Smoky Mountains had been beautiful and always included stopping to kiss in secluded coves. The evening meals were delicious, served with candlelight and romantic music. Their shopping expeditions were fun and light-hearted. Ellie had to stop Ben from "buying everything in the stores" according to her. Ben loved her for that. He did insist that they buy Sarah and John a toy each and get his mother some homemade fudge.

They stepped into The Candy Kitchen, an iconic shop on the parkway. He enjoyed Ellie's "oohs and aahs" over the taffy pulling machine and her ecstatic delight when he bought her a small container filled with the creamy candy.

He remembered there were several women's boutiques near The Candy Kitchen and led Ellie in that direction.

When she sighed deeply as they stood looking in the window of one, he said, "Come on, Ellie. I want my wife to wear clothes that are as beautiful as her." When she was still hesitant, Ben decided on a different route of persuasion—a kiss on the neck, a soft word in her ear. His gentle leading had Ellie trying on pretty much

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anything he wanted. Each time she came out of the dressing room, Ben was again amazed at her beauty. And his good fortune.

A pair of skinny jeans caught his eye in one store and when he mentioned them to Ellie, she put her foot down. "I don't want to wear no man's blue jeans, thank you very much. Just look how they show that woman's legs off!" Ellie pointed to the mannequin in the window display.

Ben's eyes followed Ellie's hand and sighed when he thought of how the jeans would set off Ellie's toned, long legs. "Yeah," he said with longing.

When they were checking out with a few new dresses and shoes, Ben walked back to the display and looking around to see that Ellie was occupied at the other end of the store, he slipped a pair of the jeans in with his purchases. Maybe he could get her to wear the jeans just for him, in the privacy of their home.

He watched Ellie as she fingered a scarf, deep in her own thoughts. Warmth spread all over Ben as he realized how wonderful marriage could be. Then reprimanded himself. His marriage was simply an agreeable arrangement between him and Ellie for her protection and his pleasure.

The last thing he was going to do was fall in love with his wife.

As if a large exclamation point to that thought, a voice sounded behind him as the cashier rang up his purchases. "Sorry I'm late."

His body tensed. His blood froze. He could feel his jaw tightening and his eyes narrowing.

"There was so much traffic on the parkway and once I got here I had trouble finding a parking place."

Ben watched the woman walk around the counter and lean down to put her purse away. He braced for the confrontation to come.

She straightened and pushed her thick bleached hair back from her face. Her eyes found his and she stood still, immobilized. She blinked twice and then a smile curved her lips. "Ben."

"Jan. Long time, no see." He turned towards the cashier, hopefully dismissing the woman who had ripped his heart out of his chest. "We done here?"

"Yes, sir. If you'll just sign for the charge."

He concentrated on keeping his hands steady as he signed the charge slip. Taking his bags, he walked to Ellie and quickly lead her out the door and away from the store. The last thing he wanted was for Ellie to meet Jan. Not that he was embarrassed by Ellie, far from it. He just didn't want his past to interfere with his present. He didn't want to remember the pain, the betrayal. His heart tightened as again tried to put the hurt away.

"What's wrong, Ben?"

"What do you mean?" He hadn't been aware that Ellie was studying his face.

"Your face got all hard. We're practically running down the street. Almost as if you wanted to get away from that store. Did I do something wrong?"

He stopped, angered at himself for making her think his actions were her fault. "Not at all. I . . ." He glanced back in the direction of the store. "Um, I was . . . just thinking of something back at the office," he lied. "Sorry."

His pace slowed as he held the bags in one hand and kept his other arm around her.

Malinda Martin

“Are you sure?”

Her big blue eyes reminded him that she was not Jan, that not all women were alike.

But his heart had trouble believing it.

## Chapter Ten

“Mama? What color should I use for the princess’s dress?”

Ellie walked over to her daughter who sat at the kitchen table with her little brother coloring a page from her book that “Daddy Ben” had bought for her.

Looking down at the picture, Ellie smiled. “I don’t know, baby. What’s your favorite color?”

“Pink!” Sarah said without hesitating.

“Then I think it should be pink.” Ellie kissed the top of Sarah’s head and went back to preparing breakfast.

Her new marriage was like heaven. She had never known the bliss of being married to such a man as Ben. He was kind and gentle and so physically attuned to her needs that even when they weren’t touching sometimes Ellie’s body would shudder remembering all that had gone between them.

And she didn’t seem to be the only one thriving in the marriage. Sarah and John were both happy and serene. As if they had found their peace. Even Ben seemed to be settled. He wasn’t nearly so moody and quiet. He spent plenty of time with the kids and after they went to bed, the night was his and Ellie’s to be husband and wife.

A sigh escaped her lips at the thought as Ben shuffled into the kitchen. “Good morning,” she said cheerfully, giving him a sweet kiss.

He merely grunted and sat, his face in his hands.

Ellie tried to contain a grin. Little Sarah had been after him to go to church with them and he’d promised that he would the next Sunday. So, here he was, early on a Sunday morning, after they’d enjoyed a late night, trying to wake up to make good on his promise to her little girl. Could she love him more?

She poured him coffee and set it in front of him before moving back to the stove to fry up bacon to go with pancakes. She hummed as she worked, happy and content.

“Daddy Ben, what color is camels?” John asked, coming to stand next to Ben, his coloring book in his hand.

Ben automatically pulled him up onto his lap, blinking his eyes several times, obviously trying to focus on his surroundings. “Ah, let’s see here, partner. What’d’ya got?”

John set out his coloring book and pointed to the picture of the animal on the page. Ellie watched as Ben gently gave him a few ideas and before long he was coloring with John. Ellie’s heart melted at the sight of the big, strong peacekeeper coloring with the little boy.

"Daddy Ben, Miss Stacy said that 'Mr. Sin' was going to be in church today," Sarah said.

"Really?" He looked over at Ellie, a confused expression on his face.

She chuckled and said, "It's a character in the puppet show for the kids," she answered.

"Oh." When Ellie set a plate of food in front of him, he murmured, "I was afraid she meant me."

She gave him a slight poke on the shoulder and retrieved the other plates of food.

"But John and me might miss him on account of Mama's singing this morning. Grandma's going to let us listen to her and then take us back to our church."

"No kidding, you're singing this morning?"

Ellie's stomach churned as she remembered but nodded and tried to smile. She sat with her own plate and coffee and said, "Like my daddy used to say, I can feel the whole mountainside of butterflies making a home in my belly."

Sarah giggled and John said, "Don't want no butterflies in my belly!"

Ben kissed his head and set him down. "That's what happens when you're as talented and pretty as your mama," he said grinning and winking at Ellie. Making the butterflies do a swan dive.

"Don't want to be tal'ted or purdy," John muttered, as the others chuckled.

After breakfast, Ellie instructed the kids to put their books and crayons up as she cleared the table. Ben started helping but stopped to ask, "Why didn't you tell me you were singing this morning?"

She shrugged. "Didn't think it were no big deal." She scrubbed the table harder than necessary, trying to rid the worry that he wouldn't be pleased.

"Oh." He continued putting things away and said, "Well, I'm glad I'm going to hear you."

Ellie stood straight and pressed her stomach with both hands. "Really?"

He frowned. "Of course. I think you've got a beautiful voice."

Her eyes searched his to see if he were serious. As if he knew she needed more of a confirmation, he went to her, wrapping his arms around her waist. Nuzzling her neck, he said, "Probably not right that me and the kids are the only ones that get to hear your angel voice."

How did he know the right thing to say? She threw her arms around his neck and held on tightly. "Thank you, Ben."

He pulled away in order to kiss her thoroughly. The kiss went on and on as pulses thickened and breathing got harder. Ellie was lost in this man, so lost that she almost didn't hear her daughter call, "Mama, I need you to brush my hair."

Reluctantly, she eased back, happy to see his eyes were slightly unfocused. She kissed him once, lightly, and whispered, "I guess we'd better get ready for church."

His voice gravelly and unsteady, he said, "Yeah. After all, Mr. Sin's going to be there today."

The ceiling didn't actually fall in when Ben entered the church and sat with his mother. The parishioners didn't faint at the sight. And Pastor Tom didn't point

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his finger at him and pronounce him damned after all. In fact, it was a pretty nice service. Peaceful, comforting, interesting.

When Ellie stepped from the choir to the pulpit to sing, Ben couldn't help holding his breath, feeling all the butterfly feelings that his wife had spoken about.

She closed her eyes and started singing.

The auditorium was silent as she sang a familiar old hymn with love and feeling. Soon Ben could hear the women sniffing all over the auditorium. Looking around he saw people smiling, nodding.

Even he couldn't help getting choked up at Ellie's presentation.

When she finished, the auditorium erupted with calls of "Amen." Ellie humbly went back to the choir and sat. Her eyes found Ben and, he knew she looked for approval. He wasn't going to let her down. He smiled and nodded.

He wished that had been the end of it. But when they met after the service, people kept coming up to her, thanking her, complimenting her, asking when she was going to sing again. That would have been okay, except everyone extended the congratulations to him and his wonderful choice in Ellie as his wife.

If they only knew.

His marriage to Ellie was an arrangement. A mutually satisfying one. Not a relationship in which their "love" inspired the other to wonderful accomplishments.

He tried to emphasize with each person that yes, Ellie did sing like an angel but he wasn't at all responsible for that. But no one seemed to hear him as he received more hugs than a body ever needed.

"And then all of a sudden there was a sound like a whistling coming from the ground. Everybody stopped to listen. Old man Stubbs walked to the spot where the sound came from and stuck his shovel down hard. A stream of water shot up thirty feet in the sky. Unbelievable!" Deputy Woody laughed and added, "You should have seen Stubbs. He was dancing in the sprays of water, laughing up a storm. Who would have thought that Ellie'd find water on his property."

Another member of the Eleanor Kent Malone admiration society.

"That's gonna save a lot of jobs here in Boggs County. Not only does the farm employ a bunch of folks, but they supply the café, restaurant, and grocery store with a lot of their fresh produce."

"Yeah, I know, I live here too. That's great news," Ben said with no emotion as he shuffled through paperwork on his desk.

Ben supposed he should just enjoy Ellie's accomplishments and to a degree he did. It was important for an elected official like himself to have a spouse that the community embraced. But he felt like a hypocrite, with people looking at him and Ellie as if they were the perfect couple with the perfect family, the perfect life. It was an arrangement. Period.

They'd been married six months and he was sure by now somewhere in the town was a committee determined to nominate his wife for sainthood. Great, but would they just please leave him out of it?

He wasn't in the best of moods when he got home. After taking time to greet Sarah and John, who were full of news about their new puppy, he walked to Ellie who was peeling potatoes at the sink.

Her sweet smile and gentle kiss had the rough edges starting to smooth and he couldn't help giving her another kiss, one that held promise of more once the children were in bed.

He sighed and sat at the kitchen table. John held the little dog up to him so he could greet him also.

"All right, kids. Give your daddy time to catch his breath. Take the dog in the backyard and play for a while."

Once the room quieted, she walked to Ben and rubbed his shoulders. "Hard day?"

He shook his head. "Just another stellar day fighting the criminal element in the metropolis of Ellerton, Tennessee."

"I'm not sure what you mean."

For a moment Ben remembered his dreams of being on the police force of a large city, always something going on. Not warning school children to walk at the crosswalks or refereeing a disagreement between two senior citizens about a checkers game or listening to his deputy go on and on about his wife solving the problems of his town.

But this was his life.

"It's nothing. Really." He took one of her hands and led her to sit on his lap. "Just let me sit here and hold you and everything'll be okay."

As he nestled into her, she stroked his back, his shoulders, kissing his head.

Yeah, this was what he needed. "Hey, how about you and me going away for the weekend. I'm sure Ma wouldn't mind keeping the kids and dog."

She gave him one last kiss and returned to the stove when the timer sounded on the oven. "I'm afraid we can't. We've been invited to Mr. Stubbs farm Friday for dinner. We didn't have anything else planned and he told us to come early so the kids could see his farm. I thought they'd like that. Oh, did you hear—"

"Yeah, I heard. You found water on the property. How'd that come about?"

She placed the sliced potatoes on the stove to boil and took hot biscuits off the cookie sheet. "I was cleaning for Mrs. Stubbs and she told me about their well about to go dry. I told her it weren't nothing to finding water so she asked me if I'd take a look around."

Ben walked to her and leaning against the counter said, "Now how did you know how to find water?"

"My daddy and me used to do it. Everyone in the hills caught rainwater and snow but sometimes when we had droughts we had to hunt for underground wells." She smiled. "I remember one time we found a good source for the widow Duggins. There was so much water flowing, we had to build a dam. She was so happy she gave Daddy a kiss right on the mouth." Ellie laughed out loud.

Suddenly, her expression changed and her movements became less sure. "Then Hezekiah saw the chance to run the water to his place and smashed the dam."

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She wiped her hands on her apron and pulled out dishes for the table. She paused and looked out the window towards the mountains in the distance. "When you think they'll be back?"

Not if. When. Ellie was a smart woman.

Ben folded his arms and said, "I don't know. The snow's melting up in the mountains. The trails should be clear." He saw the fear creep into her eyes. Gently, he took her arm and waited for her to look him in the eyes. "They have no power over you, Ellie. You live here. You belong with me."

"I know that. I just hope we can convince them of it."

Two days later when Ben, Ellie, and the kids showed up at Zeke and Lani Stubbs's farm for dinner, they were surprised when the whole town showed up for a large celebration with Ellie Malone as the guest of honor. The women brought enough food to feed all of Knoxville. The men had games going for the children. Everyone had to see the new well that was up and running.

When it came time to eat, everyone was quiet as Pastor Tom was called upon to say grace. Before he started, he said, "As we celebrate this wonderful occasion and thank God for it, let's also thank Him for bringing Ellie into our community." Ellie blushed as all eyes went to her. "Ellie, we've all been touched by your courage, your insight, your love. And we hope we'll be able to call you our neighbor and our friend for many, many years to come."

To the cheers of everyone, Ellie smiled, bowing her head to blink away the tears.

Ellie was supremely happy except for a few things that nagged on her brain. She hadn't seen nor heard from her former in-laws since the day last fall when they showed up at the town dance. It wasn't like them to just give up and go away. In the back of her mind she knew they would show up again. And she wasn't looking forward to that.

Her relationship with Ben was good. They enjoyed being together. They talked, shared the responsibilities of raising Sarah and John. Their life in the bedroom was fulfilling. Her love for him grew everyday. When would he express those same feelings?

She understood they had entered marriage with neither expressing love for the other. Her own feelings had grown everyday, blossoming into a deep love that was sometimes hard to keep to herself. Surely his feelings for her had grown as well.

Saying "I love you" was probably difficult for some men. Maybe that was the case. She should just go on loving him and be happy with all they had.

But there was one more thing bothering her.

A desire to bare Ben's child had been building since they married. She had conceived so easily before. What was wrong now? She suspected that it had something to do with the little rubber device that Ben insisted on using when they were making love. He said it was called "safe sex" whatever that was. Could that be why she wasn't getting pregnant?

She would have to sit down with him and discuss it. But whenever he came home from work, he was always so tired that the last thing she wanted to do was to

bring up something that could be argumentative between them. She never could build up her courage to talk about it, determining just to be thankful. They did have a good life.

The kids were spending Saturday afternoon with their grandma so Ellie decided maybe it was time to bring up the subject. She took the time to clean the house with extra care, making sure that it smelled wonderful. She set up a table in their bedroom with a candle so they could enjoy a romantic dinner after the kids were bathed and tucked into bed. She set a roast and vegetables into the oven. Biscuits were ready to bake. She mixed a batch of chocolate chip cookies, Ben's favorite and had them ready to put in when the phone rang.

"Ellie. Why don't you let the kids spend the night with me? I'll bring them to church in the morning and you and Ben can pick them up there."

"That's fine, Miss Peggy, but they'll need their church clothes."

"Well, have Ben bring them over."

"I can't. He's out on patrol." Ellie thought and then said, "I'm sure Crystal is home next door. I can get her to run me over with the clothes."

"That's not necessary—"

"I'll see you in a few minutes." Ellie hung up. She didn't want to interrupt her evening with Ben for him to take clothes over for the kids.

A few minutes later, Crystal was pulling into Peggy's driveway. Ellie was surprised to see Ben's patrol car in the driveway. Then she remembered that Ben had said he would pick up the kids before he came home.

Ellie walked into the back door. She could hear her children in a back bedroom playing. She put their suitcases on the table and started into the living room, when something Ben was saying caused her hand to freeze on the door.

"Ellie doesn't need to know, Ma."

"Ben, I really think you should tell her," Peggy was saying.

"Whether Jan comes back to town or not doesn't concern Ellie. I don't want her to know."

"Son, it's a small town. Don't you think she's going to find out? Don't you think she'll run into Jan sometime or other?"

"Maybe not." Ben's voice hardened. "I can't see Jan staying too long. Maybe a day or two. Then she'll be heading out. I doubt I'll even see her."

"But don't you think the possibility exists for Ellie to be hurt?"

"Why? I married her. Not Jan."

Ellie knew that she shouldn't be standing there eavesdropping, but she couldn't help it. If this would help her understand her husband better, why not?

"Did you ever tell Ellie about Jan?"

"I did. Before we got married I told her what happened."

"Ellie must have been touched that you had finally learned to love again after what Jan did to you."

There was a pause before she heard her husband saying, "Why in the world would you think that I'm in love with Ellie?"

Suddenly, she felt her nice little world spinning out of control.

## Chapter Eleven

Ellie backed up from the door and because she knew she would collapse if she didn't sit down, she quietly pulled a chair out and sat. She had hoped, no she had assumed that Ben had fallen in love with her. Even though he never said the words, he showed her in a hundred different ways each day that he cared for her. She didn't want to hear anymore but their voices carried to her hurting ears.

"Ben, how could you say such a thing?"

"Because it's true. Ma, I vowed a long time ago that I would never love another woman. Now, I like Ellie. I like her a great deal. I'm very attracted to her, have been from the first. But I refuse to ever give my heart away again. It's just not going to happen."

"Does Ellie know this?" Peggy asked.

"She knows our marriage is . . . an arrangement for both our benefits." Ellie heard Peggy sigh. "Ma, Ellie knows how badly I was hurt. She's a wonderful woman. She doesn't nag, doesn't expect much. She seems to be happy with what we have. And I got to tell you, I'm really enjoying having my house clean and my meals made. Among other things."

Ellie felt tears streaming down her cheeks. This explained so much about their married life. Why he hadn't said anything about having a baby. For goodness sakes, the last thing he wanted was a baby with her. Why he'd never said, "I love you." For crying out loud, he didn't, nor would he ever.

She suddenly felt so dirty, as if she were just being used. Ben was getting her services, *all* her services, for the price of the plain gold band on her finger. Ellie looked down at the ring and began nervously twisting it. She wasn't sure that she could hear anymore.

"So you're using that precious woman for your own needs? You better not forget that she has needs of her own. And you'd better think about meeting those before it's too late."

"Ma. We're doing fine." Ellie could hear him standing and stretching. "Don't you dare put ideas into her head. Everything's fine between us just the way things are and I want them to stay that way."

Ellie was done. Without making a sound she left by the back door, leaving the kids cases on the kitchen table. She got back in the car with Crystal and said through her tears, "Let's go."

As Crystal backed up she said, "Ellie, are you okay?"

No she wasn't but what could she say? "I think I got something in my eye. Probably some of that there pollen that's started up."

Back at the house, Ellie finished making dinner as she continued to push back tears. She shook her head vigorously. Enough weeping. She had to be smart. If this was the kind of marriage Ben wanted, so be it. She'd oblige him. But there were going to be a few changes. She had to protect her children and herself. It had been her goal since they'd left the mountains. Really nothing had changed.

It wasn't in her to ignore her marriage vows. Ben hadn't hit her or been unfaithful. She wasn't going to leave. As always, she'd work with what she had.

As she was putting the food on the table, Ben came in the back door. "Hey," he said, and as was his habit he went towards her to give her a kiss but Ellie scurried around getting hot dishes out and ready for his supper.

A little confused, Ben went to the sink and washed up. "Went by Ma's house to pick up the kids but she said they're staying the night. I'll take a change of clothes over for them after dinner."

Knowing that Ben was waiting for a reply but not wanting to explain it had already been done, Ellie said, "Fine." It was the only word she could choke out.

After getting everything on the table for his dinner, she said, "I'm not feeling so well tonight. I think I'll just go on to bed." And without waiting for him to say anything she pulled off her apron and strode quickly out of the kitchen and to the bedroom.

She was shaking badly. Reaching into a dresser, she looked through the contents of the drawer and found the heaviest, longest nightgown she could find. Clumsily, she changed clothes, buttoning up the gown that covered her from her neck to her toes.

The bed was cold when she crawled under the covers and burrowed deep into the pillows. A minute later she was surprised to feel moisture on the pillow cradling her face. She was crying again, darn it. The sobs continued so that she didn't hear footsteps coming down the hall.

"Ellie?" Ben walked into the bedroom, saying, "Is there something I can get for you? Maybe a cold compress, aspirin, a glass of water?"

He sounded so concerned. Ellie was amazed at how he could pretend to care about her. Calling herself ten kinds of a fool, she just shook her head and huddled deeper into the bed covers.

"Are you sure you're not coming down with something?" Ben started to walk towards the bed. "Maybe you should—"

The ringing of the phone cut him off. He quickly reached by the bedside to answer it so it wouldn't disturb Ellie.

She listened to his side of the conversation.

"Yeah, Ma. What's up?" . . . "Yeah. I'm getting to it. Do they—"

Ellie could feel his eyes studying her as he continued to listen. "Ma, I'm not sure what you're saying." . . . "Yeah." . . . "Okay, Ma. I understand."

She heard the phone being placed on the bedside table. The mattress dipped and his hand gently stroked her hair.

"Are you sure there isn't anything I can get for—"

"I think I'm going to have a baby," Ellie murmured. *Let him stew on that for a while.*

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The quietness of the room was deafening. In a perverse way, Ellie was enjoying Ben's obvious discomfort. In a scratchy voice, Ben said, "Are you sure?"

Ellie knew she couldn't carry out the lie, she just wasn't that kind of person. She sat up in bed and looked him straight in the eye, hurt pouring out of her. "I lied. I'm not carrying." Her heart tightened at the obvious relief in his face. "It's the first time I've ever lied to you. I suppose I wanted you to feel a little pain. It was selfish of me."

Ben frowned and took her arms in his hands. "Honey . . ." Her body stiffened at the contact. Did he think he'd just make everything all right now with a touch and a sweet word? Maybe she'd been naïve before. Not now. She pulled out of his hands and turned her back on him.

Taking a deep breath, Ben said, "You heard the conversation between Ma and me." It was a statement and not a question.

Ellie didn't respond yes or no but instead began talking in a low, controlled tone. "It's important that I know the truth, Ben. And now that I know what it is you want out of the marriage, we need to get a few things straight.

"Okay," he murmured.

On the far side of the bed from him, she turned to face him. She'd be brave enough to do that. "I want you to help me open a bank account. For just me. Well, for me and the kids. We appreciate your protection but there's no reason you should be supporting us."

"Now, wait a minute—"

"I make enough money to pull my weight around here. I'll be glad to pay half of all bills. Also, I'd like for you to teach me how to drive and eventually I'd like to buy an automobile."

"That's really not necessary, Ellie. You know I—"

"I'm not going to be beholden to you for anything other than what you originally promised. Protection.

"Finally, since you stated at your proposal that you would exercise your husbandly prerogative, I insist that you continue to use those rubber things. And I'd like to go to the doctor and get some of those little pills. Might as well be doubly safe."

Ben was apparently speechless, as he just sat there staring at her.

"Now, I really do have a bad headache so if you don't mind closing the door on the way out." And she turned her back to him and lay back down in the bed.

She heard him stand and whisper, "I never wanted to hurt you, Ellie." A minute later footsteps, and then the door closing.

She didn't know that he'd noticed the small table by the window set for a romantic dinner for two. She didn't know that he felt like the lowest slug on the planet.

Regardless, her tears began again.

Their marriage was irrevocably changed after that. Ellie still cooked and cleaned for Ben but the spark, the light in her eyes was gone. It saddened Ben to see that.

The day after their “talk” Ellie met Ben at the bank to open her account. She was shown how to deposit her checks and how to balance her checkbook. The whole process fascinated her. After that, Ellie had Ben take her to the Division of Motor Vehicles to get the learner’s guide on driving. All night she read and studied.

The next morning Ben was off from work so she convinced him to take her back to the DMV to get her learner’s permit, which he did.

She aced it.

With her permit safely in her purse, she said, “Okay, let me have the keys.”

“Are you nuts?” Ben said surprised.

“I’ve never been more serious. The government thinks I’m ready to learn so come on,” she said as she wiggled the fingers of her outstretched hand. “Give them over.”

With a new kind of fear in his heart, Ben released the keys and got into the passenger seat. As they eased out onto the street, he watched her eyes grow intense, her teeth biting her lower lip as she concentrated. He smiled.

Until other cars approached.

They made it home without any mishaps. Except for a couple of abrupt stops and a few yelled exhortations to watch out. His discomfort had made her chuckle, which, to him, was almost worth the life-threatening terror.

“How about we take the kids to the pond this Saturday?” he asked as they entered their house. “We could have a picnic and I think it’s warm enough to swim.” He walked closer to her as she looked into the refrigerator and with two fingers caressed her neck, dwelling on the spot under her ear where she was most sensitive.

She abruptly closed the fridge and reached for the grocery list she kept on the kitchen bulletin board. “I can’t. I’m working. But the kids would probably love to go with you.” Her eyes stayed on her writing.

Ben let out a breath. “Ellie.” He wanted to take her into his arms and comfort her but how could he when he was the reason for her sadness? “You know I’m . . . very fond of you.”

“I know.”

He paused waiting for her to say more. When she didn’t, he said, “Well . . . good.” His eyes surveyed this woman. She was beautiful in every way. And intelligent. She could probably do anything in life she wanted and here she was married to a bum like him.

A slight worry surfaced in the back of Ben’s brain that had him thinking she’d just skip town when she had her own car and enough money. No, he shook his head. Ellie’d made a promise to him at the marriage altar. She’d never go against that promise. He had nothing to worry about. But after what she’d heard at his mother’s house, he should be grateful for what he got.

“How about I make us some lunch?” he asked, trying to get some kind of positive response.

“I’m not really hungry. You go ahead.”

A new worry appeared. Ellie had never been a big eater. She was perpetual motion, never still. Would this depression affect her already meager appetite?

Determined, he took the list out of her hands and pulled out a kitchen chair for her. “Sit,” adding quickly, “Please.”

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After giving him a smirk, she sat. Her fingers began tapping on the table in a quick staccato as she watched him. He smiled smugly, handed her a big, juicy red apple, and poured her a glass of milk. While she munched, he made two large ham and cheese sandwiches and completed the meal with bags of chips.

She sighed heavily. "I'll never be able to eat all of this."

Shrugging, he lifted his hefty sandwich and tapped it to her. "Give it your best shot." Maybe he couldn't give her love, he could give her this.

Ellie finished her work early on Saturday. The house was quiet allowing her to think of too many things. Like the state of her marriage. She surveyed the spotless house looking for something to do. Wandering to the bedroom, she glanced at the bed that had brought her so much joy. It seemed to taunt her now, reminding her of what a fool she'd been. Her heart literally ached. She yearned for closeness with Ben, to truly be joined together with him. But he didn't want that.

She rubbed her chest hoping it would ease the pain. It didn't.

Maybe a soak in the tub would help. She usually didn't have time for anything that seemed so selfish to her, but Ben had encouraged her to take what he called "Me time." He said it would make her a better parent if she periodically took a bit of time for herself.

With a deep sigh, she wondered if he was right.

After a hot bath that did nothing for her but make her skin wrinkly, she stood in front of the closet looking for clean clothes. She knew that she was losing weight, even though she had none to lose. It couldn't be helped, she supposed.

She was sorry that the pretty dresses Ben had purchased for her on their honeymoon now seemed to hang on her as if on a hangar.

Then she saw it—

The jeans.

She remembered that Ben had secretly bought them for her in Gatlinburg, showing them to her when they returned to their hotel room. She had laughed and rolled her eyes at his eager look.

She had put them away. Until now. Well, having lost a few pounds they probably wouldn't cling to her skin so tight.

Ellie grabbed the jeans and a short sleeved frilly blouse. Maybe the blouse would convince people that she was a woman, she thought smiling wryly. As she dressed, she decided she'd run a few errands—a gallon of milk at the grocery store and a new broom from the hardware store. Then she'd come home and get dinner started.

The light spring breeze blew through her freshly washed hair as she walked down the main street of Ellerton. The sun was shining brightly, lifting her spirits as she tried to forget all the emotion that she felt for Ben. She still loved him, would always love him even if he didn't return the feeling.

The times they had made love since their discussion had been . . . strange. She tried to participate but felt an invisible barrier between them that held her back from giving everything she had to her husband. If Ben had noticed it, he hadn't said anything. She yearned for the closeness they'd shared before . . . No. It was better

she knew the truth. Hadn't that been what she'd told him? She wished she believed it herself.

She wasn't going to complain. They were each getting what they wanted. Ben was getting a cook, maid, and companion in bed and she was getting protection and the freedom to earn her keep. It wasn't a perfect situation, but it could be a lot worse.

That brought to mind the Kents. Now that spring was here, she fully expected to see them back in town. Ellie shivered. She hoped that Ben could protect them like he had promised.

A low whistle sounded as Ellie walked down the street. She looked over to see a deliveryman smiling at her. She stopped and looked at him, trying to place if she knew him or not. Then he winked, got back into his truck, and took off. Strange behavior.

When Ellie walked into the hardware store, the group of men talking near the cash register turned and looked. Their silence was deafening, their eyes wide.

"Mr. Johns, where would your brooms be?"

"Ah . . . aisle five. Next to the mops, Miz Malone."

Ellie looked at the four men. They were all looking her way but weren't looking at her face. She looked down thinking she had gotten something on her new jeans. Even though she didn't see anything, she brushed at them and went to find her new broom.

It seemed to be like that everywhere she went. Ellie had become self-conscious by the time she got home. After putting up her purchases, she decided to bake a batch of chocolate chip cookies for Sarah and John, and, okay, Ben. She busied herself with mixing the ingredients and as she was sliding them into the oven to cook, the back door opened.

Sarah, John, and Ben came in talking and laughing. It was quiet for a second before Sarah said, "Mama? Is that you?"

Ellie straightened up and turned around, giving her children a smile. "Of course, it's me, honey," Ellie said as she walked to her children to hug them. "How was the water?"

"Cold," Sarah said.

"Yeah, so cold my skin gets bumps," John said.

Ellie laughed. "So why don't you two go get on some warm clothes. I'm just starting dinner but I suppose I can let you have one cookie when they come out of the oven."

Amidst cheers, the two happily trotted down the hall to their bedroom. The kitchen was quiet. Ellie didn't say anything to Ben but went to the refrigerator to start dinner preparations. "Meatloaf all right for tonight? It'll take about an hour and a half if you've got something you want to do."

Ben didn't say anything, so Ellie turned to him. His eyes were those of a predator. She'd seen it in a badger or a coon up in the mountains. He was looking at her like she was his next meal. And he was licking his chops in expectation. "Ben?"

She watched as his eyes roamed her lower half. She crossed her arms in front of her. "Oh, no. Now you! I'm not sure why I'm getting that look from every man in town but I am sure that I don't like it much!"

## Tennessee Waltz

Ben's eyes flew to hers. "You wore those jeans into town?" At her nod, Ben walked to her and with his face close to hers said, "Never again."

She didn't like the command. "Why? I don't understand."

"Because, darlin', every man thought about what I'm going to do right now." With that, Ben pressed his body into hers, pushing her up against the counter. His hands went to her legs and intimately caressed the curves outlined by the pants. Ben's lips gently went to her neck and leaving little kisses worked their way up to her ear. "Ellie. My God, you are so gorgeous. Can we go back to the bedroom before you drive me any more crazy? I have to have you."

Without much thought, her arms went around his neck and into his still damp hair. She couldn't speak. Her throat was clogged with her breathing and her building emotion. How could he do this to her? How could he make her want him, make her want to love him with her whole being? This couldn't continue. Her heart couldn't take it. It's just physical. Nothing more, she told herself.

Giggles from the kitchen doorway had Ellie looking over. Her children, thank God. She quickly backed away from Ben and said, "Um, you two ready for a glass of milk and a cookie?"

They both sat at the table, still laughing. "You were kissing again," Sarah said.

"Yuck!" John exclaimed. He had learned that word from his older and wiser six-year old cousins.

Ben smiled and sat next to Sarah. "That we were, princess. Your mama just looks so good in her new jeans that I couldn't help it."

A flash of realization hit Ellie. Her face turned bright red. "That's why those men were looking at me like that?" she asked Ben.

He winked at her and said, "That's why." When she set glasses of milk at the table, he pulled her close to his mouth and whispered, "Give me names and I'll go beat 'em up."

Ellie tried to hide a little smile. It wasn't love, but it was something.

Ben took Ellie to buy some new pants. He insisted she get more jeans, just not so tight, along with a few other casual pants. Ellie insisted on a few more dresses and that she pay for the purchases. Ben decided that some battles were not worth fighting.

After their moment in the kitchen Ben felt that he and Ellie were on better footing. He didn't want to do anything to upset that.

Ben pondered all this as he left the drug store after chewing the fat for a while with old man Stubbs and Doc Barnes. Passing the dry cleaners, he heard someone softly calling his name from the door of the shop.

Turning, his eyes fell on the beautiful, platinum blonde woman watching him. Her smile was dazzling, showing a row of pearly white teeth. She wore a white halter dress that displayed an ample bust and fell just above her knees. Her long, shapely legs were anchored by a pair of high-heeled sandals in a bright red, matching her toe polish. His eyes went back to her face. Matching her lips. And why was he looking at her lips?

"Hello, Jan."

## Chapter Twelve

"I heard you were in town," Ben said concentrating on regulating his heart rate.

She chuckled and said, "Small towns. You gotta love them." She walked until she was standing just in front of Ben. "When we ran into each other at the shop last fall, you left in such a hurry we didn't get a chance to catch up." Her glaze went to Ben's mouth just before she said, "How've you been?"

"Fine. How's Greg?" Ben grimaced as he said the man's name.

Jan sighed dramatically. "We split up ages ago. I realized that I was completely blinded by what I thought was love."

"I know what you mean," Ben said bitterly.

"Oh, Benny, don't be angry with me." Her heavily mascara eyes looked up at him. "I mean, we really were just kids." Her voice lowered as she added, "But I'm all grown up now, honey."

"What do you want, Jan?" Ben stuck his hands in his pockets and looked anywhere but at her.

Jan stepped back just an inch to stare up into Ben's eyes. "Why don't we start with just catching up? What could it hurt?"

Too much, Ben thought. He'd just reached a tentative peace with Ellie. The last thing he needed was for word to get back to her that he was talking with his ex. On Main Street. In front of everybody.

*Oh, good Lord!*

He looked around and saw half a dozen eyes peeking out at him from various businesses on the street.

"Great. Just great."

Ellie wiped the sweat off her brow. She'd never seen a storage room as dirty and cluttered as this one.

The owner of the "Heavenly Hair" salon had needed her help, promising to pay her double if she could get control of the out-of-control room. Even though her back hurt and her feet ached, Ellie wasn't complaining. It was good money, money that would be put away for her children. She was determined they'd have every benefit possible, what she had never had.

She came across what appeared to be a moose head. What the heck was that doing here? Before putting it in the trash pile, she thought she'd better check. For all

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she knew it could have special sentimental meaning. Although looking at the moth-eaten fur she couldn't imagine why anyone would want to keep it.

Carrying it with her, she walked into the business and was surprised to find all the women peering out the front windows. They were all there, their heads filled with curlers, foil, and bobby pins, gawking at something down the street.

She heard snippets of their chatter. "What's she doing here?" "What's he doing?" "They're standing awfully close." "Have you seen a more hideous dress?" "Do you think Ellie knows?" That last comment caught her interest.

"What's going on?"

With a loud collective gasp, everyone turned to see her standing there holding the moose head. No one spoke. No one knew what to say. Finally Marcie said, "Oh, you found old Bullwinkle."

Ellie looked down at the head and said, "I wasn't sure what to do with it."

"Just throw it away, honey. It's always creeped me out," Evelyn the salon owner said.

"Something going on outside?" Ellie moved her head trying to get a good view out the window, but the women spread out, effectively blocking her view."

"It's nothing, honey," Suzy Dansen replied. "We're just watching, ah, two old friends catch up, that's all. Right girls?"

The other women eagerly bobbed in agreement, shaking the curlers, foil, and bobby pins.

Setting down the moose head, Ellie said, "Who is it? Anyone I know?"

The women just looked at each other muttering, but none of them answering. Confused, Ellie walked over and peered through the window. The sight of Ben and some blonde floozy cuddling up together in plain view of everyone in town had Ellie's vision turning red. Her breath started coming out in short, quick heaves. Her fists clenched at her sides.

"I'm sure it's nothing, Ellie dear," Evelyn said. "Ben and Jan probably just wanted to catch up."

"Jan? Jan?!"

The infamous Jan. Ellie could physically feel the fury rising in her, past her stomach, rising higher to her throat. Just the thought of Ben and Jan being in a sentence together made her so furious that she couldn't think straight.

She stomped out of the beauty parlor and purposefully headed towards her husband and his "friend," oblivious to how she looked. Her hair that had started the day in a tight bun was now falling around her face. The red bandana around her neck used for wiping her face was stained and wet. Her clothes, an old tee shirt and baggy overalls were as filthy as her cheeks.

And her eyes were blazing.

She saw Ben grimace when she approached. Good. He quickly jumped away from Jan and said, "Ellie. Sweetheart."

"What's going on here?" Ellie said in a no-nonsense tone. Her hands on her hips, her stance wide, she was not playing around.

"Ben? Who's this?"

She watched him swallow and say, "My, ah, wife."

The woman tried for a smile and said, "I'd heard you'd married. Is this her?"

Ben cleared his throat. "Ah, yeah. This is Ellie. Honey, this is Jan Kingsley. I believe I've mentioned her."

Ellie gave the woman a once over. Why'd she have to be so pretty, and smell so nice? And here she was filthy as a pole cat from the hills.

"I also heard she was from the mountains, in some kind of trouble." Jan turned to Ben and placing her hands on his chest, said, "Ben, you always did have such a good heart, always helping people out."

Ellie wasn't sure if it was the fact that the woman didn't acknowledge her by actually speaking to her, or the fact that . . . that . . . person had her hands on *her* husband, but something inside of her snapped. She jumped at Jan, her fists swinging, but before she could connect with Jan's pretty chin, Ben grabbed Ellie around the waist and held her away from the grinning woman.

"Ellie, stop this. We've got an audience."

"Where I come from you don't let no woman steal your man. And if she's a wanting a fight, I'll be glad to oblige her."

"What a savage little woman," Jan said. Ellie leaped at her again, forcing Ben to hold her tightly to him with all his might.

"Let's try to be civilized, shall we?" Ben said in a low, controlled voice. Sure, he didn't have anything at stake here.

"Well, I suppose she might be cute if you cleaned her up. What happened, Ben darlin'," Jan said in a whisper. "Was she pregnant? Gracious, you weren't responsible, were you? You always were a very, ah, *affectionate* man."

"Ben, do I have to break your arms before I can break her face?" Ellie yelled, her eyes spitting sparks at the lovely Jan.

"Mama? What's wrong?"

Ellie immediately stilled. She turned to see Peggy standing there, a disapproving look on her face, holding John's hand. Ben's arms continued to hold her as the fight left her body.

"What an adorable little boy," Jan purred. She studied John and said, "But he doesn't look like he could be yours, Ben." Then as if a light went on in her brain, she said, "Oh, you are the sweetest thing. You adopted the little boy so he'd have a father. You really are wonderful."

Ellie's heart plummeted. How did Jan know to kick her where it hurt? Ben hadn't married Ellie because he was in love with her. He *was* giving a home to them, pure and simple.

Remembering her son's question, Ellie said quietly, "Nothing's wrong, baby." She pulled out of Ben's slackened grasp and took John's little hand. "Come on with me and . . ." How could she distract him? "I'll show you a real moose head." Before she and John walked away, she turned and swallowed hard. "I'm very sorry, Miss Kingsley. That was wrong of me. It won't happen again."

Then the two walked away.

As Ben watched them go, he had the feeling of a million eyes watching him. It seemed that people all over town had stopped what they were doing and come

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outside to watch the show. Feeling very much the sheriff, Ben yelled, "Nothing to see here. Go back to what you were doing."

Everyone did, except for Peggy.

Ben's mother stood there frowning at him. "It's okay, Mom. I can take it from here." Reluctantly, Peggy turned around and started to walk away.

"Nice to see you again, Miz Malone," Jan said.

Peggy turned and looked at Jan. She gave her no more response than a slight nod and walked away.

"My, what a scene. I bet the town will be talking about your little hell raiser for years."

Ben wanted to defend Ellie. He wanted to tell Jan how much the people of Ellerton loved Ellie and what a difference she'd made in everyone's life. In his life. But Jan wouldn't hear him.

So, he went back to his original question. "What do you want Jan?"

"Ben." She chuckled without any real humor. "Ever since I saw you in the store I've been thinking about you. We . . . ended so badly. I hate that." She started to take a step toward him but he took a step back. Sighing she said, "I'd really like to talk to you. But not here, not now. How about meeting me at Haggerty's tonight at nine o'clock? Please?"

He hesitated before saying, "What kind of game are you playing?"

"No game. Meet me, please? Buy me a drink, we talk. Then, if you want, you never have to see me again." Her green eyes grew wide and hopeful. "If that's what you want," she whispered.

Ben could smell her perfume, a fine French scent that she insisted on. He remembered being with her, all their hopes and dreams, the life they had planned. It had been nice. Before he knew it, she stepped close and her fingers were making circles on his chest. And Ben had a moment of remembering too much.

His mind returned to his wife. Ellie. He had already hurt the woman and didn't intend to hurt her anymore.

"After I talk to you I never have to see you again?"

"If that's what you want," Jan said with a pout, her fingers brushing off a piece of lint and then returned to her sides.

Ben studied her deep, ocean green eyes. They were harder than he remembered, but older, more life weary. "Okay, Jan. Nine o'clock tonight." He turned and walked back to his office.

He hoped he was doing the right thing.

Ben and Ellie acted like polite strangers all through dinner. As Ben complimented Ellie on her "Son-of-Gun Stew" Ellie quietly thanked him. Neither commented on the scene that took place on Main Street.

Little John, however, oblivious to the tension, had been eager to share the incident with his sister who'd been at kindergarten.

"Some white-haired woman all dressed in white was talking to Daddy Ben. She musta said something that made Mama mad because Mama lit into her good. I ain't ever seen her so mad. Thought she'd whip her right there on the street."

Ben had tried to quiet the kids but not before Sarah had whined, “Oh, shoot!” I miss all the fun!”

Ben’s heart had gone out to Ellie, who’d quietly stared at her food. He hated the way he’d made her feel. He hated that she felt embarrassed for her actions. To be honest, he was grateful that she still felt enough for him to defend their marriage.

The rest of the meal had been insanely quiet.

At eight thirty, Ben told Ellie he was going to Haggerty’s for a beer. He pulled on a light jacket, wondering if he should tell Ellie whom he was meeting and why. Probably not. It might make things worse between them. If that was possible. “I won’t be long.”

Ellie helped him on with his jacket and said, “I hope not, Ben.” Her quiet, pain-filled tone had him looking down into wide blue eyes.

Did she know? Again he wondered if he should just tell her. The decision was made for him when she turned and walked back toward the bedroom.

After a last look and a deep sigh, he headed out into the night.

Ellie couldn’t go to bed. Her body was exhausted from the day but her mind was whirling faster than a jackrabbit. Unable to stay in the bedroom, she went to the kitchen and began scrubbing. No need to let a good anxiety go to waste. After that she took a shower and dressed for bed—the granny nightgown that covered every inch of her. She sat in an upholstered rocking chair and began to do her hand quilting. Her hands expertly made the tiny stitches without thinking. A good thing, since she couldn’t get her mind off Ben.

Somehow she knew he was going to meet Jan. Call it woman’s intuition, or the fact that he hardly ever went to Haggerty’s anymore. Mainly it was that he couldn’t look her in the eye. The idea of him lying or more accurately not telling her the whole truth was what hurt the most. Yes, she would have a fit if he’d told her he was going to talk to the woman. What wife wouldn’t? And her behavior on Main Street certainly didn’t instill confidence in him that she’d be okay with the idea.

But really, why should he tell her everything? He’d made it perfectly clear theirs was not a true marriage based on love. If he wanted to meet the woman that had claimed his love years ago, who was she to stop him? Was he stupid enough to give his heart to her again? Maybe he’d never stopped loving her. Ellie shook her head vigorously, as if to dislodge those thoughts from her brain.

But still her nagging heart wouldn’t leave her alone.

The quilting needle pricked her finger and she put it in her mouth to soothe. What would he do when alone with that woman?

Her body tightened. Her heartbeat pounded, her eyes narrowed. She threw her handwork down and stomped to the dresser, determined. She wasn’t going down without a fight.

At Haggerty’s, no one was “alone.” The tavern was doing a rousing business for a Tuesday night. The jukebox was playing, couples were on the small wooden

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dance floor, groups of men were playing pool at the two tables in the back, and the beer was flowing.

As Ben entered the building, the first thing he noticed was that his taste for such places had diminished since his marriage.

"Hey, Sheriff! Long time no see," yelled Haggerty, happily drawing drafts for his clientele.

"Yeah. How bout a brew, Hag," Ben replied.

"Coming up." He got a clean mug and pulled the tab. "Your ex is here, by the way. Got back into town last week, I think."

"I know. Thanks," Ben said as he accepted the beer. Taking a taste, he sat down at the bar and waited. If he knew Jan, and he did, she'd find him.

"Hey there, handsome." Ben smirked. Had he called it or what?

He turned to see Jan, her perfectly made-up face, a lovely emerald green silk dress cut up to her thigh with matching pumps. Again he marveled that although she was beautiful, the whole package seemed too contrived, too shallow for his tastes now. She was nothing like Ellie. A grin spread across Ben's face as he looked back at his beer thinking about his wife back home.

"Well, now, that's a nice smile. You like my dress?"

Yes, with Jan it was all about her. She never thought about helping others, what she could contribute to society. At that moment, Ben was so thankful that he wasn't saddled with her as a wife.

"No, I was just thinking of my wife."

"The little savage?" she said under her breath.

Ben's eyes narrowed quickly. "Careful. This town loves her. She's earned folks' respect, mine too. So you'd better watch your tongue when you talk about her."

Jan was taken aback. "Sure. No problem. Why don't we find a table, okay?" She took his arm and led him away from the bar back to an intimate table for two in a dark corner.

He purposely didn't make a move to help her with her chair, enjoying the scowl on her face. She sat and took a sip of her drink. "How have you been, really Ben?"

"Fine. You?"

"This isn't small talk. Seeing you in Gatlinburg got me thinking. When I called my mother and she told me you'd married after knowing some woman for such a short period of time, I felt . . . well, something. After all, we were planning to be married at one time, you know."

"Really? You saw me six months ago and *now* you decided to act on your concern. What happened? Your latest boyfriend throw you out?"

She gave an award winning pout and said, "Ben, how can you be so mean. It was good between us before, you know it was."

How could he forget? Ben leaned his elbows on the table, his hands cupping his beer and said, "Ellie and I are doing just fine. In fact, she's the best thing that's ever happened to me. I don't know how I got so lucky to marry her."

It was a direct hit. Ben could see it in Jan's eyes. There was a momentary flash of distress in her eyes that quickly melted into sensuality.

Jan's hand rested against Ben's as she said, "Ben, I know you. You don't want to be sheriff of some hick town. You never did, you were made for bigger things. You're young. You could still have that dream of working on a big city police force. We could still have that dream together."

What had once been his dream was now just a distant memory. At some point in his life, he had come to enjoy being sheriff of Boggs County. The pace of life here was slow and easy. Peaceful.

"Ben, look at me."

When his eyes met hers, he saw a sad, empty woman. "What?" he asked, thinking he'd let her finish, refuse her, and then go home to his family.

"We could have it all, baby. Just the two of us. Think of it, us in Manhattan. It could be wonderful."

Now it all made sense. Jan had decided she wanted out of Gatlinburg and saw him as her ticket. He'd been right. Something must have happened in the past six months to force her to come to him.

He wasn't the least bit tempted.

With a carefully straight face, Ben said, "What about Ellie and the kids?"

Jan sat up straight. "You can't mean that you're going to spend your life with that woman. Why I heard she came down from the mountains, what could you possibly see in that hillbilly?"

Anger quickly came to the forefront of Ben's reasoning. "I told you before to watch what you say about Ellie."

"All right, all right. You think highly of her, I get it. But come on, darlin', I know you don't love her."

Ben thought about this. How did he feel? As he sat there talking to the woman he thought he had loved, the woman who had thought nothing of tearing out his heart and stomping it with her high-heeled shoes, he realized that he had never really known what love was.

Until Ellie.

A burden he hadn't even known he was carrying suddenly fell from his shoulders. Light permeated his dark soul as his mind began to focus. Everything became crystal clear, as he focused on a couple of important facts.

He was free. Finally, completely, and irrevocably free of the stranglehold Jan had put on his life and mind for years. He could see her for what she was and instead of hating her, he knew that the blow she'd dealt him had helped lead him to the life he had now. He'd never hate her for that.

And he knew something else for certain.

He loved Ellie.

It wasn't only that he admired her, desired her, which he absolutely did. It wasn't that she was sweet and funny and interesting. It was more. He could see himself spending the rest of his life with her. Listening to her, watching her, heck, even teaching her how to drive. The cold parts of his heart were warmed by thoughts of her. Looking around, he realized he couldn't wait to get back home to her.

Jan just sat waiting for his reply. Finally demanding his attention back on her, she said, "Ben?"

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"I love Ellie," Ben murmured with a sense of wonder in his voice.

"I'm sure she's . . . a nice girl but don't you think she belongs with her own people back up in the mountains? She's young and . . . hearty. I don't doubt that she could find a strong mountain man to take her and her children off your hands. You always were a soft touch, Ben."

Ben was amazed. The woman never really listened to him. "No, Jan. I really love Ellie. I love the wonderful, passionate, and caring woman that she is. I love what I am with her. I love Sarah and John and I love all the children that Ellie and I might have together. Now, if there's nothing else, I'd like to get home to my family. I hope you keep your word and never approach me again."

Before Jan could say a word, Ben left through the front door. He didn't have time to see the shocked expression on her face, or the smiling, supportive looks from everyone in the bar who had pretended not to notice the clandestine meeting of the two. He didn't have time to hear a cheer rise up all over the bar and the sound of Haggerty's voice saying, "Drinks on the house."

After all. He had to get home.

## Chapter Thirteen

The house was dark as he pulled up. Ben sincerely hoped that Ellie wasn't asleep. If she was, he was going to have to wake her up and tell her everything his heart was telling him. He had never thought of himself as a poet, but at the moment he wanted to write love poems. He wanted to tell her that her eyes were more beautiful than the blue of the wildflowers. Her smile lit a fire in his heart that nothing could weaken. Her kindness made him a true man.

Egad! He'd have to work on his creativity.

Ben locked up behind him and was excited when he saw a lamp on in the master bedroom. He first checked on Sarah and John, kissing their foreheads and pulling the covers up over them. He walked into his bedroom and—

His breath caught.

Ellie was lying in the bed, a vision of beauty. Her long hair was gleaming around her shoulders, which were bare except for the spaghetti straps of the long ivory negligee that she wore. The bodice of the gown dipped into a deep "v" in the front, showcasing the tops of Ellie's small breasts. The creamy nightgown seemed to gently caress her long legs and the slit that went all the way to her upper thigh had Ben's tongue hanging out of his mouth.

Ellie looked at Ben with big blue eyes and shyly smiled. That was all Ben needed. He rushed over to her and firmly took her into his arms, ravishing her mouth with his. If he couldn't tell Ellie everything he felt at the moment, he'd surely show her. He lay down with her, pulling her body against his.

As two magnets destined to meet with a force greater than either one, they came together, skin to skin, mouth to mouth, heart to heart, in a power that threatened to destroy their mortal bodies.

In the quietness of the night, Ben held Ellie. Their lovemaking had been so intense, he still wasn't sure he could speak. He pulled her tighter as his hand stroked her back, loving the soft feel of her skin.

"What happened with Jan?" Ellie asked softly.

Ben looked at his wife, his eyebrows raised. "Now how did you know I was going to see Jan at Haggerty's?"

"I just knew." Ellie's eyes lowered. "So, you saw her."

Ben touched Ellie's face with a feather soft touch. "I went to tell her goodbye. That was all, Ellie. And if you're skeptical, and I wouldn't blame you if you were, you

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can ask anyone in Haggerty's and they'll tell you. We had a beer, we talked, and I left. And came straight home to you."

A smile, wide and bright as the Tennessee sunshine spread on Ellie's face. "Really?" Her small hand began playing with the springy hair on his chest.

"I swear. But I want to tell you what I realized tonight, Ellie." He took a deep breath to tell her the words he'd sworn he would never tell another woman. "You see, I—"

The ringing phone cut him off. Uttering a curse under his breath, Ben reached over and picked it up, keeping Ellie pulled tight against his body. "Sheriff Malone."

"Sheriff, just got a call in from Mason Howard. Seems the dam to the east of his place is leaking really bad. It's already flooding Route Twenty-One."

"Didn't we fix it last fall when we had that big storm?"

"Yes, sir. Don't know why it's leaking now. Harvey's there now. Said it's a big mess."

Ben got up out of the bed. "All right. I'll head over there right now. See if you can get about five other men to come out and help. Get Eddie Johns to open up the hardware store and bring some bags. Maybe we can sandbag it until we can see the damage in the morning." Ben hung up the phone and got moving, quickly dressing.

"What's wrong?"

"A dam's leaking back behind Mason Howard's place. I've got to get over there and help plug it up or we're going to have a mess come morning."

Ellie pulled back the covers. "Can I do something to help?"

"No, sweetheart. Just be ready to make me a pot of coffee when I get home. Which probably won't be tonight." He leaned over the bed and kissed her tenderly. "See you in the morning."

Ellie lay back down, still feeling the warmth of her husband's arms around her. She congratulated herself on donning the negligee instead of sulking in the granny gown. Smiling, she remembered the expression on Ben's face when he walked into the room. It had made the agonizing wait completely worth it.

Their time together had been different tonight, something she couldn't put her finger on. Ben had, as always, been attentive, considerate, giving. But it was his eyes, she now realized. There was something in his eyes that she'd never seen before—a peace, a contentment. It made her shiver with the possibilities.

If only that call hadn't come, she could have asked him about it. But being the important person that he was, he had to go and check out the damage of the broken dam.

Ellie frowned. Something about this wasn't right. The hairs on the back of her neck stood as she thought the situation sounded vaguely familiar. She pulled the covers around her chilly arms, hoping she could get some sleep so she'd be ready for Ben in the morning.

Hours later, she thought she heard a noise. Looking at the clock, she saw that it was a little after two in the morning. She donned her bathrobe and went to check on the kids. Maybe the dam was fixed by now and Ben was home. They could

probably cuddle back in bed for a little while, get a little sleep, before she had to get up and make breakfast.

Her thoughts already speeding to the day, she opened the little room that her children shared. Her children were up and dressed sitting on the beds, their little suitcases packed sitting next to them.

They both had kerchiefs gagging their mouths.

Sarah's arms were around her brother, clearly in comfort, and Ellie could see the terror in their eyes.

Her own eyes grew very wide and she opened her mouth to speak but before any sound could come out, a hand clasped firmly over her face and an arm held her around her middle. As she tried to squirm from the unwanted grasp, she heard an evil voice that brought shivers down her spine. "You do as I say, Ellie.

"Time to go home."

Ben was wet, cold, and hungry. He'd be lucky if he didn't catch a horrible cold. The hard work through the night had been back breaking as they'd loaded over a hundred sandbags with dirt and placed them on the damaged dam. Finally, the men had turned their attention to the flooded road, easing the water off as best they could, devising a detour around the worst part, and getting the word out to all information channels.

But it wasn't over. After getting on dry clothes, Ben had to get back to the office and monitor the situation. He hoped Ellie could make him a quick breakfast so at least he wouldn't be starving.

A few lights were on in his house as he pulled up, a good sign. After entering the house and seeing no one in the kitchen, he walked back to the bedroom. It was empty. "Ellie?" He checked the bathroom.

Hurrying to the kids' room, he glanced in to see two empty beds. A sense of dread began to form in the pit of his stomach. Looking around the small bedroom Sarah and John shared, he noticed that some of their clothes were missing along with their small suitcases. And their beds weren't made. Something was definitely not right.

He hurried back to the bedroom he shared with Ellie. Again, clothes were missing along with her suitcase. All her jeans and pants were still there, negligees were still there. The old housedresses and the granny gown that he teased her about were gone. He slowly sat on the unmade bed.

Ben's head started to spin. She had left him. How could she? Everything had seemed to be finally coming together for them. He was even going to tell her that he loved her. He wanted to give her everything, maybe even have children with her. What brought this on?

He moved over to the phone. Perhaps she had gone to his mother's house. If she was leaving, surely she wouldn't leave without saying goodbye. As he sat back down on the bed, he smoothed the sheet underneath him and punched in Peggy's number. Then he froze—

Ellie would never leave without making the beds.

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On this she was adamant. In fact, Ben had teased her about making the bed whenever he had merely gotten up to go to the bathroom. She'd joke about something her father used to say. Something about being ready if a special guest were to suddenly show up needing a bed.

"Hello? Hello? Who's there?"

Ben shook his head and looked at the phone in his hand. He gripped it hard and held it to his ear. "Ma? Has Ellie been by? Did she tell you of some place she was going to early this morning?"

The words were pouring out of his mouth. "Wait, slow down, son. I haven't seen Ellie since yesterday. What's wrong?"

Ben told his mother everything he knew as he quickly shed his wet clothes and put on dry ones. When his mother sighed deeply, he said, "I think those insane hillbilly in-laws of hers came back."

"Are you sure she's not mad at you Ben? She has every reason to be."

Ben ran his fingers through his hair in frustration. "We were resolving everything. I left her last night happy and smiling."

"But maybe—"

"Ma. The beds aren't made."

That's all Ben had to say. "What are you going to do? How can I help?"

Ben went to his bedside table and pulled out his gun, slipping it into his waistband in the back. "You start calling around town. See if anyone's seen anything. I'll radio Woody at the station and alert him to the situation. Have him put a patrol together. I'll be in my car as far as Mountain View Café and head up the mountain trail there."

"But Ben, how do you know that's where she's gone?"

"That's the general direction Ellie and the kids came from. Also, see if you can round up some people to canvas the town and outer roads. Maybe we'll be lucky and someone saw something."

"I wish you'd wait to go up to the mountain. Take some men with you."

"The longer I wait, the harder it's going to be to find them. Now I've got to get going."

"Be careful, son."

On the way to the café, Ben spoke to Woody. He explained his plan and Woody told him he'd have a few men trailing behind him. Ben left his car in front of the café just as the sun began to peak between the trees. Mary Jo was already at work, waiting on a few early risers. Ben greeted her and asked if she'd seen Ellie or the two men.

Mary Jo had come to know and like Ellie. When Ben quickly explained the situation, she made sure everyone in the restaurant knew what was going on so they could keep an eye out for her. A few people even offered to go with Ben.

Everyone loved Ellie. After thanking the people for their help and grabbing a couple of bottles of water to hang on his belt, he was gone. A trail started back about a hundred yards from the café. It was dark looking up through the trail, so Ben turned on his flashlight as he started up. Pushing a branch out of the way, he stopped to see a small piece of fabric hanging on the bough. He immediately recognized the material. God bless Ellie.

Grabbing his walkie-talkie, he said, "Woody, you there?"

"I'm here, Sheriff. Find anything yet? Over."

"I'm behind the café heading up through that grown over trail to the north. I found a scrap of Ellie's dress on a branch. They headed this way. Send those men in this direction. I'm going up."

"Roger that. Sure you don't want to wait for them? Over."

"No. I'll leave the scrap in place so they see it. If I see any others, I'll try to contact you but I'm not sure I'll be able to be in contact for much longer."

"Got it. We'll be standing by. Over."

Ben continued up the trail, trying to keep as quiet as he could. Hopefully he could overtake them, knowing one man was old, one man was big, and they had two children in tow. Two miles later he found another piece of fabric. He tried to contact Woody but the radio only got static. He turned it off and hiked ahead, listening for any hint of Ellie and the kids.

With each mile, he got angrier. How dare those men come and take his family. They'd be punished, he'd make sure of that. If they so much as hurt a hair on Ellie's head or the children they'd be lucky if he didn't kill them before he hauled their sorry butts back to jail.

His mind was reeling with all kinds of violent and perverse punishments for the two kidnappers when his ears detected a voice. It was faint and far away so he stilled to listen. Amidst the normal sounds of the mountains—wind moving, trees rustling, water streaming—he heard a voice, gently singing. It was a hymn, the one he'd heard Ellie sing in church.

He smiled for the first time in hours as he resolutely headed for the voice. "Keep singing, sweetheart. I'm on my way."

"Mama, I'm hungry," Sarah said as the little group made their way up the mountain trail.

"Shh. I know, baby," Ellie said, her mind whirling with how the three of them could escape the Kents.

"When we gonna have breakfast, Mama?" John asked his eyes wide.

"You been spoiling them, Ellie. It ain't what mountain people do. We got to be able to fend for ourselves, not depend on anyone to feed us," Obadiah said.

She held her children close as they walked. The growling from little Sarah's stomach caused a pain in Ellie's heart. "They're just children. They haven't eaten since last night. Couldn't we stop and—"

She never saw it coming. Hezekiah backhanded her, causing her to fall to the ground. Sarah and John cried out and fell on her. Breathing heavily, Ellie stood, wiping her bruised cheek.

"Hezekiah! Behave yourself," his father said.

In a low tone, Hezekiah said, "She asked for it, Pa. Besides, she's my woman."

"I ain't your woman. Didn't you hear me when I said I was married to Ben? The parson in town joined us in the church before God."

Hezekiah's eyes turned on Ellie causing her to shake. "You were my woman first. We don't need no parson to declare it," he murmured, his tone threatening. If anything, his eyes had become meaner since the last time she'd seen him. Meaner

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and wilder. For the first time, Ellie could see the insanity that lay behind the vacant pupils. She had to think of a way out of this. Maybe someone would find her trail. Would Ben come looking for her? She hoped with all her heart. They started walking again.

Sarah's soft sobs brought her focus back to her children. Very softly she whispered, "Don't worry, my darlin's. We're going to get out of this."

"I want Daddy Ben," Sarah whined.

"You can forget about that meddling sheriff, honey," Obadiah said.

With a sudden fear greater than anything Ellie had ever felt she turned to face her former father-in-law. "What did you do to him?" she asked shaking with fury.

"You'd better thank me, little girl. Hezekiah wanted to just shoot him down dead but I didn't think that'd be a good idea."

A light came on in Ellie's mind. "The dam. You broke it, didn't you," she accused.

"You always was a smart one. I knew it when Jeremiah married ya. If only my firstborn could have found one as sturdy and clever as you. It seemed to be fate when that accident took Jeremiah. Just like it was meant to be between you and Hezekiah."

Hezekiah laughed low and menacing. Sarah and John huddled closer to Ellie as they walked. Thinking about the past, Ellie was again astounded at how little Obadiah had thought of his second son. Maybe that had caused Jeremiah to be more of a loving and caring man. Maybe it had been a good thing.

Continuing his own tale, Obadiah said, "As we was waiting out the winter we got to thinking of how to get you back to Clint. Hezekiah remembered that dam and we decided to cause a little damage to get the sheriff out of the way."

"The same way you'd get back at people back in the hills? By damaging the mountain dams on their property?"

Obadiah chuckled and shook his head. "Like I said sturdy and clever to boot."

Ellie tore off another snippet of her hem and dropped it on a low hanging branch as they entered a large clearing. Along the edges of the area were bushes filled with edible wildflowers and berries. Obadiah lumbered over and sat on a large rock to catch his breath, sending Hezekiah to pick some food for the children.

Ellie lowered herself to the ground and pulled Sarah and John to her. "They need water," she said as Obadiah pulled out an old canteen and took a sip. He looked down at her and the children. He handed the canteen over and said, "Just a sip. We won't hit a stream for another couple of hours."

Only after a nod from their mom did Sarah and John each take a sip. Forgoing any for herself, she handed the canteen back to Obadiah. She pulled both children into her arms and rocked them, placing kisses on their heads. To comfort all three of them she began singing her favorite hymn, one that had always lifted her up. The children relaxed against her as she let the song soothe. With a deep, cleansing breath, she let her voice grow, letting hope fill her soul.

Obadiah's loud wheezing brought her attention back to the moment. She turned and cocked her head at her father-in-law's strained face. His breathing was shallow. He rubbed his chest hard, clearly trying to catch his breath.

Could this be her moment to run? She glanced at Hezekiah, whose hardened eyes glanced constantly from bush to her. If she and the children were to run, the man would be on them before they'd made it twenty feet.

She turned back to Obadiah. Maybe their salvation rested with the older man.

"Obadiah, are you hurting?"

"Just a touch of heartburn, girl. Nothing I ain't had before."

Ellie kept watching him. She hadn't seen this before. Obadiah's face was turning a pasty white as he bent over and rubbed his head.

Moving to him, Ellie gently touched his arm and said, "Obadiah?"

"Let go of me, Mary, I told you I was all right!" Obadiah yelled at her as he pulled his arm away.

Hezekiah came running back. "What did you do?"

"Nothing. He thinks I'm your mother."

Bending down to look at his father, Hezekiah said, "Pa?"

Obadiah tried to take a deep breath. "I'll be all right. I just need to rest for a few minutes. Just let me rest. For a few minutes."

As this was going on, Ellie heard a slight sound in the woods. Without moving her head, her eyes sought out the noise. It was Ben. She could just make him out amidst the trees and bushes. She glanced over at the Kents. Their rifles lay up against the rocks, next to Obadiah. If only she could get the guns away from them.

"I'll watch him if you'll get the food," she offered. Hezekiah looked at her with skepticism. Before he could say anything, she said, "He needs something to eat, Hezekiah. You get the food and I'll try to get him to drink more water."

She could tell that Hezekiah was concerned. Probably knowing that she was right, he went back to the shrubs, his eyes glaring at her. When he was away, Ellie sat next to Obadiah on the rock and held up the canteen for him to take a drink. "Sarah, honey, come hold the water for Obadiah to drink," she whispered. Her eyes went to Hezekiah. *Come on, turn your back for just a few minutes.*

As if obeying her unspoken request, Hezekiah turned, just enough to allow Ellie a moment to take a rifle. Her instinct was to run with her children. Her mind reminded her there was another rifle. And again, they'd never be able to outrun Hezekiah.

Before he turned back, she quickly opened the gun and emptied the bullets into the pocket of the housedress the men had insisted she put on before they left her house. She continued glancing up to watch Hezekiah. As she lifted the other rifle, he turned. She only had time to put the safety on and set it back down.

She said a quick prayer that this would all play out without anyone getting hurt. Especially Ben.

## Chapter Fourteen

They were safe. At least so far. Ben stayed hidden in the bushes beyond the clearing as he watched the brute of a man and Ellie speaking with the older man, who looked like he was sick. He spied the two large rifles sitting on the rock. So that's how they got Ellie and the kids to leave.

As he watched, Ellie's eyes met his. He nodded slightly and gave an encouraging smile. Her eyes went back to her kidnappers. She spoke to the men and Hezekiah walked to the shrubs, away from Ellie and the kids, but not far enough for him to dare attempt a rescue. He watched as Ellie took one of the rifles. *No, not yet!* His heart stopped as time seemed to stand still. She fumbled with the firearm as he held his breath. She seemed to be unloading it. *Good girl.*

The other man searching the bushes turned just as she had taken the other rifle and set it down. Ben quietly let out a breath. Yelling at her, the man jogged back with what appeared to be weeds and berries. He kneeled before his father, trying to get him to eat.

Ben's mind whirled, working on a possible plan of escape. When suddenly, to his horror, John spotted him. "Daddy Ben! Daddy Ben!"

Hezekiah looked up and kicked the boy with the side of his foot. "You ain't got no Daddy Ben no more. You're a Kent and don't you every forget it!"

Little Sarah was furious. She stood up and kicked Hezekiah in the shin as hard as she could. "Why you little—" Hezekiah went after the girl who ran screaming.

Ellie jumped on Hezekiah's back, trying to keep him from going after Sarah. "Sarah, run! John, run with her!" Ellie screamed as she held on tightly to Hezekiah's back like she was riding a mean, ugly bull in a rodeo.

"Here, kids," Ben said as they ran from the clearing. They fell into his waiting arms. He kissed them, hugging them hard. "You two sit here behind this tree and wait." He maneuvered John's arms around the tree trunk and placed Sarah behind him, covering his little shaking body. "Hold on and don't move. Promise me, okay?" With big eyes they both nodded to him.

Ben walked into the clearing, his gun out and trained on Hezekiah. "It's all over, Kent. Lay down on the ground, arms and legs spread."

A wicked smile spread over Hezekiah's face. "You think you can take me? We're in my territory now, sheriff." He flung Ellie to the ground and stood in fighting stance, ready for Ben to face him.

"Don't make me shoot you, Kent."

"You're a lawman. You ain't gonna shoot a unarmed man. Come on. You and me, one on one."

"Don't do it, Ben," Ellie begged.

As Ben started towards Hezekiah, a rifle went off, the bullet hitting about a foot in front of Ben's feet. Everyone looked over to see Obadiah still sitting on the rock pointing a gun on Ben. "I don't want to kill you sheriff but I will if you don't leave us."

"I'll be glad to leave but I'm taking Ellie with me."

With a supernatural hatred in his eyes, Hezekiah lunged forward and before Ben knew what happened, Hezekiah tackled him, causing Ben's gun to go flying. The two began wrestling on the ground.

Ellie moved towards Ben's gun on the ground but froze when she heard, "You come back here, little girl, or I'll shoot that sheriff."

In a small voice, Ellie said, "No, Obadiah. You're not a bad man, not really. You're not like Hezekiah. This isn't right."

"Shut up!" the older man yelled as he raised the gun up and shot in the air. "You're a mountain woman. You're a Kent. You're going back with us, do you hear?"

The men stopped when they heard the gunshot. Ben had a split second to land a solid punch to Hezekiah's jaw. The man fell back but didn't go down as they continued their fistfight.

The exertion from the rifle and the yelling had Obadiah panting. Ellie went to him hoping to ease the gun out of his arms.

She gently put her hand on his arm but Obadiah shook her off and pointed the gun at her. "You never should have gone and died on me, Mary. I didn't know how to raise those boys. It was too hard."

Both men stopped at the sight of Obadiah's gun on Ellie. "Pa, you can't shoot her." He rushed to his father. Ellie watched the gun pointed at her belly. Her eyes moved to Obadiah, out of his mind with pain, and Ben, who stood frozen a few feet away. Her heart sank at the bleakness of their situation.

Obadiah reached for the other rifle and threw it to Hezekiah. "Take that gun and finish off the sheriff. Then we've got to get going," he said, gasping.

Hezekiah smiled. "It'll be a pleasure. Over here, sheriff. I think I'd like you to fall into the ravine when I shoot you."

"Obadiah, you're sweating," Ellie said loudly, hoping to get Hezekiah's attention off Ben so she could grab Obadiah's rifle.

Obadiah closed his eyes and moaned. "Mary, I don't feel so good. Help me." Gasping for breath, he clutched his heart, and fell over. Ellie grabbed the gun and pointing it at Hezekiah. "Stop right there."

"What's wrong with Pa?" Hezekiah asked.

"He's unconscious. He needs a doctor. We're going back down the mountain and getting Doc Barnes."

Hezekiah laughed. "I don't think so. Pa'll be okay. He always is. Besides, I don't think you're going to shoot me before I shoot him." He pointed his gun at Ben.

"There aren't any bullets in your gun, Hezekiah. I took them out."

## Tennessee Waltz

A look of panic flitted across Hezekiah's face before he chuckled. "You can't fool me, Ellie." Just to prove her wrong, Hezekiah pointed the gun towards the sky and shot. Nothing happened.

He glanced down at the gun and Ben attacked Hezekiah with a vengeance. Ben hit the man again and again. Hezekiah was stunned and off balance. Trying to get his footing he pushed Ben away from him with all his might.

Ellie aimed the gun and cocked it. Just as she was going to shoot Hezekiah in the leg, Ben regained his balance and started back towards the large man.

Hezekiah looked at him with pure hatred. Like a raging bull he huffed and puffed and started running at Ben. At the last moment Ben jumped out of the way and Hezekiah, unable to stop his forward motion, plummeted over the side of the mountain, into the deep ravine below. The loud blood-curdling scream echoed through the valley.

Then it was quiet.

Ben turned, still breathing hard. Ellie couldn't move, her hands still on the rifle. Her body was clinched with paralyzing terror. Ben walked slowly to her. "Ellie. Put the gun down. It's all over," he said gently.

Vaguely hearing him through the fog of the trauma that was now settling into her soul, she dropped the gun. Ben took her in his arms but she was stiff and unmoving. And then her body started shaking.

Ben took off his jacket and put it around her. "Come sit down here, honey," he said. After settling her on the rock, he bent over to check Obadiah. He felt for a pulse and looked up at Ellie. He shook his head. She felt nothing. Except cold. All-encompassing, bone deep cold.

There was movement in the bushes followed by a voice. "Sheriff? Everything all right?" Harvey and a few other men from town walked into the clearing.

"Yeah. We've got one man down. Looks like a fatal heart attack. The other went over the cliff."

Ellie watched Ben walked over to where Sarah and John waited. She could see them huddled together, hiding their faces as if waiting for tragedy to strike. "Kids," he said as he went to them. He gathered them up in his arms and held them tightly. "Everything's going to be all right," he murmured as he covered their faces with kisses.

As much as she wanted to run to them, her body wouldn't cooperate. She couldn't even rub her arms for warmth.

"Sarah! John!" Ellie saw Miss Peggy hurrying through the woods to the children.

"Ma! What are you doing here?"

She took her turn hugging the children. "You thought I wasn't going to come see about my grandchildren? How's Ellie?"

Ben lowered his voice but the breeze carried it to her. "I think she's in shock. We need to get her out of here."

Her mind was scattered in a million pieces. Obadiah and Hezekiah were gone. The bondage that had been hanging over her head was over. She should have been happy but she felt sadness.

Ben walked back over to her. Looking her in the eyes and speaking slowly he said, "Ellie we're going to get you back to Ellerton. I'm going to take you to the hospital to check you out. If they say that you're all right then I'm taking you home and I want you to go straight to bed."

"No," she murmured. "Too much to do. I've got too much to do today." She blinked her eyes several times trying to focus.

Ben took her upper arms in his hands and raised his voice a little louder. "Ellie. You've been through a traumatic experience. You need me to take care of you, now do as I say!"

*Do as I say.* The words swam back and forth through her mind. She'd heard it before. Her father and Jeremiah, two men she loved. Then Obadiah and Hezekiah, men that hated and used her. Now Ben. Men seemed always to be telling her to do as they say, never what she thought best. As if she didn't have a brain in her head. In the back of her mind, Ellie knew that she had been through a painful experience and was feeling the aftershocks. But she was tired of having others decide how she lived her life.

As if a large bucket of cold water had been poured over her head, Ellie came to full attention. She looked at Ben and waited, giving him one more chance to ease back and let her tell him how she was feeling and what she wanted to do. She waited to see if he was different from the rest, waited to see if he loved her enough to let her choose.

"I'm not kidding, Ellie. I don't want to have to force you to do as I say."

No. She remembered, now. He didn't love her. He'd never love her, he had practically told her that. How had she forgotten? And now after everything that had happened, it was just too much for her to take.

With empty eyes, she studied him. Taking her time to form her words, she said, "No. You can't force me. No one can force me anymore."

His confused expression was almost funny if it hadn't been so sad. She walked over to Sarah and John and hugged them hard. She gave Peggy a hug, took her children's hands in hers, and began walking back down the trail.

Ellie and the children rode with Peggy to her house. They were quiet on the way, both kids sleeping soundly in the backseat. Back in Ellerton Peggy and Ellie settled Sarah and John into the bed in the guest room, the same one they had slept in when they first came to town. Peggy guided Ellie into the kitchen for a cup of hot tea.

Peggy wondered how to help her daughter-in-law. She didn't quite know what had happened between Ellie and Ben but she knew that it was serious.

After pouring their tea and setting it on the table, Peggy pulled out a chair and joined Ellie. They sipped for a while in silence. Peggy just waited. Ellie's eyes were dull and listless, very concerning.

Finally, Ellie said, "Did your husband love you?"

Peggy smiled. "Yes, he did. And I loved him very much."

"Did he make you do everything he said? Because he knew best?"

This time Peggy laughed. "Honey, every man thinks he knows best. But whenever my Ray tried to make me do something I usually told him where he could

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go with his orders." She leaned closer to Ellie. "You don't have to tell anyone that I said that."

Ellie smiled slightly. Then with a sigh she said, "I'm just so confused. The Kents always made me do just what they said. And Ben wants to do the same thing. I can't go back to that."

"I understand, Ellie, I really do. Men can be so obtuse. They have this fierce desire to protect those they love but sometimes when they try to explain it, it doesn't come out just right."

"But he doesn't love me, Miss Peggy."

"Are you so sure? Seems to me that everything he's done in the last twenty-four hours has shown differently. He said goodbye to a woman that's been haunting him for years. He risked his life to bring you back to Ellerton. To him. Sounds like the actions of a man in love to me."

Ellie shook her head. "I'm just not sure."

Peggy patted Ellie's hand. "Well, you stay here as long as it takes to figure it out." She took a sip of her tea. "Just promise me this. Don't judge Ben by the men that took you up the mountain because Ben is nothing like them. And you know that."

Ben was impatient to get back to Ellerton. Although he'd wanted to take Ellie and the kids back home, as sheriff he was duty bound to stay on the mountain to secure the area.

What Ellie had said to him had set his teeth on edge. He wasn't quite sure what it meant. When he arrived home and found the house empty, he was completely frustrated.

He drove over to his mother's house and walking in the back door, found her cleaning the kitchen. "Are Ellie and the kids here?"

"Yes, they are," Peggy said in a low voice. "The kids fell asleep in the car and I just got Ellie to lay down with them."

"Why didn't you take her to the hospital? She needs to be checked out," Ben said turning towards the bedrooms.

"Benjamin Alistair Malone, you come back here this second." When he turned around, Peggy said, "You've got bigger problems than taking Ellie to the hospital. Which, by the way, I don't think she needs. Those symptoms of shock you said she had are gone. She's lucid and cognizant. But she's very confused."

"Confused? About what?"

"About you. About where she stands with you. About your intentions towards her."

Ben frowned at her. "My intentions?"

Peggy sighed in frustration. "Ellie's remembering what those mountain men were like and she's wondering if you're any different."

"What? I'm not any different from those barbarians that abducted her and took her up the mountain?" Ben couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"Of course you're different in the obvious ways but maybe not so different in the less obvious ways."

"I'm too tired to try to solve any riddles, Ma. Just spell out to me what you're saying."

"I'm saying have you ever courted Ellie? Have you ever brought her flowers and told her how lovely she is? You two had exactly one date before you were offering her marriage for her family's protection. With, I add, very little emotion involved. Then you expect her to obey your every command when she can't see the love behind what you're telling her to do."

Ben looked at his mom. She nodded knowingly at him. "Yes, I know you love her, son. But she doesn't. And I don't think she's going to believe you if you walk into that bedroom and announce it to her." Peggy grasped Ben's hand between hers. "You've got a big job on your hands. You've got to convince Ellie that you love her or I'm afraid you're going to lose the best thing that ever happened to you."

Ben thought over what his mother said for the next two days. He had taken Peggy's advice and stayed away so Ellie could recuperate from her experience without the added pressure of Ben being near.

His house had never seemed so quiet. He was definitely going insane.

Ben came home from work with a plan. He was going to take his mother's advice. He walked out to a field near his house and gathered a bouquet of wildflowers, Ellie's favorite. After a shower and a shave, he donned khaki pants, a white shirt, and a navy sports jacket. From the dresser he picked up a small box from the local jewelry store and studied it, hoping tonight he'd be able to give it to her.

Inhaling deeply, he slipped it into his pants pocket, grabbed the flowers, and headed out.

When he entered his mother's house, the kids squealed with delight. He couldn't get them in his arms fast enough.

"We miss you, Daddy Ben," Sarah said.

"Oh, Sarah. I miss you so much, honey."

"When we coming home, Daddy Ben?" asked John.

"I don't know, partner. Soon, I hope." Ben could feel his heart hurting. Across the room he saw Ellie. She wore sweatpants, sweatshirt, and no shoes. Her wheat-colored hair around her shoulders.

She'd never looked lovelier to Ben.

Like a teenage boy, he walked slowly across the room, his heart beating fast. "I, ah, brought you these," he said handing Ellie the flowers.

"Thank you," she mumbled looking at the beautiful blooms.

"Kids, why don't you come help me finish dinner," Peggy said from the kitchen door, quickly herding the children into the kitchen so Ben and Ellie could have some privacy.

"I was wondering . . . that is, if you don't have plans . . . if you'd like to go out to dinner."

"Go out to dinner?" Ellie asked.

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"Yeah. I'd like to take you out. You know, on a date. Just the two of us. But no pressure. We'd just go and have fun and I'll bring you back here to Ma's house when we're done. If that's what you'd like."

He watched her walk slowly to the couch and sit. His heart clenched thinking he might lose this incredible woman. His breath backed up in his lungs as he waited for her answer.

"That's real nice, Ben, but I think Miss Peggy's got dinner already started."

A setback but not a flat refusal. He took comfort in that and, taking a chance, sat next to Ellie. He gently took one of her hands and said, "I think she'd understand. I'd really like to spend some time with you, but only if you want to."

"It's real nice of you to ask me, Ben." She smiled shyly down at the flowers in her lap.

"I should ask you about things more than I do, Ellie. I'm going to try real hard to start doing that."

"That'd be nice," she whispered.

"You look very lovely, Ellie." He started massaging the hand he held.

Ellie looked up at that. She moved her hair back behind her ears as a slight blush covered her face. "I look terrible, Ben," she mumbled.

"I think you're the prettiest girl I've ever seen," Ben said with all the emotion he was feeling.

Ellie's eyes gazed into Ben's. He heard her breath catch, her hand relax in his. "Ben," she whispered.

Not wanting to go faster than she needed, Ben made himself release her and said, "Where would you like to go for dinner? I'll take you anywhere you like."

Ellie shrugged. "I guess somewhere they've got a good hamburger would be nice."

Ben smiled. "Remember the night we met? I got you a hamburger at the Mountain View Café. You loved it."

"I thought it was the best thing I'd ever eaten."

"I started falling in love with you that night," Ben whispered almost to himself.

Ellie's big blue eyes held Ben's as she said, "You did?"

Enough with going slow. Ben had to have Ellie back. Now. Maybe he should just put it all on the line and be done with it. "I did. Ellie, honey, I've learned a lot of things since that night. You've taught me. But mostly I've learned how to let go of the past and embrace what's right in front of me. And if you don't take care of your present it can slip away before you know it."

"My daddy always said, 'the present is God's present to you,'" Ellie said roughly.

It was a good sign that Ellie was quoting her father, Ben thought. "Well, I don't want to mess up my present." He reached into his pocket and pulled out the small jewelry store box. "I didn't really do this right the first time so I'm going to try it again." He got down on one knee and looked at Ellie. Opening the box he said, "Eleanor. Will you marry me? Please?"

Ellie was gazing alternately at the beautiful sapphire and diamond ring and at Ben's face. She tried to speak but was so conflicted she couldn't. He hadn't told her directly what she needed to hear. But he was making such a nice proposal.

When she didn't say anything, Ben said, "I wanted a special ring for you. The sapphire reminded me of your blue eyes. I know you work hard with your hands so I got a gold chain in case you wanted to wear it around your neck."

It was all so thoughtful but still—

"I thought we could start all over." Ben paused slightly to watch Ellie's reaction. "Maybe even throw away the pills and condoms."

Ellie's brows raised and her mouth dropped open. Was he offering her more children? With him?

"I've found out that I don't want to live alone anymore. I'm miserable. I miss you and the kids something awful. And before you think it's because you cook and clean for me, it's not that. If you want I'll even do more around the house to help you out."

This was all nice. Wonderful, in fact, but . . .

Ben took a deep breath, letting it out as he whispered, "Ellie. I love you."

A light brighter than the noonday sun, warmer than a king-sized quilt spread from her middle all the way up to her face, causing her lips to curl as pure joy flooded her soul. The unease she had been carrying was lifted from her and she finally felt her stomach relax for the first time in days. She jumped off the couch and into Ben who was still kneeling on one knee causing them both to fall to the floor.

Ellie and Ben were laughing as their arms found each other. Their bodies melted together, and they shared a kiss that would make angels cry.

When they finally came up for air, Ellie said, "Oh, Ben. I love you so much I think I might die from it."

He helped her up and sitting on the couch, he pulled her onto his lap. He reached for the fallen box and took the ring out. Carefully placing it on her ring finger just above her wedding band, he said, "Nothing wrong with dying from happiness. Just as long as it happens many, many years from now. I don't think the town of Ellerton could do without you. Or our children. I know I couldn't." They joined in another soul-melting kiss.

"So will you come home with me tonight? You and the kids?"

Ellie thought about it for a second. With a sly smile she said, "After our date."

Ben chuckled. "You're a wise woman, Eleanor Malone."

Neither talked for the next few minutes as they kissed and held each other tenderly.

The swinging door from the kitchen slowly opened and three sets of eyes peered out. All three people were smiling.

In a whisper, Peggy said, "Now, you see children? Everything's going to be just fine. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if your daddy loaded you all up and took you home tonight." She closed the door, leading them to the kitchen table.

"It's a good thing, Grandma. I think Daddy Ben needs us," Sarah said in a serious voice.

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Her eyes shining, Peggy looked down at the children. "Yes he does. And I have a feeling that he's learned just how much."

John inched back to the door and peeked out. "When are they ever gonna stop kissin'?" he asked.

"Never, honey." Peggy sighed. "I do believe they'll never stop kissing."  
And they didn't.

The End

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### ***CHRISTMAS DAD***

Bethany and Samuel Fitzgerald are tired of having no dad for the holidays. When they discover a friendly transient at the inner city help center where their mother volunteers, they devise a plan to hire him to be their "Christmas Dad." [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).

## About The Author

Malinda Martin has always believed in true love.

Her career began years ago after being mesmerized by reading a Debbie Macomber book. She read over three hundred romance novels and was irrevocably hooked on the genre.

After raising five children, she had to find something to do with her time so with the support of her family and the push of NaNoWriMo (National Novel Writing Month) she began writing her “feel good fiction” stories.

In the fall of 2012 she published a holiday romance entitled *Christmas Grace*, which made the Amazon Best Seller list in holiday romances.

Malinda specializes in uplifting sweet romance stories that makes a person happy. Her passion is creating humorous and heartwarming romance to inspire and encourage others to reach for their happily ever after.

An avid Disney fan, she and her husband live in Celebration, Florida, just ten minutes from the Walt Disney World gates. When she’s not at the Magic Kingdom, at the beach, or writing, you’ll find her curled up reading a good romance.

Be sure to visit her website at [www.malindamartin.com](http://www.malindamartin.com).