



**HARTE'S
PEAK** MARIA
MICHAELS

Harte's Peak

Maria Michaels

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Harte's Peak

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Dedication

To my savior. Thank you, Father, for Your relentless pursuit of this prodigal daughter. I now understand one truth: I am Yours.

1

Vera Carrington shifted gears and ramped up her speed, grateful for the car's get up and go. Fortunately, the roads had already been cleared from last night's snowfall. She had assigned herself the early shift at her café, but the darkness of the January morning had done nothing to wake her.

Her regular customers at The Bean expected the doors to open at six. She had about an hour's worth of preparations she'd have to accomplish in about fifteen minutes.

Times were tough in their resort town, now. Fewer tourists and vacationers were making the trek to the California Sierra mountain town.

The wail of a siren split the air and in her rearview mirror, the police lights flashed.

Not again. The third speeding ticket she'd have to talk her way out of in as many months? This was the last thing she needed. Especially now. She was already two months behind on her home's mortgage payment and still had no idea what to do.

She couldn't afford this ticket. Maybe she could talk her way out of it just one more time. After that, she'd start paying better attention to the speedometer.

She pulled over near a six foot high snow embankment and watched in the rear-view mirror as Ryan Colton climbed out of the cruiser. She sighed. Ryan was different since he'd caught religion and

become a regular at Jack and Maggie's church. Talking her way out of this one wouldn't be easy.

"Hi there, Ryan." Vera hit the button and let some of the cold morning air seep through the now opened window.

A pang of guilt stabbed her. The right thing to do would be to take her punishment. She could hear Maggie's voice echoing in the recesses of her mind. "You're my best friend, but I'm married to the sheriff now. Behave yourself."

"Hey, Vera. Do you have any idea how fast you were going?" Ryan had his flashlight out but avoided shining it in her eyes.

"I'm sorry about that. Hit the snooze too many times. I overslept."

He took out his ticket pad, expertly balancing his flashlight. "I know what that's like."

"I'm not a morning person and I would assign the shift to Annie, but I can't afford the payroll right now." Maybe with his newfound religion, Ryan might have a little compassion for a hard working girl. "Especially with Maggie on maternity leave. You know, Jack's wife?"

"You wouldn't be trying to talk me out of writing this ticket, would you?" He was clean cut now, having shaved off his beard a few months ago, though it didn't take away from his rugged good looks. He'd always been difficult to ignore and now he was so darned *nice*.

"Who, me?" Vera tossed her hair back and hoped she wasn't too obvious. Ryan was not as gullible as the younger officers.

"Because I do recall the last time I let you go I reminded you it would be the last time." He flashed

that disarming and cocky grin.

Stop it; stop smiling at me like that. "I do remember that." She tried not to melt under his penetrating stare. His expressive brown eyes had a way of untangling her frayed nerves.

"I would let it go, but Jack had a talk with us. He says you've got to learn your lesson."

"I have a reputation, I see." Vera tapped her red fingernail on the steering wheel.

"For speeding. Yes, you do."

Vera stepped out of the car hoping she might have a better effect, get him to step back, and take a look.

He stood his ground.

She considered flirting with him. Not only would it be effective, but it might also be fun. Then she heard Maggie's voice in her head again. *Great.* Might as well get this over with now. She might still make it to The Bean on time. "Just give me the ticket." She dug in her purse and handed him her driver's license. The wind whistled as it whipped through the trees and she shivered under her parka.



Ryan Colton stared at Vera as she stood inches from him. She'd thrown the door open and got out as if she expected him to take a step back. He wasn't going anywhere.

Thin and leggy, Vera was tall for a woman, but still a few inches shorter than him. Her dark blue eyes and pale blonde hair drove men to distraction.

Unfortunately, he was no exception. "Now you want a ticket?" He took her license. Being this close to Vera addled his brain. He couldn't have heard right.

"Yeah, and I'd appreciate it if it's sometime this year." Vera put her hands on her hips.

He could smell the mint of her toothpaste. He was about to reconsider because everyone deserved one more chance and she looked so soft and beautiful this frigid morning. Now she insisted he cite her. Well, he wasn't about to disappoint her. He copied the information from her license, checked off her charge, put her speed in the blank provided, and signed the ticket. "Here you go." He tore off the sheet with no small amount of pleasure and held it out with her license. "You have a nice day."

Vera narrowed her eyes and ripped the paper out of his hand. "I'm going to try." She got back in her car and drove away slowly.

He got back in the cruiser and drove through town as the sun rose over the horizon and more cars began to populate the streets of Harte's Peak.

A year ago, he wouldn't have appreciated the graveyard shift like he did today. But only a few months ago he'd started to see everything in a new way. Now he saw the sunrise with a promise he'd never imagined before. Every morning felt like a new beginning, a chance to demonstrate his new self and to show God that he appreciated His grace.

Part of that meant covering the graveyard shift so that new family man, Jack, could spend the morning with his pregnant wife, Maggie.

Ryan was happy to take the shift. Even if it meant running into Vera the Speedster. If he were a revenue hound he'd know exactly where to find his meal ticket, but instead she'd managed to talk her way out of one the last three times she'd been pulled over.

Lonnie Smith, who still stammered like a

schoolboy in her presence, had let her out of two tickets.

Yet he was in no position to judge since he'd also let Vera go with a verbal warning three weeks ago when she'd gazed into his eyes. He'd briefly remembered the old Ryan, the one who'd asked her out on a regular basis even though she had repeatedly turned him down.

Of all the townspeople who had heard about his conversion and baptism Vera seemed the least convinced. It would be an uphill battle to demonstrate to the people of Harte's Peak that he had changed. Vera, more than anyone else, reminded him of that fact.



Vera had finished up with the last of the morning rush customers when Annie McCarthy, Maggie's replacement, arrived promptly at ten for her shift. Annie's nose ring and jet black hair made her look like a punk rocker. She was actually an unemployed school teacher. "Brrrr. Did you have any trouble getting in the door this morning? I had trouble getting out of my house." Annie tied on her apron.

"There were three customers waiting for me, and they helped me out."

"All kinds of gentlemen are out this morning. The heater in my car isn't working well, and when I thought my insides had congealed and turned into one solid block of ice, I saw Ryan Colton shoveling the entrance to Katie's bookstore. Just looking at him warmed me up."

"He's been a busy boy this morning." Vera

smirked. Ryan had turned into a regular Boy Scout.

"I'm no fan of cops, but that man could change my mind," Annie sighed.

He might even change my mind. And if he'd ever ask her out again Vera might have to reconsider. He'd stopped asking several months ago, coincidentally, about the time he'd been baptized. Maybe he thought he was too good for her now.

"Since you're here, I'm going to the office and get some paperwork done." Vera took off her apron.

Six months ago, she'd taken a second mortgage on her home in order to make some improvements to the café, expanding to the storefront next door when it was vacated by the fabric shop that had closed its doors after twenty-five years in business. One of the additions included a private office in which she could adequately do personnel reviews and manage payroll.

Who could have known that shortly after the improvements were completed Harte's Peak tourism would take a swan dive?

Vera pulled out the file she had been avoiding and with shaking fingers dialed the number. She verified her information with the mortgage company's phone tree and waited for the representative to answer.

When she had the faceless person on the other end of the line, she tried to reason with them.

"Ms. Carrington, I see you're two months behind with your mortgage payment. I can take a payment right now over the phone for your convenience."

Vera winced. *For my convenience.* If she'd had the money to make the payment would she be making this embarrassing phone call? "I can't make a payment right now. But I have a few questions."

Apparently, a mortgagee asking questions threw

the mortgage company for a loop. Vera was transferred to at least six different departments before she finally had the proper person on the line. She explained her position and waited for a response, barely able to breathe.

"The only way you were qualified for this loan was under our special interest-only program," this person droned on. "Of course, now that it's been a year your loan has adjusted, but you also need to start paying toward the principal. Your broker should have explained this to you." The representative's low pitched voice was more than a tad condescending.

Her broker had left town months ago when his business hit bottom. Now her payment had doubled. Vera thought she'd understood the fine print and terms of her refinance, but now she wished she'd hired a lawyer to translate it into plain English for her.

As she'd been taught to do, Vera listed all her assets in a column. At the top of that list sat the café. Sure, the economy had slowed, but the café would hold its own now that she'd trimmed expenses.

But even if there were buyers lining up for her café in this economy, she wasn't about to sell the one thing that had ever been truly hers.

No. She'd have to find another way to save her home.



Ryan headed home to catch a few hours of sleep after his shift before he headed over to the church's foundation meeting that afternoon. When their pastor had organized the *Home is Where the Heart Is* foundation in response to the record number of

foreclosures in their county, Ryan saw it as a way to put his faith into action.

He often had to post the notices of foreclosure and orders to vacate on the homes and felt sick every time he did. In the small town, he was on a first name basis with some of the people who were about to lose their home. Sometimes it was too late to save the home, but the foundation was gifting first and last month's rent to displaced homeowners, and every now and then, they were able to provide enough money to get an owner caught up on their back payments. Lately, their meetings had been focused on raising money for the foundation. Unsettling ideas like a bachelor's auction had been proposed, and someone was trying to get in touch with a worship band to see if they'd play a free concert.

As he neared Vera's café, he pulled over. Maybe he'd drop in for a quick decaf and give her a chance to apologize. He'd only been doing his job this morning.

Annie was behind the counter, and Vera was nowhere in sight.

"Hey, Ryan. The usual?" Annie reached for the coffeepot.

"Decaf this time," he said.

He paid quickly and left the café nearly running into a man on his way inside.

"Sorry," he said and then did a double take. "Kyle?"

"Hey, buddy." Kyle slapped him on the back.

Ryan hadn't seen Kyle Grant in years. Not since their days on the pro ski circuit. "What are you doing in Harte's Peak? You're not here for the tournament?"

"Yep, I am."

"Why would you do that? It's an open and you

won't get much competition."

"Exactly. I could use the money and I like these opens from time to time. Keeps me in shape for the bigger pro-circuit tournaments."

"Why come down so early? You won't have to qualify, and it isn't 'til next month."

"Maybe I just wanted to drop in on an old friend. You said if I ever landed in Harte's Peak to look you up."

He had said that, but that was before everything had changed. "Yeah."

"Anyway, the purse is only twenty-five thousand this time around, but I came down early to check out the competition. Although I don't expect to have much."

"Twenty-five thousand?" Ryan allowed himself to think of how far that could go toward shoring up the reserves of the foundation.

"Why? Are you thinking of entering? That might actually make it fun for me."

"Nah. I'm out of shape. No match for your skill anymore." With a little practice, he might just be able take on his old friend, but he hadn't been up on a pair of skis since the accident that had sidelined his career.

"Tell the truth, bud. You never were." Kyle elbowed him.

Ryan ignored that. "Where are you staying?"

"I'm staying at the Lodge where I'll admit I do like the scenery. And I'm not just talking about these mountains." Kyle wiggled his eyebrows.

Right. Kyle referred to the women who flocked to these tournaments like groupies, treating the athletes like celebrities. He'd been on the end of that kind of attention in the past. "Good luck. If I can help, let me

know. I'll be seeing you around."

"Wait a second. We should get together sometime. Tear up the town like we used to. The women of Harte's Peak won't know what hit them."

If anything, Ryan would have to keep his distance. He'd left that lifestyle behind and certainly wasn't going back to it now. "I'll leave you to that."

Kyle stared as if Ryan had just said that skiing was a sport for sissies.

Ryan would need to take some time and explain to Kyle that he'd changed. Even if he wasn't quite sure where to begin.

2

Vera didn't see that she had any other choice. She'd have to visit her mother and beg for help. If she could get current with her mortgage, she could relax and breathe. Even better, a major ski tournament would take place in one month, and the publicity would boost tourism.

At a Chamber of Commerce meeting, she'd heard every lodge in town was booked solid for the event. All of those tourists would be looking for a warm cup of coffee both before and after the slopes.

Vera locked up her office and made her way to the uncrowded café. "I have to take a drive to Sonoma."

"That's a two hour drive. Will you be back later, or do you want me to close?" Annie asked.

"Do you mind?" She'd never had Annie close shop alone before, but the time had come.

Annie grinned ear to ear, obviously feeling she'd earned a measure of trust.

The drive down the mountain and into the valley was a little like leaving one world and entering another. In the mountains, pine trees that were filled with dollops of snow bowing the branches became green pine trees, their branches empty except for the occasional squirrel.

Soon enough she arrived in the valley, where even the rain could not change its pristine appearance. The streets might have been paved with gold for all the

money here. Ava Carrington lived in the same old and established neighborhood where Vera and her older sister, Amy, had grown up.

Vera had called ahead and heard the measure of surprise in her mother's voice. They hadn't spoken since the holidays, and those conversations had been strained. Pulling into the long circular driveway Vera held her breath.

Maybe this wasn't such a good idea.

But Mom had more money than she could ever possibly spend. She was a frugal woman, a fact she never hesitated to bring up around Vera.

"Hi, Mom." Vera hugged her mother in the entryway.

"Let's have some tea. I waited for you." Mom led her into the elegant dining room.

Vera glanced at the grandfather clock in the entryway. She'd arrived a few minutes after noon, and her mother, who fancied herself English, served tea at high noon. Though Mom never fully comprehended that high tea in the UK was served later in the day, the ritual used to comfort Vera. No matter what else happened in the world, she knew at noon they'd be having tea.

Even on the day that Dad had left them once and for all, Mom had called her girls into the dining room where both Vera and Amy had sipped tea through their tears.

"You look too thin," Mom said through pursed lips.

A new record. She'd been in her mother's house less than ten minutes this time. "I've gained ten pounds in the past year."

"Well, it doesn't look like it. You know how this

makes your sister feel. She can't help it if she's meaty like me." Mom dropped four cubes of sugar in Vera's teacup without asking.

"Mom, you're hardly meaty."

"You're naturally thin like your father." Her mother winced as though the tea tasted bitter, but Vera knew the bitterness came from the memory her mother's words had churned up. "I'm only asking you to think of how that makes Amy feel."

"Amy and I are fine. We talk every other day." As usual, the problem was in Mom's mind. A mind like a steel trap that couldn't let go of the past.

Vera had made a mistake coming here.

Mom pushed the cookies in Vera's direction.

Vera wasn't hungry, but she took an angry bite out of one.

"So why are you here?" Mom's brown eyes narrowed.

"Can't I just come by to visit?"

"You can, but you don't." Her mother sighed. "How's the man who escorted you to Christmas dinner? I can't remember his name. Eddie?"

Leave it to her mom to remember the exact name of the man she'd brought home for the holiday, someone she had not seen or heard from since that day.

Vera chose not to answer. Instead, she shoved another cookie in her mouth.

"Is he the latest casualty in your string of men?" Mom continued.

"I haven't seen him, and we weren't serious anyway." She didn't need any man in her life, but no need to bother trying to convince her mother of that fact.

"I'm not surprised. You'll probably never settle down. You don't want to meet the right man, do you? You're just like your father."

Mom's acid tongue burned into Vera's heart. Mom never meant comparisons to her father as a compliment.

"I did settle down once. Don't you remember?" Mom never saw past Vera's ex-husband's money to see his faults.

"He was a good man." Mom poured more tea.

A good man? Vera winced, her fists tightening. She took a deep breath and let it out. "I know how much you liked him."

"He took care of you, didn't he? You don't know how lucky you are."

"Lucky?"

"Don't pretend you don't realize how beautiful you are. You could get a man anytime you want one. If only you would decide on one and stick with him. How hard is that?"

"I did pick a man." Vera held the fragile looking teacup so tightly she feared it might burst into a hundred little pieces.

"Yes, you did do that. Several, in fact. Now if you could learn to hang on to one."

Like you hung on to my father? There was no point to this. She couldn't ask her mother for help. She'd tell her to find another husband. She placed the empty cup on the table and stood. "I need to go."

"What did I say?" Mom's eyes widened.

"Nothing."

Her mother pushed away from the table. "Go ahead. Leave. You do that well. You shouldn't be so sensitive when I'm trying to give you a little advice."

Vera bit her lip for a long moment, staring at her mother. Then she shook her head. "I can get advice from my friends. From Amy. When it comes to my mother, sometimes all I want is a hug."

And that wasn't going to happen. Mom touched only when necessary: to straighten a flyaway hair, brush bangs out of eyes, flick away a piece of lint. The last time she'd embraced Vera had been on her wedding day.

"I'll call you later." Vera's eyes brimmed with tears as she walked out. She'd have to find another way to get out of her financial mess.