

DELIA LATHAM

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The First Noelle

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Hope Springs−5 miles

Noelle Joy struggled for breath that seemed inadequate. She gripped the wheel with white-knuckled fingers as her vehicle sped relentlessly toward the small, California mountain town that had been her home until a decade ago.

What are you thinking? Why would you ever return to the place where you suffered the worst indignity of your life? Even as the desperate questions spun through her mind on an out-of-control turntable, she launched into long-rehearsed relaxation techniques. One...two... three... Breathe in. Four...five...six... Breathe out. Breathe. Just. Breathe.

By the time the weathered "Welcome to Hope Springs" sign came into view, her emotions were well in hand. She was here to do a job—one that would look good in her bank account and on her résumé. And—since she insisted on honesty at all times, especially with herself—she had to admit the person at the other end of the contract added a certain appeal to this gig.

Noelle had dutifully researched the man after he'd contacted her, but there'd been no real need. Michael Holliday was becoming a household name. The talented architect had burst onto the scene seemingly out of nowhere and had won award after award in the years since his first design created an uproar in the industry. He somehow managed to steer clear of the

ever-reaching tentacles of the press, but that phantomlike ability to avoid the spotlight only whetted the media's collective appetite.

Holliday also drew notice by often, and generously, sharing the rewards of his labor. Charity organizations, large and small, benefitted from his wealth. Individuals and families in dire need had been blessed by generous checks delivered to their doors—all signed by Michael Holliday, all accompanied by simple notes that included well wishes, promised prayers, and requests to keep his donation downwind of the press. But happy, relieved people rarely kept that kind of blessing under wraps.

Aware of, but not able to track down the source of the mysterious gifts, the media had dubbed Holliday the Phantom Philanthropist.

Not a single photojournalist had ever captured a clear shot of the man. A few unrecognizable photos found their way into various publications, but none provided any real idea of his appearance. News articles offered only guesses as to where he lived, using vague terms such as, "Most likely somewhere in Northern California."

Along with a stringent confidentiality agreement, Noelle had signed a contract that offered an incredible amount of money to create a decorating miracle in Holliday's home. Having scribbled her moniker on "the dotted line," she became one of the few people who possessed a physical address for Michael Holliday, Phantom Philanthropist and Architect Extraordinaire.

He did indeed live in Northern California—somewhere near Hope Springs, where Noelle had enjoyed a happy childhood, lived out teen years filled

with love and romance...and suffered the most painful and degrading rejection any woman could endure. A good portion of the total population had witnessed her public rebuff—a bride in a church bedecked with Christmas finery, awaiting a groom who never showed.

She groaned as she pulled into her parents' driveway for the first time in a decade. As much as she loved Mom and Dad, the prodigal's return promised to be anything but joyful.

With lunch and cleanup behind them, Noelle followed her mother from the kitchen into the living room.

A wide swath of pure silver streaked a section of the beautiful black hair Nancy Joy always wore with ultimate grace in a classic French twist. Despite that delicate bow to a departure from youth, her beauty was undeniable.

As if unable to keep from touching her daughter, she drew Noelle into a warm embrace. "It's wonderful to have you back in Hope Springs, darling. This house hasn't been quite 'home' without you."

Noelle cleared her throat against a gargantuan lump. Since she'd walked through the door several hours earlier, she'd battled what promised to be a regular gully washer of tears.

So many memories lived within the walls of this house—mostly warm, wonderful ones that she'd deliberately buried over the past decade while keeping the events of that one dark day at the edge of her mind. Holding onto the pain kept the naïve, gullible girl she

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thought of now as "the first Noelle" from resurfacing. That girl would destroy the strong, successful woman Noelle had become.

She returned her mother's hug. "It's always good to see you and Dad, but being in Hope Springs is not easy."

"I know, darling. I know." Her mother reached up to brush a strand of hair almost the identical color of her own off Noelle's face. "But facing our monsters is the only way to shrink them down to proper size, which usually isn't nearly as large as in our imaginations."

Noelle rolled her eyes and emitted an indelicate snort. "This one was pretty big in reality, Mom. I'm not sure it can be shrunk any smaller by coming back home."

Mom sighed. "I don't mean to downplay what happened, sweetheart. No young woman should ever have to endure that kind of hurt and humiliation. But you didn't let it destroy you. You've already beaten that particular boogeyman, so coming back here offers an opportunity to kick it to the curb, once and for all."

"Fine, Mom." No one ever won an argument with the Reverend Joy's wife because she was almost always right, and Noelle didn't feel up to giving it a shot today. She kissed her mother's cheek, grabbed her purse off a small table in the entry, and reached for the doorknob. "I won't be more than a few hours. Probably less, depending on this guy's ability to make clear what he needs in a reasonable length of time." She forced a strained smile. "Tell Dad I'll expect those steaks to be grilled to perfection, like always."

Mom's laughter soothed the seeping wound in Noelle's heart, scraped raw by her return to an old haunt. Her unchanged bedroom. The space still housed photo albums oozing pain from every page, stuffed animals with talon-clawed memories attached to their cutesy grins and cuddly bodies, even a closet full of clothes drenched in all-too-vivid images that messed with Noelle's cool façade.

Probably a good thing Daddy had been unable to free himself from the annual board meeting at the church. Seeing her father would have weakened her to a degree beyond that already brought about by simply being in Hope Springs. She needed this break to meet with her client and look over the job. The familiar professionalism she wore like an armor would create a bit of balance, give her a better grip on her emotions.

Daddy's voice had calmed her every fear as a child and bolstered her through the hormonal ups and downs of a young girl entering womanhood. Those soothing tones wouldn't be as likely to undo her once she tucked a session of cool, calm, collected professionalism into the day.

Back in her car, she fed Holliday's address information into the built-in GPS. The route took her a good distance further up the mountain and miles off the main route. Noelle hadn't known the beautiful, secluded area existed, despite having lived so close for the first twenty-two years of her life.

She pulled to a stop at a pair of imposing gates fronted by a guard shack. To her surprise, her heart pounded with expectation. Her mind wouldn't be quiet either, tossing out a horde of unanswered questions.

Was Holliday an older man, or was he young for his accomplishments? Was he handsome? Maybe he was hideous, like the fairy tale beast, and that's why he maintained such a fiercely private existence. Was he kind, as seemed to be indicated by the media-inspired title? Or was that all hype? Perhaps the whole Phantom Philanthropist thing was a ruse to hide his real personality, which might be anything from a mouse to a monster.

A man's voice crackled across the air. "Identification, please."

Holliday should be expecting her. Why all the cloak-and-dagger? Well, his house, his rules. She dug out her driver's license and the guard took it, his alert gaze darting back and forth, side to side, as if expecting an attack.

Noelle bit back a giggle when he broke from his fastidious survey of the surrounding countryside to peruse her license, seemingly line by line. What did he expect to find there?

At last, he returned the ID and gave a single, terse nod. "When I open the gates, follow the drive and park by the front steps. A valet will take your car."

Sure enough, a uniformed valet met her at the base of a series of steps leading to massive oak doors that would have served well in any medieval castle. The man actually smiled as he took her keys. Having passed the intense scrutiny of the portly guard, it seemed she'd earned a bit more friendliness.

"Mr. Holliday will meet you at the door, Miss Joy."

Potted plants lined each side of the wide steps—gorgeous bursts of azalea, bonsai-shaped miniature wisteria, hoya, plumeria, fuchsia, and a number of plants Noelle didn't recognize and was almost certain shouldn't survive the cold of the Northern California mountains. Holliday must have a sizeable greenhouse.

The door opened as she reached the top step. A man stepped outside but seemed reluctant to venture beyond the shade of the overhang. He towered well over Noelle's five feet, nine inches. Muscles strained at the cloth of his sleeves and across his chest.

"Good afternoon, Miss Joy."

Something caught in Noelle's heart, and she swallowed repeatedly. Had she heard that voice before? Why did it make her want to cry...or maybe scream and throw rocks through the beautiful stained glass windows that fronted the huge estate?

She allowed her gaze to travel beyond the broad chest to a firm, square chin, and upward. Nicely shaped lips curved into a smile that seemed a little shaky around the edges and revealed perfect white teeth. A straight nose, not too long, or too short. High cheekbones.

For some reason, she avoided his eyes, instead moving on to take in slightly longish, golden-brown hair with a smidgen of gray at the temples.

"Miss Joy?" A hint of concern tinged the oddly familiar voice.

Noelle swallowed again and forced her cowardly gaze to his, only to be caught in a dizzying vortex of confusion and familiarity. *I know this man. I've met him before. Where?* She stood up straighter, hiked her chin, and mentally donned the ice cloak that had stood her in good stead over the course of her career. Holliday wasn't the only one with a media-dubbed moniker. She had one of her own, and the Ice Princess of Design wouldn't be put off by a furrowed brow and a tense expression. "Mr. Holliday. I'd like to get started right away, if you don't mind."

Forced to meet his gaze—his eyes were hazel, but

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somehow she'd known they would be—she saw a flicker of something that made her breath a little shallow. She was way off her game. Was it because those eyes held a strange, impossible familiarity?

"Of course. Come in, please."

He indicated she should precede him into the house...no, the mansion. "House" didn't even begin to describe the residence. Noelle had seen a great number of multi-million-dollar homes in her line of work but nothing that compared to the one in which she now stood.

"This is...quite lovely." She was careful to maintain the chill in her tone. "Professional distance at all times" was the mantra by which she'd lived for the past decade. It had served her well. No need to change it now, just because something about Michael Holliday made her skin tingle and sky-rocketed her heartbeat. "If anything needs improvement, it's well hidden."

His low laughter sent something almost unbearably electric skittering up her spine. "It isn't improvement I'm looking for, Miss Joy. It's a mood, a certain look...an ambiance, if you will. And since my event will be held on Christmas Eve, it must be themed very specifically around that holiday."

She nodded, despite the rock of dread that landed in her stomach with a thump. Up until now, the only Christmas event she'd ever created had been her doomed wedding a decade earlier. After that, she never again celebrated the holiday she'd once loved most. She refused to have a tree in her home and never sent a Merry Christmas card to a single soul. Stockings, mistletoe, and hot apple cider—things she'd once loved—were now just unavoidable traditions she muddled through every year while counting down the

hours until the bells stopped jingling, the carolers' songs died away, and her favorite radio station started playing real music again.

Joy Designs absolutely never, ever, ever accepted a design job with a Christmas theme. She opened her mouth to tell Michael exactly that but remembered just in time that she'd already signed the contract, without checking into the specifics of what Holliday needed or for what occasion. She uttered a pathetic inner moan. Christmas. She'd signed a legal contract saying she and her team would create a holiday environment somewhere in this castle-sized home.

Noelle steeled her spine and pasted on a smile she was certain didn't fool the handsome architect for even a split second. Well, the contract had not included a clause that said her smiles had to be genuine. Then again, she hadn't realized it mentioned anything about a Christmas event either, because she barely noticed anything other than Holliday's name. She knew better than that. Now she had no choice but to design a winter wonderland in this massive mansion.

Bah Humbug.

2

Michael knotted his fists and relaxed them again. Noelle's fake smile made him want to capture her face between his hands and demand an answer: Why couldn't she be real?

He'd followed the woman's career for a long time before asking her to handle his upcoming Christmas event. Only she could create what he had in mind. He'd read all the society trash that labeled her "The Ice Princess of Design," but he also bore an unwanted media moniker, so he wasn't inclined to lend much credence to such things. Still, Noelle did indeed freeze out all overtures by besotted suitors, if any of the articles were to be believed.

Judging by the chill emanating off her at this moment, they probably were.

He'd watched for a long time, and the burden he carried became heavier with each bit of news. Every article touting Noelle as the darling of interior design showed photos of a woman he barely recognized. The slightly crooked curve of her lips wasn't a real smile. No light shone from the golden caramel depths of her eyes.

Michael longed to kindle the flame that surely existed beneath the surface. He cleared his throat. "Is there a problem, Miss Joy?"

"No, of course not. I don't usually do Christmas-

themes. Actually, I never do, but it seems that's what I've signed up for this time. So-" She raised both perfectly shaped eyebrows and cast a glance around the spacious foyer. "Shall we get started?"

Michael gave her a mini tour of his home—if that's what it could be called. He was aware the mansion lacked warmth, but he hadn't figured out how to infuse such a thing into the huge rooms and high walls that housed a single man and just enough staff to knock down cobwebs, keep him fed, and insure he had clean clothes in his closet.

Although he took Noelle through the entire ground floor, he focused his attention on the great room—a space large enough to be called a ballroom, but Michael disliked the word.

"This room in particular, along with the foyer, is where I'll want you to work your magic. I also have a small chapel behind the house. That is to be included in your design efforts. In fact, I'll expect the chapel, even more than inside these walls, to be breathtaking."

She nodded once—a regal, peremptory drop of her chin that made his jaw clench. "May I see the chapel?"

"Follow me." He led her through a series of openings leading to a courtyard tucked between the three wings of the structure. They walked past a large fountain with multiple jets, through a winding flower garden—still bursting with color, thanks to the greenhouse in which he loved to putter—and into a small, wooded glade.

"Oh!" Noelle clearly hadn't expected what she saw.

Michael couldn't help grinning. That instinctive outburst, and the widening of her eyes, was the first genuine, spontaneous response she'd exhibited since walking through his front door. "Pretty, isn't it?"

She shook her head. "A glass chapel! It's lovely, and so perfect for the setting. Are we going inside?"

"If you'd like to, of course."

"I would. Very much."

He unlocked the door, and Noelle preceded him into the glass-walled structure.

Michael used the mini-church for prayer and worship—with piped-in music and recorded sermons, since he rarely risked attending an actual church service. He stood back and watched her slow glide down the middle aisle, one hand trailing from pew to pew. She made her way to the front, where she turned in a graceful circle, taking in the view from various angles.

A narrow creek ran just outside one long wall. On the opposite side, a mountain vista sprawled in panoramic glory. Hundreds of evergreen species held proud reign. Showcased amongst the pines and firs, other trees sported the last of their fall attire. Some were stripped bare, stark evidence of the approaching winter. By Christmas Eve it would have frozen out the last vestiges of autumn's touch.

But it was the view from the front wall to which Noelle was drawn.

Michael watched her, drinking in this glimpse of the beautiful woman with her emotional walls down. Without the façade.

She stepped onto a low platform and made her way to the glass barrier between inside and out. Clearly transfixed, she drank in the view.

A waterfall dropped from quite a distance up the mountain, poured over three separate tiers in the rock and soil, and culminated in a gorgeous final fall that splashed and splattered in glistening diamond-bursts of rushing water to the lake at its base. Only God could create this kind of splendor—the kind that stole one's breath, heightened the emotions, and whispered a constant reminder that, prince or pauper, beauty or beast, powerful or insignificant…any one person's existence created only the finest of threads in the Almighty's ongoing tapestry of life.

Michael joined Noelle and made no mention of the tears on her cheeks. Nor did he comment when she swiped at them with one hand and blinked out a rapid attempt at damming the tide of whatever emotion had caught her off guard.

"So, what do you think? Can you do something spectacular with my little church in the wildwood?"

She shook her head. "Nothing could make this place any more perfect."

He hiked a brow. "I distinctly remember a magazine ad that promised Joy Designs could one-up nature every time."

She laughed...a soft, low gurgle that caught his heartstrings in a painful grip and tugged with the force of a winter blizzard. "I may have to retract that one. Here, the best I can do is enhance what G—uhm, what nature has already provided."

"God dropped a bit of Eden here in my little glade, didn't He?"

Her shoulders stiffened, and Michael heaved an inner sigh. Pain sliced his heart at her clear aversion to any mention of God. Still, Noelle—the real woman—had peered through the frozen façade for an instant. She was in there somewhere, and he wouldn't stop until he melted the bars of ice around her heart.

Noelle banged her hand against the steering wheel. Her weakness back there was unacceptable. Letting down the emotional walls would free that other part of her—the side of her personality that she'd locked away. She had no intentions of ever letting that Noelle see the light of day again.

What was it about Michael Holliday that chipped at her defenses? And that "moment" in his adorable little glass church? For heaven sake, she'd seen beautiful scenery before. She'd visited a number of different countries, always with an eye to ethnic design and cultural trends. Some of those locations boasted breathtaking scenery. While she appreciated nature's wonders, she never got emotional about them. Yet today, she'd been moved to tears by a waterfall outside her client's charming glass chapel right here in the good ol' USA, a few miles outside her hometown. What had brought on such an uncharacteristic response?

"Doesn't matter." She spoke into the silence of her vehicle. "It won't happen again."

If she hadn't already signed that dratted contract, she'd call the whole thing off and go back to San Francisco. But she'd worked too hard to build an impeccable reputation for Joy Designs, and she couldn't afford to destroy it by walking out on the most influential client of her career thus far. She'd stick it out, and she'd deliver her best work ever, leaving Michael Holliday no reason to voice anything but glowing references.

Then she'd leave Hope Springs again, and this time, she'd erase the route from her memory.

After letting herself into her parents' front door, she turned toward the stairs, but a sound outside caught her attention. She peered through the sliding glass doors and all the tension slipped away in an instant, as if some unseen magician waved a magic stress wand that siphoned away worry and angst. A smile lit her face as she crossed the room.

A number of tiki torches lit the backyard. Seventies music, set at a nice, easy-listening volume, played from the speakers Daddy had installed with meticulous care long before Noelle left Hope Springs. But it wasn't the music or the lights that kept her frozen in place, enthralled.

What swelled her heart and shortened her breath were her parents—the sound of their voices, barely loud enough to be heard over the music. The sight of them, so happy together, just as they were in every childhood memory.

The grilling station had cost far more than her parents could afford way back when. They'd justified the purchase by putting it to frequent use—sometimes entertaining friends, but quite often for their family alone. The Joy patio became as much the heart of their home as was the kitchen in most American residences. So many memories lived under that sturdy awning, around the patio table, and throughout the whole yard.

Noelle's lips curved upward despite her earlier vow to use the Ice Princess persona every moment of her stay in Hope Springs. She didn't need it here, with the two people who'd loved her every moment of her life.

Her dad wore a tall, white chef's hat and a pristine white apron—his standard get-up for grilling steaks. He'd long since learned to wield long-handled

barbecue tools with flair, and when he put on the hat and apron, something changed inside him. Typically soft-spoken, Dad's voice was the epitome of culture, perfectly modulated to befit his ministerial role. But on his own patio, grilling steaks with his family and listening to the tunes to which he and her mother had fallen in love, that voice rose to a near boom—a volume he never used in public, and certainly not during the services at Hope Springs House of Joy. Donning his chef's hat and apron seemed to release a lighter hearted side of the Reverend Kenneth Joy, turning him into the quintessential essence of Noelle's adored daddy and the unflappable Nancy Joy's husband.

At the moment, he held a spatula in one hand, but it didn't stop him from holding his wife close as they dipped and swayed, laughing into each other's eyes.

Noelle's heart pinched hard. She'd always loved the "dance-capades" her parents put on at every backyard barbecue. Even as a child, and then a teenager and right up until the day her world came crashing down around her knee-length bridal veil, she'd longed for a marriage with the same kind of love and utter devotion this couple had displayed with beautiful consistency all her life.

Watching them now for the first time since that long-ago Christmas Eve, Noelle was slammed once again by the crushing force of harsh reality. She would never, ever experience that kind of love. In the world of the new and improved Noelle Joy, it did not exist.

Her father caught sight of her just when she was ready to turn and run.

"Noey girl!" He dropped a swift kiss on Mom's forehead and hurried across the patio. "Aren't you a

sight for your poor old Dad's aging eyes?" Sliding the doors open, he drew her into his arms and rocked from side to side in the familiar, comforting half-dance she remembered so well. "Sweetheart, it's wonderful to have you home."

She wrapped her arms around a waist slightly larger than she remembered and squeezed hard, then favored him with a smile—a real one. No fake personas allowed on the Joy patio. "I've missed you."

"And I missed you twice as much." He led her to the table while her mother watched with a quiet, contented smile. "Sit with Mom, and I'll finish up at the grill. Everything's just about ready."

"No hurry." She kissed her mother's cheek.

"How did it go, darling?" Mom squeezed her hand. "Who is this mystery client of yours, anyway?"

"Mom, you would've loved this house." She laughed then, and rolled her eyes. "Except, 'house' doesn't quite do it justice. This guy's place is more of a small castle."

"Hmm." Her mother's eyebrows drew together just briefly. She never frowned long enough to risk causing wrinkles. "I wasn't aware anything like that existed around here."

"I'm not surprised. It's quite secluded." She reached for a bacon-wrapped jalapeno. In San Francisco, she'd never allow herself such an indulgence, but here in Hope Springs, she didn't think twice before helping herself to one of her mother's special appetizers. "There's an armed guard at the gate. You'd think the place was Fort Knox. And get this—a valet parked my car." She bit into the luscious pepper treat. "Mmm...luscious! In San Francisco, valet parking is standard service at most upscale venues.