



MARY
ALFORD

*Christmas in
Delaney Mountain*

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Christmas in Delaney Mountain
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Dedication

To anyone who has ever faced down a dark moment in their life and survived. This book is for you.

1

Two months. She'd spent the last two months looking over her shoulder and yet the expected nightmare hadn't returned. There'd been no word from him. No sightings. Only silence.

So why couldn't she relax? Begin to enjoy life once more?

Because this routine was a familiar one. The last time had been four months. The time before six. The only variable in the equation was that there was no variable. The routine—his routine—never faltered.

He always found her.

So, no matter how tired, or frustrated, or fed up she became, she couldn't let her guard down because it had only been two months; and she was convinced, even after moving to a remote village in Colorado, he would find her again. At times, Kara felt like a ghost without a past. Transparent. She barely remembered the woman she'd once been...before him.

Kara glanced out the window at the gathering darkness. It came quickly at this time of the year in the shadow of the mountains. The news had been broadcasting a huge winter storm on the way. It was almost six. Amy would start to worry if Kara didn't pick up her four-year-old daughter, Maya, soon.

But Kara couldn't afford to upset her boss. She needed this job. She was barely hanging on financially. Kara picked up the phone to call Amy. Before Amy

had a chance to answer, Kara's boss stepped out of his office and into her personal space. Immediately, she dropped the receiver back into its cradle to the sound of Amy's "hello."

A familiar nervousness slithered down into the pit of her stomach. It reared its unwelcomed head every single time David Delaney came within twenty feet of her.

It didn't help that he was handsome and had bad-boy-troubled-past written all over him.

His straight, dark blond hair had been hastily pushed back. He hadn't shaved in several days. David's stubble darkened his strong jawline, drawing attention to his face. She suspected he'd pulled quite a few all-nighters lately.

When David had hired her, he'd explained that he and his brother were expanding their ranching business and had bought up several hundred acres of land across Delaney Mountain from the original ranch. David was charged with getting the new ranch up and running, which was huge undertaking, especially now that his brother had taken a leave of absence to be with his wife who was on strict bed rest during the final stages of her pregnancy.

While David seemed to enjoy the challenge, the running of the entire ranch fell squarely on his shoulders, resulting in many long days....and nights. He'd told her that the ranch foreman, Noah Henderson, was a tremendous help, but still, the pressures had to be enormous.

Kara glanced up, regretting the color that crept up her face.

His amazing smoky-blue eyes were on her. His aftershave reminded her of how long it'd been since

she was close to a man. And as always, her thoughts drifted to Bryce. She still missed him terribly. It had been almost five years since she'd buried her high school sweetheart, and the love of her life. Lately, it seemed life was reminding her of the things she'd lost with Bryce. Yet she just couldn't picture going there with anyone else. Especially now.

After she'd survived *him*. Kara squared her shoulders. She couldn't afford to give in to an attraction. Her life and Maya's depended on Kara never losing sight of the past.

"Something wrong?" David asked in polite concern, while dropping the inch-thick manila folder he'd been working on most of the day on her desk. The slight whooshing sound it made grated along her frazzled nerves.

Kara sat up a little straighter. "Nothing at all, Mr. Delaney."

He'd asked her to call him David when he'd first hired her two months earlier, but had finally given up a few weeks into their relationship. Now he just looked at her with frustration.

He didn't understand, but calling someone by their first name meant forming a connection. Which meant she'd feel something when she had to leave in the middle of the night. Because *he'd* come after her. No change in that variable.

David chose to let the matter go, his attention already diverted to the next piece of business at hand. "I need you make the changes I've indicated to the report before you leave, please." David's limp was more pronounced today. It usually appeared whenever he was tired or stressed. And David Delaney had plenty of reason to worry.

This new contract for a hundred head of cattle would either make or break the new ranch. Which meant she might not have a job in a few weeks' time, a problem she didn't want to have to deal with so soon.

"Yes sir. I'll get right on them," Kara said and waited for him to leave.

David turned to go but something kept him from doing so.

"Are you sure you're OK?" He turned to her and asked once more. The gravelly voice washed over her, charming as always.

Kara drew in a steadying breath then looked at him. The kindness in his eyes had been there many times before, but today, when she was feeling more lost and alone than she had in a long time, it was almost her undoing. She'd give anything to be able to tell him the dark secrets of her heart.

Kara swiveled in her chair until her back faced him. "Of course. I'll have the changes ready for you within the hour."

She sensed his presence behind her. She could almost feel him struggling with his conscience. David Delaney was a rare breed of man. She'd learned that in stages over the past few months. David possessed a kind heart. In her experience, that was about as uncommon as a sunny day this time of year in Colorado. She held onto her breath until it hurt, praying he'd leave her without questions. Her desperate need to believe in human kindness again had her hoping he wouldn't.

The silence lengthened uncomfortably, and she turned to find him still there, still watching her. Their eyes locked. A thousand different questions passed between them before he quietly left her to her solitude.

Kara let go of the breath she'd held onto, sneaked a quick peek back at his door, and then picked up the phone to call Amy once more.



David closed the door and blew out a breath. What was it about this woman that got to him? In Delaney Mountain, Colorado, there were few single women in his age group, which never bothered him before. But there was something about Kara that got under his skin. Actually, there were a whole lot of somethings that had him curious.

Why would someone who clearly had never been exposed to such stark and rugged conditions as Delaney Mountain chosen to move here? As far as he knew, she was single and living alone.

"Whatever it is, it's none of your business, Delaney. You've got enough on your plate to worry about." He shook his head and moved to the window of his ranch office. Even in the twilight darkness, the view of the Delaney Mountain was worth the price of admission. Every time he looked at it, it reminded him of his childhood. Growing up on the ranch in the shadow of the mountain had been idyllic for a while. Until his mother passed away, and his father chose to bury his grief in a bottle.

When he came back to Delaney Mountain five years ago, it was a ghost of the town it had once been. It had been his experience that people came to this part of Colorado for two reasons. They were running from someone or something. For him it was just the opposite. He had been running from his troubled past when he'd left Delaney Mountain as a teen.

Too late, he'd learned that the man responsible for most of his bad memories, his father, had died a changed man. He was grateful for his brother, Kyle, for trying to find him through the years, even though he hadn't wanted to be found at the time.

Everything changed when he joined the Marines. His life came into focus, and he knew there was more to life than feeling sorry for one's self.

The intercom buzzed. He turned from the breathtaking view and picked up the receiver. "Yes, Kara." It was hard not to enunciate her name, hoping she'd take the hint. No one called him Mr. Delaney. That was his dad. He doubted if most of the cowboys working the ranch even remembered he had a last name. Except when it came to signing their paychecks.

"I've finished the edits and sent them to your inbox. And Mr. Jacobs is holding for you."

David bit back a sigh. "Thank you, Kara." He plopped down onto his chair.

"If you don't need me for anything else, I'll be leaving, Mr. Delaney."

In spite of his frustration with her formality, he smiled. She was an awesome administrative assistant. Always anticipating his needs, even before he knew about them. He just wished she'd open up to him a little more. Smile from time to time. He had a feeling she had a nice smile. He came back to the moment when she repeated his name. "That's fine, Kara. I'll see you tomorrow. Have a nice evening."

She didn't bother returning the sentiment and his mind went back to his earlier speculation. Why had she come here? There had to be at least half-dozen more visitor-friendly places to live in, especially in the wintertime, then the remote village of Delaney

Mountain, Colorado.

David remembered he'd left Andy Jacobs, the ranch's CFO, on hold. He clicked over to his second line. "Yeah, Andy." He took the hands-free receiver with him over to the window.

Kara emerged, her collar turned up against the cold, her raven hair hidden by a knit beret. He'd thought a lot about her hair. She wore it screwed up into a bun on top of her head since the first day he met her. He imagined it loose and flowing. *Get a grip.* He had plenty to think about beyond his assistant. Besides, he'd been down that road once before. He'd been in love. It hadn't worked out.

Snow begin to drift down again.

Kara reached the driver's door of the beat-up SUV she drove.

"Piece of junk," he muttered under his breath.

"Well, I wouldn't call it that bad." Andy's disgruntled voice injected. As his friend first, and CFO second, Andy deserved better.

David had zoned out somewhere around the second group of less than promising figures. "Sorry. I was actually thinking of something else. Do you mind saying that again?" He waited until Kara got inside the vehicle before returning to his desk.

"I said the first initial report isn't as good as we'd hoped."

"Oh, man." David covered his eyes with his hand. Not the news he'd hoped for and certainly not the news he wanted to pass on to Kyle. Kyle had enough on his plate right now with the baby on the way.

"But it's early still. On the bright side, cattle prices are poised to start increasing after the first of the year. The forecast looks good for that trend to continue

through the first half of next year. Looks like we bought the hundred head of cattle at the right time."

David drew in a breath. "Well, that's something."

"Yep, and we have plenty of hay baled for the winter to feed the cattle. All's good, David." Andy was one of the best financial analysts in the cattle business and could almost predict how the market would roll.

David was thankful that they'd planted that extra field of hay last summer. It would carry the cattle through most of the winter.

"The new shipment of cattle are supposed to arrive tomorrow. In my opinion, the sooner the better. I just hope the weather holds and this storm isn't as bad as they're saying. It's December in Colorado. It won't be long before we're snowed in," David said.

"You're right about that. We're living on borrowed time, as it is. Normally, the snow flies about November. God's watching out for us this year."

David was living proof of both God's mercy and blessing. He'd survived two tours of duty in Afghanistan and had come away only with bad dreams and a bum leg. "We still on for lunch on Sunday?" David asked.

"Absolutely. And try to be on time this time. Trish will have both our hides if you show up late again. You know how she loves these get-togethers. There's so little entertaining in Delaney Mountain."

"You got that right, and that's why you and I like it here so much. But I understand Trish's dilemma and I promise I'll be on time."

"Good. Oh, and Trish and I are planning to attend your brother's church this week. You know we've been trying to find a good church home since we moved here six months ago. We've heard positive things about

this one. They do a lot of community outreach. Trish wanted to invite you to come along as well.”

David hesitated. “I’ll think about it.”

Kyle and Grace had been inviting him to attend church with them since he’d moved back to town, but he’d made it a point of keeping away from most social gatherings in town. He’d practically buried himself at the ranch. Even though he’d been home for a while, he still felt awkward about being back in Delaney Mountain.

“Great, then we’ll see you Sunday.”

David grinned at his friend’s answer. Just like Andy to turn an OK into a yes. Still, he’d considered attending church at least a dozen times over the past few years. He’d felt a certain pulling on his heartstrings. His mother would call that God’s way of communicating.

David disconnected the call and went back to the window. He frowned. Kara’s SUV was still parked in the same spot. She was sitting in the driver’s seat. Was she talking on the phone or was something wrong?

He grabbed his coat and headed outside into the frigid evening air thick with snow. Already several inches had accumulated on the top of his Jeep. David fought a gusty north wind every step to her vehicle and knocked on the window, obviously scaring her.

She rolled the window down a fraction.

“Problems?” he smiled.

She put as much space between them as the cramped vehicle would allow. Her gray eyes appeared haunted. “I-I think it’s the battery. I’ve tried it several times, but it won’t turn over.”

“Pop the hood.”

She blinked as if he’d spoken a foreign language.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Can you pop the hood? I'll check to make sure the connections aren't loose."

She did as he asked, her expression misgiving.

He lifted the hood and did a quick assessment. The battery connections were tight. The battery itself was a different matter. It looked as if it had seen better times a few years back. David went back to her window and leaned into it. "It's definitely your battery. I have some cables in my Jeep. I'll pull around and give you a boost."

Relief replaced her usually worried expression. Her smoky gray eyes actually softened as she smiled.

All of his attention went to her mouth. She had the nicest mouth he'd seen in a long time. It virtually screamed to be kissed. It took a moment before he realized he was staring at her.

Color stained her cheeks. She stopped smiling and looked away.

Embarrassed by his own juvenile behavior, David walked away without another word. "Stupid," he muttered to himself as he hit the remote key pad and unlocked the driver's door. He climbed in, turned the windshield wipers on high to knock the snow off, and then drove the short distance over to her SUV. He slammed his door harder than necessary, annoyed with himself, before grabbing the jumper cables from the back.

David lifted the hood of the Jeep, connected the cables, and then did the same to Kara's SUV. When he returned to the Jeep he revved the engine and let the Jeep's motor do its job. Besides, he needed a little more time before facing Kara again. Once he'd gotten himself under control, he went back to her window.

“OK, try it.”

The SUV’s engine turned over once and then refused any more attempts.

Kara appeared more worried than normal. Her brows knitted together, and she glanced nervously around. What was she expecting to happen?

“It may take a little while. The battery’s pretty drained. I’ll go back and rev the Jeep some more. Give it a few minutes, and then try it again.”

It took three more tries for the SUV’s tired engine to fire.

Once David disconnected the cables, he felt more like himself. He leaned into her window again. The snow had really started to come down. “That should get you home, but you need a new battery, Kara.”

“Thanks,” she said in relief. She was already putting the vehicle in gear, ready to dismiss him as usual.

“Seriously, Kara. It won’t last much longer. Not in this weather. You don’t want to find yourself stranded out here. There are some places so remote that cell service is all but nonexistent.”

His warning clearly didn’t sit well with her. “I understand, Mr. Delaney. I promise I’ll take care of it. Thank you.”

He didn’t believe her. “I can call over to Steadman’s Automotive, I have an account there. They can put a new one in today.”

There was no mistaking the look of pride on her face as she squared her shoulders and faced him head on. He’d never seen her look so strong. So confident. It took him aback.

“That won’t be necessary. It’s my problem. I’ll handle it my way.”

2

It's my problem. I'll handle it my way. Kara sighed. If only it would be that easy. A new battery. Another unexpected expense and with Christmas just two weeks away. She was barely hanging on as it was. Thank goodness God had given her the insight to buy little gifts for Maya during the year. But there was one thing her daughter wanted for Christmas that Kara just wasn't sure she could make happen. She glanced in her rearview mirror.

Her boss still stood in the middle of the drive in heavily falling snow, watching her drive away. She couldn't think about him right now.

Over the past two weeks, it had been one thing after another. First the visit to the doctor when Maya caught a stomach virus that hung on. Then the electricity bill was twice what she'd expected. Now the car needed a new battery. Already she was running in the red financially, there was still another week left before payday, and she had exactly ten dollars in her checking account. Not much left to buy groceries. They'd have to stretch what was in the pantry and the fridge as far as it would go.

Kara had gotten good at stretching food. She'd had plenty of practice since her husband's death. She knew Amy would be agreeable to waiting another week for her check. Amy had told Kara on more than one occasion that she enjoyed Maya's company and didn't

need the money. Kara had refused her kind offer. She would not be beholden to anyone, not even the kindly Amy. And if she'd learnt anything since the nightmare began, it was that she had to be careful where she put her trust.

Still, the older woman had taken to Maya as if she was her own flesh and blood. And Kara's four-year-old daughter loved her Grammy Amy.

The SUV sputtered a little in protest as she neared home. *Please, Father, just let the battery hold on for another week.* She turned onto Porcupine Drive and parked the SUV inside the garage of her two-bedroom home. She'd chosen the neighborhood deliberately because it was off the beaten path. Only she and Amy lived this far up. No one would come this way without reason.

Kara was afraid to kill the engine, yet at this point, it didn't matter. She'd deal with whatever tragedy awaited her with the vehicle the next morning. If all else failed, maybe she could borrow Amy's SUV until she could afford to get a new battery.

She locked the garage even though she was only going next door to Amy's more affluent home. The house she and Maya lived in belonged to Amy who rented it out. Kara was very thankful that she did.

Night came early in Colorado this time of year. It was both frustrating and calming. The darkness helped keep the ugliness of the world at bay.

Kara rang the doorbell, and then called out, "Amy, it's me, Kara." She glanced around, feeling nervous. There was always the possibility he'd have found her and was waiting for the right moment to strike. He'd done it enough times in the past for her to take the threat he posed seriously. But she'd chosen Delaney Mountain because of its remoteness and the winter that

locked the residents in and all others out.

After a dozen or more uneasy seconds ticked by, Amy unfastened the door, smiled, and waved Kara inside. "She's in the kitchen. We're having dinner. Come join us," Amy said.

More than once, Kara worked late. Because she loved her job and desperately needed it, she never made an issue of it. She'd never told her boss she had to leave to pick up her daughter. She didn't want anyone knowing about Maya or her personal life. The less people who knew, the better chance she had at remaining hidden.

"Something smells wonderful." She followed the older woman's slower steps into the kitchen.

Maya sat in her booster seat spooning meatloaf into her mouth. The second she spotted her mother, she dropped the spoon and jumped from her chair, bounding into Kara's arms. "Mommy!"

Her daughter's sweet smile always managed to push away her uncertainties. It didn't matter how tight money was or what fears crowded in, when Maya smiled at her, everything in the world was right. "Hi, baby girl." She enveloped Maya in her arms and squeezed tight, planting kisses against her temple. "How was your day? Did you and Grammy Amy have fun?"

Maya nodded and giggled.

"Come sit down and eat, you two. Maya, you can tell your mother all about it just as easily on a full tummy." Amy winked at Kara, who carried her daughter back to the table.

Kara hesitated. She hated inconveniencing the older woman. "You don't have to do this, Amy. You've done enough. Thank you for keeping Maya for the

extra time, but I can whip up something at home.”

Amy waved a dismissive hand. “Nonsense. I love cooking, but it’s not much fun preparing a meal for one. Besides, I always make too much. Come sit down.”

Kara smiled and gave in. This had become Amy’s answer every time she tried to protest. “This smells too good to let it get cold. Thank you, Amy.” Kara dug into the meatloaf. “Mmm...wonderful.”

Maya glanced up from the mound of mash potatoes piled on her spoon. “Mommy can we go see the kittens this weekend?”

The kittens were Maya’s favorite subject. It had been over a month since they’d gone to Denver to visit the mall and yet her daughter was still talking about the kittens she’d fallen in love with. Maya desperately wanted a kitten for Christmas.

Kara didn’t know how to tell her daughter no, but with her working long hours, taking care of a kitten would be hard. Feeding it would be even harder. *Father, I don’t want to disappoint my baby again.*

“Soon, baby. Maybe before Christmas.” With a forced smile, Kara silently prayed she hadn’t just lied to her daughter, and they would still be here to visit the mall. Because she couldn’t dispel the fear in the back of her mind.

“Yippee!” Content with her mother’s answer, Maya went back to shoving food into her mouth.

Kara pushed aside her fears for the future and glanced across the table to find Amy watching her closely. So many times, Amy had studied her with knitted brows, and yet never once had the woman asked about the questions troubling her. Kara just hoped she’d never have to explain her problems or

bring them to Amy's door.

After dinner, Amy brought out dessert. Maya happily accepted a piece of Amy's homemade buttermilk pie and took it into the living room where she sat in front of Amy's antique wood stove and watched the fire as it danced.

"I'm doing the dishes and I won't take no for an answer," Kara insisted.

After a minute, Amy gave in, nodded, and added another log to the fire. The older woman kept a fire going almost every minute of the day. She'd told Kara the only time she ever let the stove rest was a couple of weeks in the summer. Amy suffered from severe rheumatoid arthritis. Her hands were so bent and gnarled from the disease that at times it was impossible for her to hold her knitting needles.

Kara's heart went out to her. It amazed her how Amy still managed to prepare those delicious meals and the pies.

"All done," Kara said once she'd finished the dishes and joined Amy and Maya in the cozy great room. Kara sat on the sofa, and, as had become their routine, Maya climbed into her lap. This was one of Kara's favorite times of the day. It was so relaxing to snuggle with Maya and talk with Amy.

"Now I understand why Amy's Diner is still so popular. You taught the current owners everything they know."

Amy chuckled and nodded. "My husband Al and I ran that restaurant for going on thirty years, until he passed. After that, well, I didn't have the heart to do it anymore. Back then, Delaney was a whole lot bigger. A lot more people lived here. Nowadays, well, most of the young people leave the minute they graduate. Jobs

are hard to come by. If you don't hunt or fish or ranch, there's not much else here."

Amy had told her once that Delaney Mountain had a population of more than twenty thousand. Today, it was hard to scare up a couple thousand.

Kara had no idea when she drifted off to sleep.

Amy tugged at her arm and whispered in her ear. "You want to stay here tonight?"

Kara glanced around the room, disoriented. Maya lay next to her sound asleep. She roused herself, rubbed the sleep from her eyes enough to focus on her watch. It was almost midnight. "I'm sorry. I had no idea it was so late. Thank you, Amy, but I need to get Maya and myself home. I have a busy day tomorrow."

"You need some help carrying her to your place?" Amy asked, concerned.

"No, I'll get her." She buttoned her jacket and grabbed Maya's from the hook before carefully lifting the sleeping child her arms. Maya mumbled something, and then wrapped her arms around her mother's neck.

Amy held the door open for them.

Kara leaned down and kissed her cheek. "Thank you for everything. I'll see you in the morning."

That troubled expression had returned to Amy's eyes. "Are you sure you don't want me to go with you and unlock the door?"

Kara did. The thought of walking into a dark, empty house was paralyzing. But she wouldn't bring her troubles to Amy's door. "No, we'll be fine. You get some sleep. I'm sorry for keeping you up so late."

Amy waved a dismissive hand. "Oh, pooh. I rarely go to bed before two or three. I enjoyed the company."

Kara smiled again. "Goodnight. See you in the