

INSPIRATIONAL ROMANTIC SUSPENSE

SOMEONE FROM CHRISTMAS PAST

LESA HENDERSON



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Dedication

First and foremost, I give thanks to God, my shield and my strength. His guidance, grace, and unwavering presence have been the foundation of this journey. Every step I've taken and every word I've written is a testament to His faithfulness. To Him be all the glory.

Second, to my husband, Ken—your love, support, and belief in me have been my anchor. Thank you for standing by my side through every challenge and triumph, for your patience (through the endless hours of writing), and for always encouraging me to follow my dreams. I couldn't have done this without you. I love you always.

Third, to my editor, Nicola Martinez—your sharp insights, thoughtful feedback, and dedication to this project have been invaluable. Thank you for believing in this story and for helping me shape it into something I'm truly proud of.

CHAPTER 1

Elise Raines had never expected to lay eyes on him again. Yet, she was sprawled on the pavement in the quaint mountain town she now called home, gazing up into the face of the man she once hoped would be her forever love. Jaxson Bleu.

Something had changed about him. His signature dark brown ponytail was nowhere to be seen. Was it concealed beneath that beanie he sported? Nevertheless, he remained undeniably, breath-stealing attractive. A stunning blend of Native American and Caucasian.

She was frustrated that his looks still captivated her. The chiseled features and tanned face belonged none other than to the childhood friend turned—what exactly had he become? The man who broke her heart and the...Elise slammed the brakes on that thought. She couldn't bear it.

He knelt on one knee, leaning in with proximity. "Elise?" His astonishment mirrored her own. Anxiety etched his voice.

She blinked a few times... "Jaxson?" she asked, almost afraid to believe her eyes. The once youthful face now carried a slight hardness and weariness. But those unusually colored blue-brown eyes were the

same—mesmerizing. At the moment, they were filled with concern and something else she couldn't read. But then again, her vision seemed a little blurry. Or were those tears?

Elise struggled to catch her breath. She thought it was more from this random encounter with an apparition from her past than the shock of having nearly missed being hit by a car. Or how hard she'd hit the ground when Jaxson pushed her to safety.

"What... What are you doing here?" She croaked the only thing she could think to say.

"Are you all right?" He'd ignored her question, his voice laced with a familiar tenderness.

Speechless, she nodded.

A passerby stopped, looking down at Elise over Jaxson's shoulder. "Is she OK?"

Elise nodded, finding her voice. "I'm fine. Thank you."

She noticed that Jaxson avoided looking up at the woman.

She pushed herself to sit upright.

"Take it easy," Jaxson suggested softly. "You took a pretty hard fall."

Her already spinning world tilted on its axis as a wave of dizziness and nausea washed over her.

"Lisse!" Jaxson exclaimed as she fell backward, only saved from hitting the pavement a second time by a strong arm beneath her back.

The last thing she wondered as she looked at his blurring handsome face was how her newly organized life had gotten so crazy in the past twenty-four hours.

~*~

"Twenty-Four Hours Earlier

Elise drew back her foot and gave the tire of her car a swift kick. Then, for good measure, she kicked it twice more.

The unusual anger didn't stop the smoke coming from under the car's hood. But it did hurt her toes, and she worried one might be broken. Maybe she deserved it for letting her frustration take over.

"Mommy, what's wrong?"

Elise's head snapped toward the sound of her daughter's voice, where the little girl stood outside the car. The fact that she hadn't noticed Amelia exiting the vehicle also lent itself to proving uncustomary behavior on her own part.

"Amelia, sweetie, Mommy told you to stay in the car."

"I know, Mommy, but you need help..." The eight-year-old explained her disobedience, which was also unusual. Amelia was a dream child and rarely disobedient; although she could have a bit of a stubborn streak when she felt strongly about something. Hmmm, maybe the nut hadn't fallen too far from the tree.

Fortunately, they were standing on the opposite side of the car from traffic, not that there was much of that on this mountain road. Elise had decided to take the cut-off on the way back from taking Amelia to the dentist in Chatley, because it was quicker. It was also

less traveled.

"I appreciate that, but you must obey Mommy when I tell you to do something, especially in this circumstance. OK?"

Taking her mother's correction in stride, Amelia nodded agreeably, causing the long locks of white-blond curls to bounce. "Do you need me to kick the tire for you?"

"What...No...the tire doesn't need kicking...I was just...kicking it..."

Amelia scrunched her face in confusion, causing Elise to smile. "Why don't you get back in the car, sweet pea, where it's safer? I'm finished kicking the tire." Elise promised.

She fished her cell phone out of her pocket. Of course, there was no signal. She wanted to stamp her foot in frustration, but one act of immaturity was enough for the day. The fact that her eight-year-old had felt the need to intervene proved that.

Elise had two choices. Wait in the car until somebody meandered by, hoping she didn't have to wave them down if she left the hood raised. Or she and Amelia could walk until they got a phone signal—or to Mountain Crossroads General Store, a couple of miles back.

She didn't feel comfortable walking along the road with Amelia, nor did she want to get into a stranger's car. She climbed back into her SUV and shut the door. She'd give it some time and see if a vehicle came their way.

Maybe she should pray and ask for help, but it

didn't seem right to make requests of Someone whom for the most part you ignored. Aunt Vera and Uncle Thomas had shown her the way. She just hadn't been walking in it. Not since... "Mom... Mommy..."

Elise lurched out of her thoughts at her daughter's insistent voice. "What is it, sweet pea?"

"I have to go to the bathroom." The consternation must have shown on her face because Amelia added, "Really bad."

"Seriously?"

Amelia nodded adamantly.

Elise looked around their surroundings. Not the best time or place, but when nature calls...

"All right. I'll go to your side of the car and open the front passenger door and your door. Just squat down between the two doors and go. Try not to get wet."

Amelia's grey eyes widened as her mother's instruction sank in. "Ugh!"

"Well, sweet pea...There are no bathrooms out here."

"OK." Amelia sighed.

When the task was complete, Elise was getting Amelia back into the car when she heard what sounded like a child crying. She froze.

"What is it, Mommy?"

Elise put her finger to her lips. She looked around the area, straining to hear. There it was again. She'd heard that cats could sound like a human crying. Her cousins, Lee and Cameron, used to tell her about it when they were hiking through the mountains around

their Aunt Vera's bed-and-breakfast. Was that what she'd heard?

There it was again. But now, it was more of a whimpering. Surely, a child was not out here. Could one have gotten separated from their parents while hiking? Or wandered away from a campsite?

Elise took her phone from her pocket...Still no signal.

The sound came again from behind her, just down the slope.

Elise pressed the button on her key fob to lock the car's doors. "Amelia, stay in the car, OK? Please don't open the door for anyone except me. Do you understand?" She instructed Amelia in her firmest, no-nonsense-I-mean-business voice.

"Where are you going, Mommy?"

Elise pointed towards the hill. It was ten feet away, and she would be able to see the car. "I'll be right back. Stay in the car." *Lord, please keep my little girl safe.* She had no problem whatsoever requesting help for her daughter.

"Glad, I wore my hiking boots today." She muttered as she gingerly descended the uneven, rocky slope. Her skirt hindered her, but years of trailing Lee and Cameron up and down slopes just like this and across creek beds had muscle memory kicking in.

She stopped at a clump of trees. Did she dare step into the brush? "Hello? Is there anyone there?" She waited. Nothing. "You can come out; I'm here to help." Then she heard it again. Someone was stifling cries. Sniffle. Hiccough. Human. That was it. She was going

in.

“Mommy!”

Elise nearly jumped out of her skin. Whirling around, she saw Amelia making her way down the hill.

“Amelia, I told you to stay in the car.” Even from where Elise was, she could see Amelia’s furrowed brow.

“It was taking you so long. I...I was worried,” Amelia said.

Elise expelled a breath of frustration mixed with understanding. Should she take her daughter with her or send her back to the car? She still didn’t know what waited in those trees.

Hiccough. Hiccough. Sniffle.

“It’s all right. We’re here to help you.” Elise spoke in a soothing tone.

“Mommy, who are you talking to?”

Elise put a finger to her lips and held up her hand in the stop gesture.

Amelia stopped, wide-eyed.

As Elise turned back, a small figure stepped out. Her heart reeled into her throat.

Amelia gasped.

An ebony-haired, tan-skinned boy who looked to be Native American stood trembling before them; his big brown eyes were a pool of tears. His face was covered in smudges and scratches, probably due to underbrush and branches. The child couldn’t be more than four or five years old.

His clothes were torn and soiled. His lightweight

jacket couldn't do much to keep the chill off his tiny body. What in the world was he doing out here? How long had he been here? It had rained the night before. He looked soaked to the bone.

She reached out to him without advancing; he looked terrified. He shook his head and took a step back.

She tried again using the same soothing tones as before. "It's OK," she assured him. "We're going to help you."

He stood his ground.

Elise could carry him up the hill to the car, even if he kicked and screamed the whole way. But who knew what kind of trauma he'd been through? If she could get him to trust her, take her hand, he might willingly go up the hill with them. She knelt on one knee, careful not to intrude into his space or reach out.

He was shivering.

"I know you're scared, and you look very cold. We can get you some dry clothes and a blanket." She opened her arms.

Shaking his head, he took another step back.

Elise sighed. What should she do? They needed to get him out of there and into clean, dry clothes.

Amelia touched her shoulder. "Mommy, can I try?"

It couldn't hurt. She nodded.

Amelia stepped around her, fumbling in her jacket pocket. She pulled out a banana and the remaining half of the peanut butter sandwich Elise had made her as a snack. "Are you hungry?"

The little boy's eyes narrowed; his stare fixated on the banana.

"You can have it," Amelia said as she peeled it and held it within his reach. Hunger edged out fear as he snatched the fruit from Amelia and crammed it in his mouth.

Elise's heart constricted at how famished he appeared. "We need to get him to the car."

Amelia nodded as she unwrapped the rest of her peanut butter sandwich.

The little boy crammed the remaining banana in his mouth as if he were afraid they would take it from him.

"You can have this too," Amelia promised in a sweet voice. "Let's go up to the car where you can eat it and get some water."

Her daughter was genius.

Amelia extended her hand to the little boy while holding the peanut butter sandwich in the other hand. He looked at the sandwich, then at Amelia, over to Elise, and then back at the sandwich. He placed his hand in Amelia's.

Elise wasn't waiting for him to change his mind. Standing, she took the sandwich from Amelia. At the little boy's whimper, Elise turned to him. "I'll give it to you at the car, I promise." She led Amelia, who led the little boy back up the hill.

Elise managed to get the two children back to the car without incident. She needed to get the child some dry clothing. Today, she was glad she'd developed the habit of carrying extra clothing, a blanket, towels, and

various items for Amelia and herself in the car.

She handed the boy the sandwich, which he immediately took a massive bite of. She grabbed a bottle of water from the pack in the back seat, twisted the cap, and handed it to him.

She and Amelia stared in wonder as he drank until he'd drained all sixteen ounces.

Elise's eyes filled with tears. "Stay with him, honey, and I'll find some dry clothing for him in the trunk."

Amelia nodded.

Elise rummaged through the clothes she had for Amelia in case of an emergency. She returned with a button-up flannel shirt. Even though Amelia was small for her age, the shirt would still be too big for the boy. However, it would keep him dry until they got help.

Would he let her change him? Motioning for Amelia to move, Elise knelt to his level. She showed him the clothes in her hand. "We need to get you out of those wet clothes, buddy. OK?"

To her surprise, he nodded before consuming the last bite of the sandwich.

"Good."

He allowed her to replace his soiled clothes with Amelia's shirt. Her jaw hardened at the sight of the strap-like marks across his lower back and legs and the various other bruises covering his body. When she was finished, she wrapped him in a blanket, wiped his face and hands, and tucked him into the backseat with Amelia.

Climbing into the driver's side, she sat

momentarily trembling. She hoped someone would arrive soon, because they couldn't sit in the car for long. Plus, she needed to get the boy some medical attention.

CHAPTER 2

Elise jumped at the sound of her cell phone ringing. She fumbled as she retrieved it. "Hello?" Her voice was surprised, even to her own ears.

"Lisse, are you OK? You were supposed to be here twenty minutes ago, and we haven't heard from you." Catlin was her cousin Cameron's fiancée. Her voice broadcast a mixture of worry and relief.

Elise's family and friends knew she was a stickler about being on time. Another habit she was grateful she'd maintained. "Catlin. I haven't had a signal. I can't believe you got through to me."

"Megan and I have been trying and haven't been able to until now. What's going on?"

"My car's broken down on the side of the road." In a rush, Elise explained the situation and the discovery of the little boy. She glanced in the rearview mirror, being careful with her words. But he didn't hear her. He was fast asleep, snuggled next to Amelia. Elise's heart melted at Amelia's arm protectively around the boy.

"I'll call Cameron now. He'll come and get you or send someone if he can't come." Catlin reassured her and disconnected the call.

Elise breathed a sigh of relief.

Help was on the way. And not just any help. The cavalry. Her cousin, who was more like a brother, was ex-special forces, and had also served for years as a US Marshal. A year ago, he'd taken the position of deputy for Laurel Ridge's Sheriff's Department to be closer to his family. He also was marrying Catlin McCormick, the newly discovered sister of his sister-in-law, Megan, who'd married his brother, Lee.

Less than a minute later, a text came through: Hold tight. Stay in the car. Cam's on the way.

She turned to Amelia. "Uncle Cam's on the way to get us."

A huge smile spread across Amelia's face. "Will we get to ride in his car?"

"I believe so."

Riding in Uncle Cam's cruiser made everything better for the little girl. But Amelia had taken the morning's adventure in stride.

Elise was thankful for her daughter's strength and flexibility. She'd really needed it during and after her parents' breakup over the past two years.

Elise was startled by the tapping on her car window.

A slim woman with dark hair and sunglasses stood outside.

Elise hadn't noticed the dark sedan that had quietly parked beside her. She turned the ignition key to partially roll the window down.

"We noticed your flashers are on. Do you need assistance?" The woman gave a reassuring smile, but she seemed to be trying to look through the partially

open window into the back seat.

Elise smiled back. "No, thank you. I appreciate you stopping, but my cousin is on his way to help." She gestured toward the flashing lights of the Sheriff's SUV approaching them.

The woman glanced at the approaching cruiser. "Glad you're taken care of." She returned to the sedan, which sped off.

Cameron spun into a U-turn and pulled the cruiser behind her small SUV.

"Uncle Cam's here. You stay put for a minute with the little guy." Elise figured she didn't really need to say it. Amelia was utterly content overseeing the little boy.

Cameron approached her. The passenger door of his car opened, and another man climbed out. He seemed strangely familiar, but Elise was so glad to see Cam she didn't bother with trying to figure it out.

"You guys, OK?" Cameron asked while grabbing her into a bear hug.

"We're fine." But she couldn't deny how good it felt to have him here.

He released her just as the other man approached them. At five-foot-eight, she could see over Cameron's broad shoulder, but she was looking into the morning sun and still couldn't make out the man.

"Do you have one of those for me, Lisse?" He'd used the name only close friends and family used.

"Sully? Sullivan Dunn!" An involuntary squeal escaped her. The years fell away as she rushed toward the brawny, six-foot-two-inch ginger-haired friend

from her past.

For the second time, she was engulfed in a bear hug—this one lifted her off her feet. She giggled like the girl she'd been, tears misting her eyes. It had been many years since she had seen him. "What are you doing here?"

"It's a long story." Grinning broadly, Sullivan put her back on her feet. "Cam can tell you about it after we get you guys settled."

"Of course." She'd gotten caught up in the moment.

"The little boy's asleep in the car next to Amelia." Both men looked at her vehicle. "I found him just down there." Elise pointed to the trees.

"I'll radio in the situation. We'll need the area checked well." Cameron moved towards his car but stopped mid-stride. "You don't think rescue is needed?"

"No. I'm afraid it'll further traumatize him. But we do need to get him to the hospital to make sure he's OK. I don't know how long he's been out here; his clothes were soaked."

"What in the world is a little boy doing out this far alone?" Sullivan asked.

"Hopefully, we'll find out and reunite him with whoever lost him. And Ace senses he's needed," Cameron said as he opened the vehicle door.

"Ace?" Elise asked.

"Let him out, Cam." Sully grinned at her and gave a quick, loud whistle. "Ace, come."

A well-muscled Belgian Malinois with a fawn-