

'T WAS THE LIGHT BEFORE *Christmas*

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*For my loved ones whose birthdays fall on December 24th, 25th, and 26th.
You are not forgotten.*

CHAPTER

One



SUNDAY EVENING BEFORE THANKSGIVING WEEK, red, green, and white drone lights blinked like stars in the indigo sky. They fluttered and settled into the emblazoned message—\$50,000 Grand Prize. Cooper Blackmon’s jaw sagged. The explosion of major-league firecrackers added to the crowd’s excitement. High-technology machines shimmered from their lofty perch, then danced into another formation, and a smaller stream of letters appeared. The 50th Anniversary Seven-County Christmas Lights Festival.

“Whoo-ee, now that’s a prize.” Jonathan Wise yanked on Cooper’s jacket sleeve and produced an ear-splitting whistle.

Cooper pulled away with a mutter. “Way to focus on the season, bro.”

Jonathan’s ebony features twisted into an incredulous expression. “Aww. Quit being a scrooge. Somebody’s gonna have a fantastic Christmas with that kind of money. Could be you and Nick.”

Cooper opened his mouth to protest, but Jonathan held up a hand. “I know how you feel about *the season*.” He air-quoted the words. “Christmas being your birthday and all, but if Wonderland wins the fifty thousand dollars, I bet you’ll get past it.” The enormous amount of prize money made his friend chattier than usual. “A three-peat win of the lights contest has never been done. Great way to put the fair city of Charming on the map.”

“And a brand-new publicity angle for the Chamber.” Jonathan’s

constant PR wore thin, even though his job required it, but the birthday jab was uncalled for. Cooper couldn't help it if the holiday blues always found him this time of year. The real meaning of Christmas and his birthday got lost amid the tinsel, the crazy expectations, and the endless gift-giving. For all of his twenty-eight years, anyway. He and his Savior had that much in common. *God, do You feel as invisible as I do?*

Jolted from his dark musings, Cooper recognized Emmitt Delacroix as he descended the steps of the temporary platform. The Texas billionaire had made his fortune with innovative drone technology, but it was common knowledge—at least in Texas—that his fondness for light shows was where it all started.

The audacious amount of prize money made more sense if Emmitt Delacroix was behind it. Now that he'd upped the ante, Cooper was motivated more than ever to secure a third win for Wonderland. Then, he could sell his share of the park to Nick. More and more, his brother's ideas centered on commercialism, something Cooper wanted no part of.

Jonathan dragged him into the crowd surging forward to shake hands with the legendary billionaire. The man wore a charcoal cashmere coat and a black cowboy hat, his feet clad in polished boots. Word was Emmitt Delacroix was a humble man despite the fortune he'd amassed.

A hint of salty brine drifted from the bay. Corpus Christi, Texas, the sparkling city by the sea, kicked off the Seven-County Lights Festival this year. When Emmitt's hand shot in Cooper's direction, he gripped it. The sandpaper texture of his skin convinced Cooper the rumors were true—that Emmitt occasionally worked his ranch as if he were a day laborer.

"Cooper Blackmon."

"Co-owner of Wonderland Park, sir," Jonathan inserted.

Recognition lit the older man's grizzled countenance. "Ah. Big draw for DeWitt County and Charming. Fine light show."

A surge of satisfaction swirled in Cooper's chest. Emmitt's gaze strayed beyond him as the crowd jostled around them. His ruddy face blanched. Then Cooper saw her.

Well, no. He'd noticed the woman the moment he'd entered Heritage Park. Her honey-colored hair and arresting eyes outdazzled the decorated scenery. She stood next to the steps of Galvan House, an

antiquated spectacle lit with icicle lights like a birthday cake with too many candles.

"It can't be," Emmitt muttered. He pushed through the people surrounding him.

"Can't be what, sir?" Cooper asked.

Emmitt stopped, his mind clearly on something else. "That young woman"—he pointed at the same person who'd snagged Cooper's attention—"bears an uncanny resemblance to—I need to find out who she is." The last words were soft, like he was talking to himself. His boots snapped on the brick walkway as he headed in her direction.

Cooper exchanged a puzzled look with Jonathan, then shrugged and followed Emmitt. Jonathan stayed close on his heels.

Amid all the glitz, she stood out. Even now, she was biting her lip. As if she didn't belong. As if she thought the illuminated frame houses deserved better. Well, yeah. The park designers had resorted to the more-is-better theme. A dreadful mistake, but Cooper had learned not everyone agreed—his brother Nick, chief among them.

Her dark skinny jeans and oversized red sweater emphasized her slim figure in all the right ways. His students would say she had cha-cha. Only she didn't seem to know it, which made her even more appealing. With intelligent eyes, she observed her surroundings and conversed with two teenagers. Too old to be hers, yet they interacted like family.

After a cursory look around, he watched her again. Was she the type to sip cocoa by an evening fire and plan for the future? He edged out of fantasy mode. It didn't matter anyway. Still raw from Nick's betrayal, Cooper had sworn off the subject of women.

As if she could feel his gaze, she glanced toward him. Out of habit, his hand crept up to adjust his glasses. Her lips parted in a tiny O, and she acted like she recognized him, but he would have remembered if he'd met her before. *Sorry, hon. I'm coming to remedy that right now.*

That settled, Cooper moved faster, not paying a lick of attention to the feeble I-shouldn't thoughts that wafted around his brain. He weaved through the excited throng of sightseers and would-be contestants behind Emmitt. *Be cool, Coop.* Oh, he planned to meet her all right. And find out how she figured in the competition. Something inside him, vague and uncomfortable, warned him she could be a threat to his well-laid plans.