

Mountain **Treasure**

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Chapter One



Gage's hands gripped the steering wheel of the red 1961 Ford Thunderbird so hard I feared it would bend. A deafening yowl sounded from the back seat. His jaw muscle clenched. He released one hand and scrubbed it over short, salt-and-pepper hair, still more pepper than salt.

"If you continue to grind your teeth like that"—I covered my smile—"you'll lose a molar."

His nostrils flared. "Karah, how can you think over that caterwauling? The roads are icy. I need to concentrate."

We continued shouting at each other over the noise.

"Rusty's only been in the car once before," I said. "When I made the trip from Tennessee to Trinity Sands Island, remember? He's not a car cat."

I think he muttered, "Apparently," under his breath, but I couldn't be sure.

Rusty chose that moment to squeeze his overweight, furry, orange body between our seats, landing in my lap with a solid plop. He reached across the middle armrest, swiped a big lick up Gage's arm, and let out a quiet, plaintive meow.

My husband of only two weeks blew out a breath. His whole body relaxed. A chuckle burst out of him. The cat laid his paw on

Gage's arm and stared at him with sheer adoration. Gage stroked him under his chin, a silent understanding passing between them.

"Meow." The noisiest feline I've ever met curled up on my lap and purred.

My second-time-around hubby, Gage Halyard, was affectionately known as the cat whisperer, and Rusty was a Gage whisperer.

"He needs D.I.E.T. food." I didn't want to say the word out loud for fear of hurting the cat's feelings. "When we go home, I'll stop by Maude's and see what the Market carries."

"We could buy a smaller, lighter crate too. I'm glad his folded up. I wedged it in the trunk." He flipped on the left turn signal.

"He hates being crated anywhere, but he's such an escape artist, I thought we might need it. We'll have to be extra careful at the cabin so he doesn't go on any adventures." I stroked the sleeping cat. "How did you put all of his things in there with ours? His chow, litter pan, and litter, plus his treats? My overnight case barely fit because the trunk had so much stuff."

"Uh, I, uh ..."

Before he finished his sentence, the back tires slipped, and the T-Bird, loaned to us by his uncle for our December honeymoon, shimmied sideways.

"Gage." His name came out as a screech. I grabbed his arm with one hand and the side of my seat with the other. Did the T-Bird, my all-time favorite car, have airbags? Only five miles from Bridal Falls Lodge on the edge of Bridal Falls, Georgia, the streets remained slippery. Piles of snow lined them, and the farther north we drove, the higher the snowbanks. A record-breaking snowfall hit the area the week before. How would we carry Rusty and our luggage to our cabin if we wrecked?

All of that flashed through my mind in the split second it took Gage to regain control of the car. Rusty didn't budge.

Gage reached over and peeled my fingers from his arm.

"Oh, honey, I'm sorry." I brushed my fingertips across his well-muscled forearm.

"You can make it up to me ..."

I interrupted him with a gasp loud enough for the cat to open one eye, then bury his head and place his paw over his face.

“What?” Gage yelped, his eyes opened wide.

“Look.” My mouth dropped open. I might have drooled a little, but that’s hardly the point.

In front of us lay a Christmas wonderland. Red and green lights gleamed from the buildings around the town square, their reflections twinkling in the windows of antique shops, cafes, and a local theater. Snow topped each peaked roof and weighed down tree branches. Blow-up Santas, reindeer, elves, and oversized ornaments adorned the open areas. Lampposts wrapped in glittery garland lined the steps of the courthouse in the center of the square, creating a scene straight out of a holiday movie.

I rolled down my window and drew in a deep breath. “It’s so beautiful. Smell that? It smells like the holidays.”

“Or cold air. Put that up before we get sick.” He followed the roundabout around the square.

“Pull over. I have to take pictures. What a magnificent Christmas tree.” Draped in gold strands and white lights, the gorgeous fir lit up the chilly north Georgia mountain night sky.

He stopped on the side of the road. Cell phone in hand, I shifted the cat off my lap. “Go stand under the tree, honey.” I indicated where he should pose.

“Babe, come on.” He pulled his pouty face. One he knew I loved.

My heart melted, and my pulse raced. The honeymoon cabin at the boutique hotel waited for us to celebrate our second marriage with our first-ever honeymoon. But still ... I batted my eyelashes. “Please. I want as many memories of our trip as possible. And you know how I love decorations.”

His lips curved up into a grin. “Only for you, babe.” He crawled out of the T-Bird and stretched. I admired his trim form as he took his place in front of the tree.

“Put your arms out like you’re having a fun time.” I coached him through several poses, shooting multiple pictures while ignoring my freezing toes and hands.

Before I could take some selfies, all of the streetlights blinked off. The blow-up decorations deflated and lay flattened on the snow like roadkill. The only light came from our car's headlights.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Not sure. Maybe they're on a timer? We'd better keep moving." He pushed a tiny button on his watch, and its face lit up. "We have a reservation for six-thirty. That's in half an hour."

"They wouldn't turn these off so early, though." The power came back on at my words, only to sputter and cut off again. "What in the world?"

He headed for the car. "Come on. We don't want to miss dinner."

The ornaments and lights cycled through several more phases of on and off. Finally, darkness surrounded us. I opened my car door. "Where's Rusty?"

"In the back?" Gage climbed into his side and leaned over the seat. "I don't see him here."

"Ugh, that cat." My chunky Houdini had mad escape skills. "Rusty? Come here, buddy."

We shouted and hunted for him, but with only the car's lights and our phone flashlights, our search was hampered. I leaned against the side of the vehicle. "What are we going to do?" I blinked rapidly, trying to keep the tears at bay.

Gage held me in his arms. "I'm sorry." He rubbed my back in slow circles.

"We'll miss dinner." I sniffled.

"We brought enough food for a month. It's okay." His words rumbled in my ear.

I wiped my cheeks dry. "We have to find him."

"Meow."

Something brushed against my pants leg. "Rusty! You sneaky boy." I picked him up. "Let's take this fellow to the cabin and lock him in. I think we can make it to the restaurant in time."

Gage drove the last five miles on the slick road as fast as he could. He cheered when we pulled up to the front of the chalet-

style lodge. “We can put the cat in our place before anyone sees him and still make dinner.”

Rusty stood up on my lap and stretched. “You have to hide in the back, boy.” He climbed into the cramped rear seat, and I tucked a fleece blanket around him. “Stay down and be quiet.” I kissed my fingertip and booped him on the nose.

Inside, the cozy warmth from the massive stacked-rock fireplace on the other side of the lobby wrapped around us. A slim young man wearing black-framed glasses and a dark suit with a small sprig of mistletoe pinned to his lapel greeted us.

“Good evening, folks. Mr. and Mrs. Halyard?” He waved us toward the check-in counter. “I’m Topher Smythe. I hope you had an easy drive. Let’s see”—he scanned the computer before continuing—“you drove up from Florida, correct?”

“Yes, that’s right.” Gage handed over his driver’s license and credit card. He tapped the counter. “Any way to get our keys and make it back in time before the restaurant closes?”

“Oh, yes, sir.” Topher clicked away on the computer while Gage continued to tap his fingers. One of Topher’s eyebrows twitched.

I covered my husband’s hand. “Patience. Good things come to those who wait.”

“I just don’t want, you know ...” he said in a low voice. He tipped his head toward the front door and our car, where our impatient, illegal cat waited.

We’d initially planned for Rusty to stay home at our Trinity Sands Island cottage. Our daughter, Nikki, would pet-sit and enjoy the beach over the holidays. Then her friend Cindy caught the flu. The day before her symptoms began, they’d gone out to eat, shared their food, and voilà, our cottage-slash-pet-sitter ended up down for the count.

Bridal Falls Lodge didn’t welcome cats or pets of any kind, and they made it clear in all their promotional materials and on their website, in several places—in bright, bold lettering. We’d have to smuggle Rusty into our cabin and keep him out of sight during our week-long stay.

A sign hung on the wall behind Topher—No Animals Allowed. Fine: \$200.

I elbowed Gage and motioned with my chin. His expression registered the same feelings I had. We were in big trouble if anyone saw the cat.

Topher must have misinterpreted Gage's sharp gasp. The hotel manager forced a smile. "I'm working as fast as I can, Mr. Halyard." He pushed the mouse back and forth, clicking away. He picked up two key cards. When he swiped the first card, a ding sounded, and the light turned green. The second refused to activate. Every swipe brought a deep clanging noise and a red light. He smacked the side of the machine.

"Look, man, one card is all we need." Gage pulled me closer to his side. "We probably won't leave the cabin all week." He nuzzled my neck.

"Honey." Warmth flooded my face. Hot flashes had nothing on my blushes.

"Just a moment, please. This is a brand-new system. We just stopped using a key made of black cherry wood, hand-carved into a bride's bouquet." He took a deep breath and blew it out.

"According to MayRee, it's like a permanent symbol of love. Her words, not mine. I found it to be quite clunky." Topher's expression never changed. He picked up his phone. "I need to call the company. A power outage occurred a few minutes ago. I'm sure that is the problem."

"Explains the crazy lights in town," Gage said.

"True." I pulled him aside to explore the beautiful lodge while we waited. Exposed wooden beams crossed the ceiling, and a huge antler chandelier in the lobby added to the rustic mountain lodge feel. Framed pictures and maps covered the walls. I stepped closer to one and read, "Local Legend." I tapped the frame. "Look at this."

He leaned toward it. "Local legend says, blah, blah, blah. Oh, wait, look, there's lost treasure somewhere on the property." He ran his finger under the words as he read, "It's believed to have been hidden near the waterfall." His eyebrows rose in question. "Aren't we staying near the waterfall? We can search for it."

Mountain Treasure

I skimmed a nearby framed newspaper article. “They just did a television program on the treasure.” I read more. “Simon Sampson oversaw it. He conducts all those historical investigations. Tries to disprove legends and find treasures.”

Topher approached, interrupting our conversation. “Here you go.” He handed each of us a key card. “Sorry for the wait. Before I forget, a large tree fell beside your cabin in last week’s snowstorm. We’ll get it removed as soon as we can, but for now, please avoid the area. Do you want help getting your things inside?”

“No, thanks.” Gage winked at me. “Let’s go, honey, and let Rus ... um, let’s unpack before dinner.” He patted Topher on the shoulder, and we hurried out the front door.