

“I have two days to find a fiancé.” Ignoring the anxiety that tightened her stomach, Graceann Palmer dipped her fork into her apple pie à la mode and slipped the tasty treat into her mouth.

Her friend Kate sat next to her at the counter in the quaint fifties-era Spirit Lake Diner, located just outside the small Pennsylvania town of the same name. Kate grinned. “You could advertise online: *Fiancé wanted for Christmas. Good pay. Temporary position.*”

“Like I’d get a real upstanding guy that way,” Graceann said.

Kate shot her a sympathetic smile. “Face it. You’ll have to tell your family you lied.”

Bing Crosby’s *I’ll Be Home for Christmas* flowed from the jukebox, mocking Graceann. Her lie had caught up with her. She would come home for Christmas, minus a made-up fiancé.

Graceann finished her pie and pushed the plate away. “Tell my family the truth and have my mom try to fix me up with someone like the dentist she invited to spend the holidays with us last year? Boring, conceited, and he couldn’t keep his hands to himself. Yuck.”

The door opened, bringing in a fresh round of cold, snowy late December air. Shivering, Graceann drew her sweater closer around her.

“I wouldn’t mind finding *that* under my Christmas tree,” Kate said.

Graceann followed her friend’s gaze to the tall man who’d just entered the diner. Dressed all in black—black motorcycle boots, black jeans, black leather jacket—and walking with the lithe grace of a panther, he took a seat at the other end of the counter. She studied him while he studied the menu. He had classic “bad boy” written all over his features—sharp cheekbones, dark stubble on a square jaw, and midnight black hair tied into a ponytail. Long, tapered fingers held the menu.

Suddenly, he looked up. Clear blue eyes connected with hers. Recognition spiked through her and sent her pulse jumping like a kid on Christmas morning.

“The Falcon,” she whispered.

“What?” Kate gasped. “You’re right. It *is* The Falcon.”

His full lips tilted in a slow, sexy grin, showing even white teeth. He nodded at them before turning his attention to the waitress. After he gave his order, he didn’t look in their direction again.

Kate gripped Graceann’s arm, her fingers digging into Graceann’s flesh beneath the heavy sweater. “Wow. The Falcon. I heard he left town the day after his graduation from Spirit Lake High fourteen years ago and hasn’t been heard from since.”

“Wonder what he’s doing back here,” Graceann said. In school, she’d had a crush on The Falcon even though he was two years ahead of her. She’d never told anyone, not even Kate.

“He’s a little scruffy,” Kate said.

“Scruffy, my tush. He’s hot.”

Kate grabbed her arm again as Graceann lifted her coffee mug. Coffee sloshed over the sides onto the counter. Setting the mug down, Graceann gave her friend an

exasperated look. “What?”

“I have it,” Kate said. “Your fiancé.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The Falcon. I’ll bet he’ll pretend to be your fiancé. After Zach bowed out, you said you’d be willing to pay someone. The Falcon always needed cash. Do it. Ask him.”

“You’re crazy. I haven’t seen him in fourteen years. He could be a serial killer for all we know.”

Kate shook her head. “He’s not. We would have heard.” She leaned closer. “You’ll be at your grandmother’s with the whole family. You’ll be safe. Your grandmother is old-fashioned. She’ll put you in separate rooms. It’s not like he’s a total stranger. Bring him to meet the family, pretend you’re wildly in love. Your mom will quit trying to fix you up. After the holidays you won’t ever have to see him again. Once you’re back in New York, you can tell your family you broke the engagement. That’s what you planned to do with Zach.”

Graceann put a hand up. “This is the craziest idea you’ve ever had, and you’ve had plenty. I can’t ask this guy to go along with my scheme. I’ll have to resign myself to fending off another loser my mom pushes at me. She means well, but she won’t accept that I’m not interested in marriage. After what Michael did, my whole family feels sorry for me. I don’t want or need their pity.”

“Michael was a jerk. He didn’t deserve you. Listen to me, Graceann. Ask. The Falcon. What could it hurt to at least ask?”

“His name is Jake, and I’ll think about it.”

“Don’t wait too long. He’ll be out of here and you’ll have missed your chance.”

Graceann sipped her coffee and stole glances at Jake Falco. Maybe Kate was right. Jake had always been nice to her and had even come to her aid once when the mean girls were harassing her. He might help her out now. At her grandmother’s, they’d be surrounded by family. She wouldn’t be alone with him. Her gut feelings were usually on target, so she’d learned to listen. She’d ignored her instincts with Michael and look how that had turned out. Something was telling her to go ahead and take a chance on Jake.

“I’ll do it.” She stood before she lost her nerve.