

Chapter 1

From childhood, Mercy Dane viewed Christmas Eve in Savannah, Georgia, like something out of a fairy tale. The old, elegant mansions were always lit from within and decorated with great swags of greenery hanging above the doorways and porch railings like thick green icing on snowy white cakes.

The shops decked out in similar holiday style were as charming as the sweet southern women who worked within. Each shop boasted fragrant evergreens, plush red velvet bows, and flickering lights mimicking the stars in the night sky above the city.

And even though Mercy had grown up on the hard side of town with lights far less grand, the lights in her world burned with true southern perseverance. Now that she was no longer a child, the beauty of the holiday was something other people celebrated, and on this cold Christmas Eve, she no longer believed in fairy tales. So far, the chapters of her life consisted of a series of foster families until she aged out of the system, and one magic Christmas Eve with a man she never saw again. The only lights in her world now were the lights where she worked at the Road Warrior Bar.

The yellow neon sign over the bar was partially broken. The *R* in *Road* was missing its leg, making the word look like *Toad*. But the patrons who frequented this bar didn't care about the name. They came for the company and a drink or two to dull the disappointment of a lifetime of regrets.

Carson Beal, who went by the name of Moose, owned the bar. He'd been meaning to get the *R* fixed for years, but intention was worth nothing without the action, and Moose had yet to act upon the thought.

Outside, the blinking neon light beckoned, calling the lonely and the thirsty into the bar where the beer was cold and the gumbo and rice Moose served was hot with spice and fire.

Moose often took advantage of Mercy's talent for baking after she'd once brought cupcakes for Moose and the employees to snack on. After that, she'd bring in some of whatever she'd made at home. On occasion Moose would ask her to bake him something special. It was always good to have a little extra money, so she willingly obliged.

This Christmas Eve, Moose had ordered an assortment of Christmas cookies for the bar. When Mercy came in to work carrying the box of baked goods, he was delighted. Now a large platter of cookies graced the north end of the bar.

The incongruity of "O Little Town of Bethlehem" playing in the background was only slightly less bizarre than the old tinsel Christmas tree hanging above the pool table like a molting chandelier.

Because of the holiday, only two of his four waitresses were on duty, Barb Hanson, a thirtysomething widow with purple hair, and Mercy Dane, the baker with a curvy body.

Mercy's long, black hair was a stunning contrast to the red Christmas sweater she was wearing, and her willowy body and long, shapely legs looked even longer in her black jeans and boots. Her olive skin and dark hair gave her an exotic look, but being abandoned as a baby, and growing up in foster care, she had no knowledge of her heritage.

Barb of the purple hair wore red and green, a rather startling assortment of colors for a lady her age, and both women were wearing reindeer antler headbands with little bells. Between the bells and antlers, the music and cookies, and the Christmas tree hanging above the pool table, Moose had set a holiday mood.

Mercy had been working at the bar for over five years. Although she'd turned twenty-six just last week, her life, like this job, was going nowhere.

It was nearing midnight when a quick blast of cold air suddenly moved through the bar and made Mercy shiver. She didn't have to look to know the ugly part of this job had just arrived.

"Damn, Moose, play some real music, why don't ya?" Big Boy yelled as the door slammed shut behind him.

Moose glared at the big biker who'd entered his bar. "This *is* real music, Big Boy. Sit down somewhere and keep your opinions to yourself."

The biker flipped Moose off, spat on the floor, and stomped through the room toward an empty table near the back, making sure to feel up Mercy's backside in passing.

When Big Boy suddenly shoved his hand between her legs, she nearly dropped the tray of drinks she was carrying. She knew from experience that he was waiting for a reaction, so she chose to bear the insult without calling attention to it.

As soon as he was seated, Big Boy slapped the table and yelled at the barmaids. "One of you bitches bring me a beer!"

Moose glanced nervously at Mercy, aware that she'd become the target for most of Big Boy's harassment.

Barb sailed past Mercy with a jingle in every step. "I've got his table," she said.

"Thanks," Mercy said, and delivered the drinks she was carrying. "Here you go, guys! Christmas Eve cheer and cookies from Moose!"

One trucker, a man named Pete, took a big bite out of the iced sugar cookie. "Mmm, this is good," he said.

"Mercy made them," Moose yelled.

Pete shook his head and took another bite. "You have a fine hand with baking. I'd ask you to marry me, darlin', but my old lady would object."

Mercy took the teasing with a grin. The men at this table were good men who always left nice tips. In fact, most of the patrons in the bar were men with no family or truckers who couldn't get home for Christmas. Every now and then, a random woman would wander in to have a drink, but rarely lingered, except for Lorena Haysworth, the older woman sitting at the south end of the bar.

She'd been coming here since before Mercy was born, and in her younger days she and Moose had been lovers before slowly drifting apart. She'd come back into his life a few months ago and nightly claimed the seat at the end of the bar.

Barb took the first of what would be multiple beers to Big Boy's table, along with a Christmas cookie and a bowl of stale pretzels, making sure to keep the table between them.

Big Boy lunged at her as if he was going to grab her, and when she turned around and

ran, he leaned back and laughed.

Mercy returned to the bar with a new order and waited for Moose to fill it.

“Sorry about that,” Moose said, as he glanced toward the table where Big Boy was sitting.

Her eyes narrowed angrily. “How sorry are you? Sorry enough to kick him out? Or just sorry his money is more important to you than me and Barb?”

Moose’s face turned as red as his shirt. “Damn it, Mercy. You know how it goes,” he said, and pushed the new order across the bar.

She did know. The customer was always right. Trying not to buy into the turmoil, she picked up the tray and delivered the order with a smile.

The night wore on with Big Boy getting drunker and more belligerent, while Barb and Mercy dodged his constant attempts to maul them, until finally, it was time to close.

It was a few minutes before 2:00 a.m. when Moose shut down the bar. There were only three customers left. Big Boy, who was so close to passed out he couldn’t walk, Lorena, who was waiting to go home with Moose, and a trucker who’d fallen asleep at his table.

Mercy headed for the trucker, leaving Moose to wrestle Big Boy up and out.

The trucker was a small, wiry man named Frank Bigalow who fancied himself a ringer for country music star Willie Nelson. He was dreaming of hit songs and gold records when Mercy woke him.

“Frank. Frank. You need to wake up now. We’re closing.”

Bigalow straightened abruptly, momentarily confused as to where he was, then saw Mercy and smiled.

“Oh. Right. Sure thing, honey. What do I owe you?” he mumbled.

“Twelve dollars,” she said.

Bigalow stood up to get his wallet out of his pants then pulled out a twenty. “Keep the change and Merry Christmas,” he said.

“Thanks,” she said, and began bussing his table as he walked out of the bar.

Moose had Big Boy on his way out the door, and it was none too soon for Mercy.

She handed Moose the twenty when he returned. “Take twelve out. The rest is mine,” she said, and pocketed the change Moose gave her.

Within fifteen minutes, the bar was clear and swept, the money was in the safe, and Barb and Mercy were heading for the door.

“Hey! Girls! Wait up!” Moose said, then handed them each an envelope, along with little bags with some of Mercy’s cookies. “Merry Christmas. We’re not open tomorrow so sleep in.”

“Thank you,” Barb said, as she slid the envelope inside her purse.

“Much appreciated,” Mercy added, as she put her envelope in one of the inner pockets of her black leather bomber jacket. It was old and worn, but it was warm.

Then she grabbed her helmet and the cookies and headed out the door behind Barb and just ahead of Moose and Lorena. Once outside, she paused to judge the near-empty parking lot, making sure Big Boy and his Harley were at the motel across the street.

The air was cold and the sky was clear as she stashed the cookies, then put on her helmet and mounted her own Harley. Seconds later the quiet was broken by the rolling rumble of the engine as she toed up the kickstand, put the bike in gear, and rode off into the night.

The empty streets on the way to her apartment were a little eerie, but she was so tired she couldn’t work up the emotion to be scared. The streetlights were draped with Christmas garlands and red bows, but they were all one blur as Mercy sped toward home.

A city cop on neighborhood patrol saw her, recognized the lone bike and biker, and blinked his lights as she passed him.

She waved back and kept going.

When she stopped for a red light and realized she was the only person on this stretch of street, she didn’t breathe easy until the light turned green, and she moved on.

Finally, she was home. She eased up on the accelerator as she rolled through the gates of her apartment complex and parked the motorcycle beneath a light in plain view of the security cameras. She ran up the outer stairs to the second level and down the walkway to her apartment carrying her helmet and the cookies. No matter how many times she’d done this or how many times she’d moved since it happened, the fact that she’d once come home late at night to find out she’d been robbed, she never felt safe until she was in the apartment with the door locked behind her.

She tossed the helmet onto the sofa and took the cookies into the kitchen. Curious as to how much of a bonus Moose was giving this year, she was pleased to see a hundred-dollar bill.

“Nice,” she said, and took it and her night’s worth of tips to the refrigerator, opened up the freezer, and put the money inside an empty box that had once held a biscuit mix.

She wasn’t sure how much money she had saved up, but last time she’d counted it had been over two thousand dollars. It should have been in a bank, but these days, banks cost money to use, and she didn’t have any to spare, so she froze her assets.

The place smelled of stale coffee and something her neighbor across the hall had burned for dinner. She was tired and cold, but too wired to sleep, so she went to her bedroom, stripped out of her clothes, and took a long hot shower.

She returned to the kitchen later to find something to eat. One quick glance in the refrigerator was all the reminder she needed that she still hadn’t grocery shopped. She emptied what was left of the milk into a bowl of cereal and ate it standing by the sink, remembering another Christmas in Savannah, her first all on her own.

Mercy was nineteen years old, between jobs, and as close to homeless as she'd ever been. She had come back to her apartment after a long day of job-hunting, only to walk in on a burglar in the act. She screamed. He ran with what was left of her savings, and the hours afterward were a blur of tears and a fear that she would not be able to survive the setback. The only money she had left in the world was in her pocket.

The people in the adjoining apartments were sympathetic and curious, and a couple felt sorry for her and gave her a couple of twenties. She was standing in the hall waiting for the cops to clear her room when the neighbor from across the hall opened his door and came out. He'd moved in only two days ago, and during that time they'd done no more than nod and smile as they passed in the hall, but she liked his face. His eyes were kind, and his smile felt genuine.

It was apparent he'd been sleeping and had done no more than comb his fingers through his hair before he opened the door. The top snap on his jeans was undone, and he was pulling a sweatshirt over his head as he came out. She got a quick glimpse of a hard belly and wide shoulders before she looked away.

"What's happening?" he asked, as he stopped beside her. "I fell asleep with the TV on.

When I woke up and turned it off, I heard all this."

"I was robbed," she said.

His empathy was instant. "Oh no! Oh honey, are you okay? Were you hurt?"

Her voice was shaking. "My arrival scared him off."

Without hesitation, he hugged her. The unexpected compassion undid her, and she began to cry.

And in the midst of that moment, the cops came out, and she pushed out of his arms.

"Ma'am, we're through here. He busted the lock. I would suggest you find somewhere else to sleep for the night."

"I don't have somewhere else or someone else," she said.

They shrugged and left the building.

The neighbors all went back into their apartments.

All but him.

She sighed and started for her apartment, when he stopped her with a word. "Don't."

She turned, anger already settling in her heart. "Don't what? That's everything I own in this world. They took my money. I'm not giving up what clothes I have left too."

She walked into her apartment and closed the door.

He opened it and walked in behind her. "Get your things. You can sleep in my room tonight. Tomorrow we'll figure something out."

Mercy started to shake. "There is no *we* in my life."

"Fine. Then *you* 'll figure something out. But you can sleep in my room tonight anyway."

She stared at his face, looking for a sign of danger and seeing none. "Yes. Okay."

"Want help gathering up your things?"

"No."

"Then do what you need to do, and knock on my door when you have everything."

She nodded.

He walked out.

She packed her bags while a cold anger washed through her. One more kick when she was down. It's how her world worked. By the time she got across the hall, she had shut herself down.

"I made a bed for you on the sofa," he said.

She left her bags by the door and then laid her coat on top of them as he locked up behind her. "Thank you," she said.

"You're very welcome. Oh, hey, I just realized I don't know your name."

She grimaced. "Oh, just call me Lucky."

"I have a feeling that's not your real name, but it will do. I'm L.J. but my friends call me ___"

"We're not friends. L.J. will do," she muttered.

His eyes narrowed, but he didn't argue. He'd seen animals trapped into a corner with no way out, and the look in her eyes was about the same. "Can I get you something to eat or drink?" he asked.

"No, thanks. Just the bed. I'm tired. So fucking tired."

A tear rolled down her cheek, but he was guessing she didn't know it. "Then I'll leave you alone. If you need anything later, just knock on my door."

She nodded, dropped onto the sofa, and began taking off her shoes.

"Good night, Lucky. Sweet dreams," he said.

She made a sound halfway between a snort and a sob. He left the room.

She went to bed. And three hours later woke up screaming.

He came out on the run with a gun in his hand.

By that time she was sitting on the side of the sofa bed with her head in her hands. Her long, black hair was in tangles, and the sports bra and sweatpants she'd been sleeping in were drenched with sweat, even though the room was cold. His first thought was that she was sick.

"Sorry. Bad dreams," she said, and got up. "Where's your bathroom?"

"Down the hall, first door on your left."

She passed by him, so close he felt the heat from her body. And when she came out, she had washed up and dried off the sweat.

"You didn't have to wait," she said.

"I know. I just wanted to make sure you were okay, and that you didn't need anything..."

Then he pointed at the clock. "It's Christmas."

Tears rolled down Mercy's cheeks.

"Oh hell. I didn't mean to make you cry," he said.

"Well, you did, so what are you going to do about it?" she snapped.

L.J. flinched. "We could make love."

Now she was the one who was startled. "What if I say no?"

He shrugged. "Then I go back to my room and sleep till daylight."

The rage within her was choking. She wanted to feel something besides despair. "I am numb. I don't think I will be able to feel."

He held out his hand. "I know how to make you feel again."

Mercy shivered, her mind racing. With a stranger? Just once. Just so she wouldn't have to hurt.

She walked into his arms.

The ensuing hour was nothing short of magic. Mercy turned into someone she didn't know existed. He turned her on and sent every emotion she had into overdrive. The sex was heart-stopping, and so was he. After it was over, he fell asleep with her still in his arms.

She watched his face as he slept until every facet of him was branded into her memory, but she wouldn't sleep. An hour before daylight, she slipped out of his bed, dressed in the other room, and left without telling him good-bye.

A loud crash, and then the squall of a tomcat somewhere outside broke Mercy's reverie.

She put her bowl in the sink and walked to the window overlooking the parking lot.

The neighborhood cat was prowling around the dumpster, and she saw the vague images of two people making out in a car near the back of the lot. Angry that she cared, she turned away. Exhaustion was finally catching up. It was after three in the morning when she rinsed the bowl and then paused in the doorway, making sure everything was turned off and locked up.

The silence in the apartment was suddenly broken by the distant sound of a phone ringing in a nearby apartment. The ringtone was "Jingle Bells."

"Merry Christmas," she muttered, and went to bed.

Chapter 2

It was nearing daylight when her cell phone began to ring. She rolled over and grabbed it as she turned on the lamp. "Hello?"

"This is Mildred Starks from the National Rare Blood Registry. Am I speaking to Mercy Dane?"

"Yes," Mercy said, as she threw back the covers and stood up.

"Ms. Dane, we have an emergency in your area. This is an unusual situation, and we're asking something out of the ordinary. Can you respond directly to the hospital in need?"

"Yes. Where do I need to be?" she asked, as she began grabbing clothes.

"You still reside in Savannah, Georgia, and are there at this time?"

"Yes."

"Perfect. There is a small town about an hour south of you called Blessings. There's no chopper available to fly you there and no time to donate in Savannah and then have it transported. Do you have transportation to get yourself to Blessings?"

Now her hands were shaking as she realized the reality of someone's life would lie partially in her ability to get there. "Yes. Where do I go?"

"The town is small. There's only one hospital. I'm sending GPS directions to your phone. Time is crucial. Be safe and Godspeed."

"On my way," she said, and dropped the phone on the bed as she took her biker gear out of the closet. Within five minutes she was out the door, her helmet in one hand, keys in the other.

The sun was only a hint on the eastern horizon as she left the complex. According to her directions, she was to take I-16 west, then connect to I-95 south. She wasn't far from a feeder road that would take her to I-516, which then turned into I-16, so she took that route.

It was early Christmas morning and traffic was sparse. Sunrise was minutes away when she finally hit I-16, and by that time she was flying. Every mile behind her put her closer to Blessings. It wasn't the first time she'd been called upon to donate her blood, but it was the first time she'd been asked to go to the person in need. It amped the urgency to a fever pitch, making her part in it personal.

Once she hit I-95 southbound, the northbound lane was a black ribbon of flickering headlights, while she and the Harley became a two-wheeled version of earthbound flight.

She rode with single-minded focus, keeping an eye on the traffic while making sure she didn't get caught in the draft of passing truckers. And when the new sun was just high enough in the east that she could see the landscape through which she was passing, the glimpses of houses led her to imagining what might be going on within the walls—because it was Christmas Day.

Surely joyful families were opening presents and eating breakfasts. She pictured turkeys already in the oven, pies already baked and lining sideboards and tables, and the dough for homemade hot rolls in big crockery bowls, covered and rising in a warm place on the counter. Unfortunately, that scene was nothing but her imagination because she'd never experienced anything like it. But the closer she got to Blessings, the more she realized there was no time to dwell on what she didn't have. Today, it was what she did have—an RH negative blood type—that mattered most.

She'd been on the interstate forty-five minutes when she reached the exit that would take her to her destination. According to the directions she'd received, Blessings was less than fifteen miles ahead. The roar of the engine beneath her was all she could hear as she leaned slightly forward into the ride and accelerated.

And just as she rode past the city limits sign, she came upon a roadblock and a long line of cars blocking the highway with rescue vehicles up ahead. Her heart sank. She didn't know it was the aftermath of the wreck that had caused the injuries to the person in need of her blood. But waiting around for permission to pass was not on her agenda.

She rolled out around the last car in line and kept moving forward. When she reached the accident site, she rode around two tow trucks, then took to the ditch to get around a couple of police cars and one highway patrol.

Although she couldn't hear what they were saying, she saw them shouting and trying to wave her down. She'd never outright defied a lawman in her life, but these were extenuating circumstances, and so she kept moving until she was beyond the roadblock and heading into town.

She knew she was speeding, but traffic on Main Street was almost nonexistent. Her gut knotted when she heard a siren. One glance in her side mirror, and she saw the red and blue flashing lights of a cop car coming up behind her. Stopping to explain her situation could be the difference between someone living and dying.

Led by fear, she swerved off Main Street into a residential neighborhood and accelerated. It wasn't enough. The cruiser was still behind her and closing the gap. Then she noticed an alley coming up on her right, swerved into it and sped up, trying to get back to Main. Everything in her peripheral vision was a blur, and the sound of the siren was fading as she shot back onto Main and then down to the far end of the street to the blue hospital sign with an arrow pointing east.

She followed the arrow, saw the hospital building straight ahead, and headed toward the entrance marked ER. She slid sideways as she came to a stop and then ran toward the entrance with her helmet in her hand and her hair in tangles.

It had taken an hour and five minutes to get there.
It was thirty-seven degrees, and she was sweating.

Everyone in the waiting room looked up as the tall, leggy woman came running into ER, heading straight toward registration. They saw black leather, wild hair, and a motorcycle helmet, and frowned. Women in Blessings didn't dress like that. She was obviously a stranger.

Mercy was unaware of the stares and would have cared less had she known. She stopped at the desk.

"I'm here to donate blood to—"

A nurse came out of a nearby office.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Mercy Dane."

The nurse threw up her hands in a gesture of thanksgiving. "Praise the Lord that you're here. They're waiting for you. Come with me."

They left the waiting area with haste, moving down a long hallway, then through double doors, past the surgery waiting room, unaware of the two men who came running out of the waiting room behind them as they passed. And when the nurse took her through another set of doors, things began to happen rapid-fire.

She'd given them her photo ID and donor card and was now flat on her back, half-listening to the frantic voices around her as they began hooking her up. It was obvious whoever

needed this transfusion was someone they knew—someone they certainly cared about. And she was here, so she closed her eyes, letting the chaos go on around her without buying into the panic, just glad she'd made the ride.

Lon Pittman clocked the biker at close to sixty miles an hour going down Main Street. He immediately hit the lights and siren as he took pursuit, and when he got close enough to ID the tag number, radioed it in. He had assumed the rider was a guy with long hair until the dispatcher radioed back. The owner was a woman named Mercy Dane. That wasn't going to change anything when he caught her, but it did cross his mind that this woman was surely hell on wheels. He was still in pursuit when she suddenly took a right and shot up the alley that ran along the side of Ruby Dye's home.

"Damn it," he muttered, knowing it was too narrow to take his cruiser up that alley at this rate of speed, and had to drive to the end of the block to take a quick right, only to see her shoot out of the alley, straight across the street into another one. She was still running the alleys, one block after another.

He took off toward Main running hot, and when he finally reached it, caught a quick glimpse of the bike and rider now on Main and turning east. With lights still flashing and his siren screaming, he took the turn onto Main and followed her route.

It wasn't until he took the same turn the biker had taken that he realized it led to the hospital. He caught a glimpse of her and the bike heading north around the hospital and floored it.

The last thing he expected to see when he drove up to the ER was the big Harley parked near the entrance. He killed the lights and siren, radioed in his position, and got out on the run.

Once again, the people in the waiting room were surprised. When their police chief entered a building running, they were curious what was going on.

None of them had expected to see so much action and excitement in the hospital ER, especially on Christmas Day.

Lon quickly scanned the room, and when he didn't see anyone in black leather, he headed for the registration desk.

"Sally, did a woman wearing black leather come in here?"

"Oh...you mean Mercy Dane? Yes, she's here, thank goodness. They took her straight to the surgery area."

He frowned. "Why? Was she injured in some way?"

"Oh, no! She came for Hope Talbot. She's the rare blood donor they've been waiting for."

And just like that, all the anger he'd been feeling for the reckless way in which she'd come into Blessings was gone. He'd helped pull Hope out of the wreck. He knew she was hanging onto life by a thread, but had no idea about her blood type or the frantic call that had gone out on her behalf.

"Where did they take the Dane woman?" he asked.

"Down the hall is all I know. You might check in at the surgery waiting room. Jack and Duke are there. They might know more."

"Thanks," he said, and headed down the hall.

Jack Talbot and his brother, Duke, were still celebrating the blood donor's arrival when Chief Pittman entered the waiting room.

Jack immediately stood up and shook his hand. "Chief! I was told you helped pull Hope out of the wreck. Thank you so much."

"I just happened to be one of the first on the scene," he said.

"I'm still so grateful," Jack said. "My wife is the beginning and end of my world."

"So how's she doing?" Lon asked.

Jack shook his head and walked away in tears, leaving Duke to answer. "She's hanging in, but it wasn't looking good. She'd lost so much blood that they didn't think she would pull through surgery without a transfusion. The problem became getting blood for her. She's RH negative, which is a rare blood type. There wasn't any in the blood banks that could have gotten to us time, and just when we thought it wasn't going to happen, they found a donor who lived in Savannah. She just got here a few minutes ago. There's no way to know how this is going to come out, but whoever she is, her presence was an answer to our prayers."

The image of Mercy Dane's frantic ride now made a crazy kind of sense. Now Lon was past curious. He wanted to see the woman who'd made a wild ride on Christmas Day to save a stranger's life.

"That's good to know," he said. "If you don't mind, I believe I'll wait here with you, just to see how Hope fares after the transfusion."

Mercy watched one nurse rush out with the donated blood while another took the needle out of her arm. The panic of getting here was over. Whatever happened now was out of her hands, save for the silent prayer she'd said for the woman in need. She was about to get up when a nurse stopped her.

"Wait, honey. Not so fast," she cautioned.

Mercy didn't argue. The room had already begun to spin when she raised her head—a combination of too little sleep, an adrenaline crash, and a unit short of blood.

The nurse helped Mercy up and walked her out, talking as they went.

"I'm taking you to the waiting room to get juice and a sweet roll from one of the vending machines before I can let you leave. I don't know if anyone told you, but the woman needing the donation is a nurse in this hospital. We are all so grateful you came when you got the call. None of this is standard donation procedure, so thank you for going above and beyond for her."

"I am happy I was close enough to help," Mercy said.

"You gave her a chance, which is more than she had before you showed up," the nurse said.

Mercy was still shaky and wanting to sit down as they walked into the waiting room. But two men who were already there stood up and came toward her so fast she took a quick step back.

However, it was the cop standing behind them who caught her eye. She thought for a moment she was hallucinating, then saw the same look of shock on his face as the one she must be wearing. Her gut knotted.

"You! You disappeared seven years ago. I never thought I'd see you again," he said.

She shrugged. "Seven years is a long time. Neither did I." She wondered if he'd stayed to give her a ticket for speeding, and then decided she didn't care.

The brothers began crowding around her, all trying to talk at once.

"Miss Dane, this is Jack Talbot and his brother, Duke. Hope is Jack's wife, and it appears they've figured out who you are. Jack, this is Mercy Dane. She needs juice and a sweet roll from the vending machine."

"I'll get it," he offered, and ran toward the machines at the far end of the room, and then yelled back at his brother to see if he had a debit card on him while the nurse seated Mercy and introduced her to the chief.

"Mercy, this is Chief Pittman. He helped pull Hope from the wreck." Then she added, "Ideally, you need to sit at least thirty minutes after you've finished eating. An hour would be even better."

Mercy nodded. "Yes, I will, and thank you."

"Oh no, we're the ones thanking you. God bless you, Mercy Dane. Have a safe trip home," she said.

Lon was in shock. Seven years ago he'd spent a week looking for this woman. She was in his arms when he fell asleep, and when he woke she was gone. He'd never forgotten her or that night, and now, fate had brought her back into his world.

"So, Lucky, long time, no see," he said softly.

She nodded.

"You are one hell of a rider," he said.

Her eyes narrowed. "So, Chief, is that your way of saying I was speeding?"

She watched his eyes crinkling up at the corners as he smiled.

"Pretty much, but given the circumstances, I'm gonna let that slide. I stayed because I wanted to meet the donor who willingly interrupted her Christmas Day to save a stranger's life. I didn't know I was going to meet an old friend."

"We're not friends," Mercy said, and then blinked as she realized that was what she said before, and added, "I don't have family. Just a job. I was happy to do it."

He heard a challenge in her claim... as if daring him to remark about her solitary life. But he wasn't going to give her a moment of sympathy. "Yeah, same here. Cops and family aren't necessarily synonymous. Most days I feel like my life is the job. At any rate, you are not what you seem, and I am impressed."

All of a sudden, a quick wave of weakness washed over her. She bent over and put her head between her knees, trying not to pass out.

Lon caught her just as she was about to slide out of the chair as Jack returned with a bottle of orange juice, a packet of mini-doughnuts, and an iced honey bun. It was pure sugar overload, but Mercy knew it was what her body needed to offset the shock of blood loss.

"Here you go, Miss Dane. If you want more to drink, just let me know," Jack said, and then pulled out a chair and sat down near her.

Duke was drawn to the woman by her beauty, and unhappy that it appeared the chief and the woman were already acquainted with each other. He followed his younger brother's lead and sat nearby.

Mercy took a drink of the juice and then tore back the cellophane from the honey bun and took a bite as the chief's radio squawked. Someone was trying to locate him.

"As you heard, my presence is requested elsewhere," Lon said, as he stood. "It was a pleasure to meet you again. Take care, Miss Dane, and have a safe ride home."

"Thank you," Mercy said.

She didn't want to watch, but she couldn't help it. The years had turned him into quite a man. One thing was the same though. His butt still looked good from behind.

Chapter 3

Jack scooted his chair closer to her. His voice was trembling as he captured her attention. "Miss Dane, there aren't words enough to thank you for what you've done. Hope means everything to me, and I thought I was going to lose her. You have given her a fighting chance."

"I was happy to help," she said.

Duke picked up the conversation. "Well, we certainly appreciate it. Hope has no family, so there was no option of having a relative donate, which would have been the normal avenue. She was adopted out of foster care."

"Then she was lucky to get out. I grew up in foster care and aged out," Mercy said, and took another bite of the honey bun.

"Where do you live?" Jack asked.

"In Savannah."

Duke pointed at the helmet that she'd put between her feet. "Did you come here on a

motorcycle?”

She nodded. “I don’t own a car.”

He frowned. “Wasn’t your husband upset about you coming all this way alone?”

Mercy resisted the urge to glare. He asked too damn many questions. “I’m not married, but that wouldn’t have mattered. I make my own decisions. No man tells me what to do.”

Duke heard the cold tone in her voice and unconsciously sat up and leaned back.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to imply—”

Mercy sighed. She’d come on too strong to a family who was freaked out, and rightly so. “No. I’m sorry. I guess the defensive wall I keep between me and the world is a little steep.”

She finished off the honey bun and got up to wash the sugar from her fingers. When she came back from the bathroom, she glanced at the clock. Since it was still too early to leave, she took off the leather jacket and sat back down.

The moment she removed it, Duke saw the odd-shaped birthmark on her neck and did a double take. “Unusual birthmark you have there,” he said, pointing at the side of her neck.

“I guess,” Mercy said. “I forget it’s there.”

She drank the last of her juice and then leaned back in the chair, resisting the urge to close her eyes. It wouldn’t take much for her to go to sleep.

“Would you like a cup of coffee?” Jack asked. “I mean, you look a bit sleepy. I wouldn’t want you to have an accident going home.”

“Yes, actually I would. Coffee sounds like a good idea, but I have money to—”

“Please, let me,” Jack said.

Mercy didn’t argue. She understood his need to give back and closed her eyes rather than continue a conversation. This was a random meeting in their lives, and the sooner she was out of here, the better.

But Duke kept staring. After Jack handed Mercy the coffee and sat back down, Duke and Jack began talking in low tones.

Mercy wasn’t paying any attention until she heard a comment that startled her. “She sure looks like Hope, doesn’t she?” Duke asked.

Jack frowned. “Maybe.”

But Duke was insistent. “Same olive complexion. Same black hair and brown eyes.”

Then Duke realized Mercy was staring at them. “Sorry for talking about you like that,” Duke said. “It was rude.”

Mercy shrugged it off as Duke continued talking. She thought he talked too much, but now that he had her attention, he launched another conversation. “Hope had a little sister when she was in foster care. Her adoptive parents left her behind, and it broke Hope’s heart.”

“That’s too bad, but it happens,” Mercy said.

“She said her little sister had a birthmark on her neck that looked like a valentine heart lying on its side.”

Mercy grabbed her neck before she thought. She could feel herself flushing like she used to when a foster parent would decide she was too wild, too unwilling to conform, and her social worker would come and take her away. *Why don’t you try to get along*, he would ask.

She never knew what to say. She had no words to describe that she was afraid of everything. That she’d been hurt so many times that her defense mechanism had evolved to being the first to throw a punch or disagree.

“I do remember Hope talking about that,” Jack said, and looked at Mercy anew.

“She said her little sister was only three when that happened,” Duke said.

Mercy stood abruptly. “What you’re implying is impossible. Why are you doing this? You know my name. It was never changed, so obviously, that’s not me.”

“Hope said she always called her Baby Girl. I don’t think I ever heard her mention anything but that.”

Now the room was beginning to spin again, but this time from fear, not weakness.

All of a sudden she was remembering a gritty floor against her bare legs and old shoes on her feet so scuffed they no longer held color. Someone was hugging her and patting her on the back. *Don’t cry, Baby Girl. I’ll tie your shoes.*

She blinked, and the memory was gone, but she felt off-center and anxious. When she began gathering her things, Duke stood.

“Aren’t you curious?” he asked. “What are the odds that a donor with the same rare blood type as Hope’s, who also looks like her, has the same general coloring, and the same identifying birthmark as the missing sister, isn’t connected?”

Mercy was beginning to shake. She’d been alone all her life, and this felt scary. She was afraid to buy into something only to be disappointed again when it wasn’t true. “It’s not possible,” she said.

“Then let’s determine it right here and now,” Duke said, and pulled out his phone and sent a quick text to a friend who worked in the hospital.

Within moments he got a text back. “My friend, Mark, works in the lab. He’s coming up to get a swab for a DNA test. Is that okay?”

Mercy wanted to run, but the thought of actually having family was beyond anything she’d ever dreamed. “I guess,” she said, and sat back down.

A few moments later, Doctor Barrett, the surgeon who had operated on Hope, came into the waiting room.

Jack immediately stood. “How is she, Doctor Barrett?”

“I’m cautiously optimistic,” he said. “I just wanted to let you know her vital signs are improving. She’s not out of the woods by any means, but getting that transfusion was vital.”

“Oh, thank God,” Jack said, and grabbed both of Mercy’s hands. “And thank you again.”

“You’re the donor?” the doctor asked.

“Yes.”

“Then I’m thanking you too. Hope is a good woman and a fine nurse. What you gave her was a chance to live.”

Mercy was blinking back tears as the doctor left and fighting an urge to run. But if she left now without following through on this sister thing, she would live the rest of her life wondering what would have happened had she stayed.

A few minutes later, a short redheaded man in a lab coat came hurrying into the waiting room. “Is this the lady in question?” he asked.

Duke nodded. “Mark, this is Mercy Dane. Mercy, this is my friend, Mark Lyons.”

Mark smiled. “Hello, Miss Dane. This will only take a few seconds. I just need to get a swab from inside your mouth, okay?”

She nodded.

When he pulled the long swab out of the wrapper, she opened her mouth.

Mark got the sample and secured it. “All finished. When we get the test results, I’ll let Duke know.”

“How long will it take?” Duke asked.

“Hard to say. They’ll take all of the regular requests for people who are waiting for treatment first.”

“Okay then,” Mercy said, and headed for the door.

“Wait!” Duke said. “How can I contact you?”

She wasn’t about to give him her phone number or address. “You can reach me at the Road Warrior Bar in Savannah,” she said, and walked out of the waiting room, then out of the hospital.

The sun was bright as she headed toward her bike. The urgency of her arrival was no longer an issue as she slipped the helmet over her head, mounted the Harley, and started it up. The pipes rumbled as she rode out of the parking lot and back toward Main Street.

Lon was standing outside the police station talking on his cell phone when he heard the motorcycle. He ended the call as she approached, and on impulse, waved her over.

Mercy sighed. This meeting had to happen to get past it, so she turned toward the curb and pulled into a parking space. She killed the engine, took off her helmet, and cradled it in her lap as he walked toward her. “Am I in trouble again?” she asked.

“No ma’am, you are not,” he said, and handed her a card. “This is my business card, but the number on the lower left is the number to my personal cell phone. I would sincerely appreciate it if you gave me a call when you get home, just to let me know you arrived safely. I am a bit concerned about the long ride you’re going to have to make so soon after donating blood. I want to know you made it home in one piece. Unlike the last time we parted, when I worried myself sick for some time, wondering what happened to you. Wondering if that thief had come back and taken you away.”

Mercy’s heart skipped a beat as he laid the card in her palm. She’d been so beaten down

and wounded by life that she never thought of his feelings when she’d left. “Are you serious?” she asked.

Lon frowned. “Yes, I’m serious. Why would you doubt that?”

She shrugged. “Nobody ever cared.”

He heard a slight tremble in her voice. “Well, I’m not nobody, and I cared before, and I care now.”

She slipped the card into one of the pockets in her jacket and then zipped it up for safekeeping. She didn’t want to think about him. “I never had to check in with anyone before.”

Lon felt like he’d been sideswiped, but didn’t let on. He’d thought it that night together so long ago, and he was thinking it again this Christmas Day. He’d never met anyone like her—a matter-of-fact woman who said what she thought and didn’t use the situation in her life to gain attention or pity.

“You’re not checking in with me, Mercy Dane. If this insults you, then don’t call. But like before, be aware that I will worry, and I will wonder if you ever made it home. I will be grateful if you call. Ride safe. Both times we have crossed paths in sad circumstances. I never got a chance to say it before, but I am truly glad to have met you.”

All of a sudden Mercy was looking at him through a veil of tears. She took a quick breath and jammed the helmet back on her head.

“Thanks for not giving me a ticket,” she said, and started the engine and rode off.

Lon stayed where he was and watched until she disappeared from view—still remembering what it felt like to come apart in her arms.

Mercy was shaken by the encounter and didn’t feel easy until she’d put several miles between herself and Blessings. The town was small by Savannah standards, but there was something about it. Some people might have called it quaint. But that wasn’t the adjective Mercy would have used. It took her a few moments to put a name to the vibe she’d gotten just from being there, but when the word came to her, it felt right.

There was an innocence to it. Maybe it had to do with small-town living. She’d never thought about living in a place where you knew most everyone who lived there and had known them since birth. She kept thinking about the depth of concern everyone had for the injured woman...for Hope Talbot. Everyone seemed so friendly, so kind and caring, both for her health and safety, and for Hope.

As for that cop, she didn’t quite know how to feel about him. He didn’t hit on her. He didn’t ask for her number like most of her customers did in the bar. He just wanted to know that she made it home. How had he worded it? Oh yes. In one piece. If she made it home in one piece.

Almost as suddenly as that thought slid through her mind, a car on her left in the passing lane suddenly swerved toward her. She swerved toward the ditch, certain he was going to hit her. At the last moment, he overcorrected and swerved hard to the left and drove into the center median.

She caught a glimpse of the car as it began to roll and breathed a shaky sigh of relief that she wasn’t the one rolling. She glanced in her side mirror and saw a number of cars were already stopping, so she kept on going, glad she was still upright and healthy.

About forty-five minutes later, she hit the city limits of Savannah and took an exit ramp that would take her home.

Fifteen minutes more, and she had arrived at her apartment complex and locked up her bike. She paused to stretch before going upstairs and gazed around the complex, noting the number of Christmas wreaths and big red bows decorating doors and balconies.

It was almost noon on a clear, cold Christmas Day.

She thought about the cop’s card in her pocket, and on impulse pulled it out and gave him a call. When he answered, she realized she’d been holding her breath for the sound of his voice. “Hello?”

“It’s me, Mercy. I’m home.”

“Good news! Are you feeling okay?”

She shivered as the deep rasp in his voice rolled through her. “Yes, Chief, I’m fine, and thank you for asking.”

“Thank you for calling to ease my mind. Next time we meet, call me Lon. Merry Christmas to you, Mercy Dane.”

“Merry Christmas to you too,” she said, and disconnected.
She started up the steps to her apartment with a bounce in her walk. It was a good day.

Lon was still smiling as he dropped the phone back in his pocket. For a day that had started out in a near tragedy, it was turning into a really good day.