

# MIRACLES

BY

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### Selected Passages

#### *From Chapter One...*

“I’ll take you home,” Sam said. “As soon as the rain lets up.”

Kate hesitated only a second or two before giving him a single nod. When he turned away to stare into the fire, her gaze slid over him, and she suddenly registered that his hands were rubbing his crossed arms—and that his shirt was still wet.

“You’re cold,” she said.

His right hand, wrapped over his left biceps, stopped moving. “I’m okay.”

“Where are your things, Sam? If we’re going to be here awhile, you should put on a dry shirt.”

He shook his head. “My Jeep’s around back, but I’m not going to unload it in this deluge.”

“I guess everything would be wet by the time you got it inside,” she agreed. “But your shirt would dry faster if you hung it with the other things.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine. You’re cold.”

When he didn’t answer, Kate sighed. “Look, I feel bad enough, causing you all this trouble—and don’t tell me I haven’t. I was a pain in the neck when you found me, and you’ve got a broken window to fix because of me. I’d feel better if I didn’t think you were freezing.”

His head turned, and she met his gaze with an encouraging look. “If you’re worried I’ll faint at the sight of a man’s naked

chest, forget it. I grew up with three brothers. And in my line of work, believe me, hairy chests are the least of what I see.”

He didn't respond to her attempt at levity but continued to give her that wary, closed expression. Then, suddenly, he yanked open the buttons of his shirt, tore the wet garment off, and flung it over the chair with his jacket. Without pausing to glance at her, he grabbed the poker and squatted in front of the fire to give the blazing logs a few good jabs. He made a production of it, shifting logs until streams of sparks were flying up the chimney.

But Kate was scarcely aware of his actions. Her eyes were wide with shock, riveted to his lean torso.

Shiny, flat scars, dozens of them. They mottled his right side, chest, ribs, back, and upper arm. All were the result of burns—all but one, and that one commanded her attention. A single arc that began over his heart, swept under his right pectoral and around his rib cage, and ended close to his spine: it was a surgical scar, one she was certain must have resulted from a monumental effort to repair internal injuries.

Her first thought was to wonder what had happened to him. Her second was to regret persuading him to take off his shirt when he clearly hadn't wanted her to see the marred flesh. Her third was to note that it would take a lot more than scars to diminish all that unashamed virility. Scarred or not, Sam Reese was quite a man.

“Is there a grocery store in Bournier's Crossing?”

Kate hardly heard Sam's question. She was studying the pattern of crisp hair, muscle, and scars on his chest. He was stooped down across from her, stuffing her medical bag and Thermos into her pack, and when she didn't answer, his hands fell still.

“Have you changed your mind about fainting?”

Her gaze flew to his and locked for the space of a heartbeat—long enough for her cheeks to stain red.

“No.” She dropped her gaze. “No, of course not.”

A minute of strained silence passed before he resumed the packing. “I’m hoping I don’t have to drive a lot further tonight to find a store that’s open. Is there one in town?”

“Uh-huh.”

“What time does it close?”

“Whenever Mrs. D. calls Mr. D. home to dinner.”

Vaguely, Kate realized how worthless her answer was, and that realization led to an awareness that she was staring again. Her gaze flickered upward, and when she found him watching her, her blush deepened at being caught a second time. This time, though, she held his defiant gaze. *I dare you to say what you’re thinking*, his eyes seemed to say. And manners dictated that she keep her mouth shut.

But she was no actress. Even when she was at her best—which she certainly wasn’t—it would have taken more talent than she possessed to pretend she didn’t see the scars. Finally, she had to ask, “Sam, what happened?”

Something dark flickered in his eyes, but he applied his attention to buckling the straps of the backpack as he spoke. “I ran into some trouble with a plane.”

“You mean, you crashed?”

“That’s the general idea.”

His tone was so lacking in emotion, she could almost hear him adding, *But it was no big deal.*

“How long ago was it?”

“A little over a year.”

Not long enough for the burns to lose their angry look, nor for him to sound even half so dispassionate about it. At least she understood why he’d been upset about her ankle; given what he’d suffered, it was easy to see why pain, even someone else’s, would bring back agonizing memories for him. As she tried to imagine what those memories must be like, her gaze coasted over him again, her expression an unconscious

reflection of her thoughts.

“Cut it out.”

The sharp order brought her gaze up to meet his angry scowl.

“I don’t need you or anybody else feeling sorry for me,” Sam growled.

Actually, the thought of feeling sorry for him was laughable. He stirred a welter of emotions inside her, but pity wasn’t among them. Still, she knew what he must have seen on her face.

“I wasn’t feeling sorry for you,” Kate said. “I was feeling, well, bad, I guess. Not about the scars, though. I promise you, Sam, I’ve seen worse.”

His look was suspicious, but he seemed to believe her.

“It’s my nurse’s instincts,” she went on. “I can’t help thinking about how badly you must have been hurt.” Her gaze traveled over him, and she shivered. “A plane crash! It’s amazing you survived.”

An instant of silence flashed past before Sam muttered, “Yeah, well, maybe I didn’t.” And with that cryptic comment, he grabbed her clothes off the chair and tossed them into her lap.

Kate stared at the clothes, then at him. Then she frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean—maybe you didn’t?”

He buttoned his still-wet shirt as he answered. “Nothing. Forget it.”

“You’re here, and you’re alive, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. Look, the rain’s stopped.” He picked up his jacket, nodding toward the door. “I’ll bring the Jeep around front while you get dressed. Or, uh”—his eyes skimmed over her—“do you need some help?”

His tone wasn’t suggestive; the offer was sincere, for all its reluctance. But it wasn’t dark anymore, and she was no longer the stranger in need he’d undressed an hour ago.

She turned to look at the fire. “No, thanks. I can manage.”

He walked to the door, stopping when he'd opened it to glance over his shoulder. "Listen, Katie," he said, "I'm a nasty bastard to be around lately. Don't take it personally. And don't try to make sense of it, either. Not much about life makes sense, anyway. Take my word for it."

And then he was gone.

*From Chapter Three...*

"Well, I've had my say on the subject," Doc said. "For now, anyway."

Kate breathed in relief when he levered himself out of the kitchen chair and picked up his black bag.

"I've got to go fight with that smart-mouthed clerk at the supply house," he said. "Tell him to get our order out here before we have to start tearing up bed sheets for bandages."

He headed for the front door, and she followed. Passing under the archway between dining and living rooms, he said, "I forgot to ask—how was the Nielsen girl yesterday? You got there, didn't you?"

"Yes..."

Doc's thick gray eyebrows drew together. "Something wrong?"

"I'm afraid Lynn's doing too much," Kate admitted. "She's nineteen years old, she's never been sick a day in her life, and she's having a hard time accepting the idea that pregnant ladies in their third trimester need to slow down a little."

"Hmph," Doc commented as he reached for the front doorknob. "She ought to get out of that ramshackle place, with no phone and no decent road and no way to— Well, what's this?" He opened the door wide. "You've got a visitor."

"Sam!" Kate's cheeks dimpled, and her lips curved into a welcoming smile. "Good morning."

Sam hesitated on seeing her, gave her a quick once-over,

then scowled as he mounted the last step to amble across the wide front porch.

“Katie, what are you doing on your feet? I expected to find you in bed, groaning.”

“Me, too.” She held open the screen door and motioned him inside. When he brushed past her and she caught that leather-and-soap male scent, the butterflies set to fluttering in her stomach. They added a hint of nervousness to her voice as she said, “Sam Reese, this is Dr. Bill Cabot. Doc, Sam’s the man I mentioned brought me home last night.”

“The man who *carried* you home,” Sam corrected, his gaze still traveling over her as he shook the older man’s hand. “Good morning, sir. Katie, what the devil are you doing standing on that ankle? Trying to ruin it for life?”

“It’s all—”

“Dr. Cabot, last night this woman had an ankle you’d have thought was—”

“Sam, it’s all right!” Kate waited until he turned from Doc to scowl down at her, then she left his side to walk halfway across the room. With a whirl on her toes that made her waist-length braid wrap around her shoulders, she turned to meet his stunned look with a grin. “See? My ankle’s fine. No swelling, no pain.”

His eyes narrowed. “Come on.”

“Really.” She grinned. “But I’m glad you’re here to tell Doc I’m not crazy. He thinks I made the whole thing up.”

Suspicion was etched into every harsh angle of Sam’s expression. “I don’t get it. That ankle was a mess. I saw it myself. At least... Well, hell, who am I to say?”

With a final look at Kate’s bare feet as she walked toward him, he shook his head. “Sir, Katie’s not making anything up. I came to take her for an X-ray. I thought she should go last night, but she was set on waiting.”

“I’m not doubting you, Sam,” Doc told him. “And Kate

would be the last person I'd expect to hear crying wolf. But joints are funny things. I've been prepared to put a cast on more than one ankle I was sure was broken, only to find it wasn't. Just count your blessings that you don't have to make the trip to Ironwood this morning."

"Thank goodness!" Kate exclaimed, then immediately felt a pang of disappointment when she realized that meant she wouldn't be spending the morning with Sam.

In the clear light of day, without pain blurring her vision, it was impossible to ignore the charged, intensely male energy he transmitted or to deny how much he stirred her senses. His jacket was unzipped to reveal a dark T-shirt molded to his chest, and as her gaze skimmed over him, the memory of that chest, with its strangely alluring mixture of tanned flesh, muscle, golden-brown hair, and scars, brought a flush to her cheeks.

At the same time, another memory intruded—Doc saying that Scott Gibson's kisses hadn't made her dizzy. No, Scott hadn't made her dizzy. But Sam Reese could. If she let him.

She was being a complete fool, even considering such a thing, because she wasn't about to get involved with an out-of-work stranger who wouldn't even say how long he'd be in the area. Still, she couldn't keep the disappointment from coloring her tone as she said, "I'm sorry, Sam. But it looks as if you came in this morning for nothing."

"Oh, maybe not," he drawled, and the long, slow inspection his gaze made of her said he had a good idea what was going through her mind. "As long as I'm here, if you've got the time, you can show me the way to your sister and brother-in-law's. I still have to pick up my key."

Flustered by his frankly approving look and the unexpected surge of electricity passing between them, Kate lowered her gaze. "Well, sure. That'll be fine. I have to go out to Cressie's, anyway."

Doc cleared his throat and took a step toward the door. "If I

don't get over to the office, Bert Andrews will have the place reeking of cigar smoke just to spite me. I'll let you know how I make out with the supply house, Kate." Stopping on the top porch step, he turned to look at Sam, standing beside her in the doorway.

"You going to be doing much fishing while you're here?" he asked.

"Some, maybe," Sam replied.

"Hmm." Doc studied him. "You got business in the area?"

"No, sir."

"No? Hmm. Well, then—"

"Sam's on vacation," Kate said, hugging the doorjamb with both hands and leaning forward to give Doc a meaningful look. "And he doesn't need busybodies like you and me spoiling it with a bunch of questions. Why don't you go nag Bert to give up his cigars, and tell that supply clerk to deliver our order, like he promised three weeks ago, and let me get to work? I've got a million things to do."

Doc frowned, then delivered his parting shot as he started down the steps. "Sam, you watch out for this girl," he said. "She's a bossy one."

"Oh, you—" Kate began, but her affectionate scolding was cut off by Sam's earthy chuckle.

"Don't worry," he called after Doc. "Katie already knows how poor I am at taking orders." With a slight pause, his voice dropped low to add, "Then again, I can think of some things I wouldn't mind her telling me to do. No, I wouldn't mind at all."

His meaning was unmistakable, and her cheeks burned as she stared, unseeing, at Doc's departing back. No man had *ever* made her such an obvious proposition, not to mention on such short acquaintance. It was unnerving—and a little frightening. It was also wildly exciting. But for a woman who was used to thinking she inspired men's appetites, not their passion, it was mostly confusing.



Feeling his gaze upon her, she tried not to look at him as she turned, mumbling something about getting her shoes so they could leave. But her gaze skittered upward briefly, and then she was trapped, unable to look away from, or to deny, the hot message his clear gray eyes conveyed.

The rules had changed. Yesterday was a bad dream. Today she was at no disadvantage that would protect her from having to deal with what they both knew lay between them; he wanted her, and if she didn't want him, she was going to have to tell him so directly. But with her knees feeling so rubbery and a flush of sensual awareness curling through her, she couldn't utter a word.

"Get your shoes, Katie, and let's go," Sam said softly. "Ed Davenport tells me they're expecting another storm tonight, and I've got a window to fix."

### *From Chapter Fourteen...*

Kate knew what she'd find before she stopped in the cabin's bedroom doorway. Still, seeing Sam haul the large duffle bag from beneath the bed, shake it out, and unzip it made every muscle in her body knot with panic.

Her heart was racing in her chest as she said, "And this—packing and leaving—is learning from your mistakes?"

"No," he muttered, "it's correcting one before it's too late."

"What mistake was that?"

The only answer she got was a harsh laugh as he dropped the bag onto the bed.

"I'd really like to know, Sam. What have you done wrong that leaving is going to fix?"

"How about everything?" He walked to the dresser and yanked open the top drawer. "I went looking for a quiet, out-of-the-way place where nobody knew me, and when I found it, instead of leaving it that way, I wrecked it."

“I see.”

Snatching a stack of T-shirts out of the drawer, he headed toward the bed, where he dumped it, saying, “Everything I’ve done since I got here was a mistake. It was a mistake to talk to people or try to get to know them. It was a mistake to get involved with anything or anybody. It was a mistake to pretend I might be able to have something like a normal life.”

“How do you know you can’t have a normal life? You haven’t tried.”

Apparently, he wasn’t going to try to answer her, either. Her short fingernails dug holes in the palms of her hands as she watched him pass back and forth from dresser to bed, emptying the drawer. But when he removed the pile of white briefs, the last items in the drawer, she spoke on a quavering note.

“I suppose last night was a mistake, too.”

His hesitation as he closed the empty drawer was slight, but she knew the question had hit home. The next drawer scraped open, and he gathered several pairs of folded jeans, turning to carry them to the bed. But after he’d dropped them onto the growing pile, he simply stood there, his shoulders rising and falling in a single shuddering breath.

“No,” he murmured.

But that was all he said. And the stoic lines of his face were in place when he walked into the bathroom, returning a few seconds later carrying comb, brush, razor, shaving cream, and shampoo.

She bit her lower lip. “It wasn’t a mistake,” she said, “but you can just walk away like it didn’t happen.”

“Damn it, Katie!” The things he held bounced on the mattress as his hands sliced downward through the air. “Do you think I want to?”

Her gaze flickered to the bed, then back to him. “I don’t know, Sam. I only know you’re doing it.”

With a violent oath, he flung himself away from the bed,

halting with his back to her to run both hands through his hair. “*Why?* Why do you need to hear me say what we both know? So you can suffer a little more?”

“No, so I can suffer a little *less.*” She hesitated, then added, “Or don’t I matter to you at all?”

“That’s crazy.”

“Is it? I didn’t ask you for promises or commitments, but it seems as if you might take a minute out of packing to”—her throat tightened—“to say you’re sorry you’re leaving.”

“Would that make you feel better? If I said I was sorry? All right. I’m sorry. I’m sorry as hell.”

With that, he pulled open the closet door and snatched a handful of shirts and slacks off the rack. And he went on emptying the closet, the nightstand drawer, and the bathroom medicine chest, dumping everything in a heap on the bed, as he continued. “What do you want, Katie? You want me to stick around awhile longer, see how far we can stretch this out? Well, forget it. I’m not going to stay another day, another week, just so we can agonize a little longer over what we *aren’t* going to have. You want to cry? Fine. That’s the way you handle things. But it’s not how I handle them.”

“Oh, that’s right,” she returned, the bitter tears running down her face. “You’re a *man*, aren’t you? And men don’t cry. They don’t get hurt or scared. They don’t *feel*. So, tell me something, Sam Reese, what does that make *you?*”