

# Chapter One

Billings, Montana, 1898

**A**s winter begged for one last breath, spring, with its gentle breeze, warm sun, and melting snow, let it be known: it's time to let go. Nineteen-year-old Dany Madrid welcomed the changing season with cautious enthusiasm. Sitting tall in the saddle on her palomino, Concho, she looked long and hard at the limitless boundaries of the vast, beautiful land she had come to love.

A new and uncertain future lingered in her thoughts. Most days she wanted to freeze time in motionless limbo and not think about the future at all. Her curious side, however, kept her wondering what might be around that next bend on this unfamiliar road she had willingly chosen to travel. Dany pulled her coat close to keep out the chill and reminded herself of where she came from, and where she currently was.

*Montana's a long way from Tennessee, but this is home now. Things certainly didn't work out the way I thought they would.*

Captivated by the Montana skyline, she breathed a deep breath of cool air then slowly exhaled as she gazed at the surrounding hills and prairie.

Dany dismounted and led Concho to a nearby stream. Ripples

glistened like diamonds as a barely noticeable waterfall trickled into it. Off in the distance, snow-capped peaks reached toward the sky.

“There you go, boy.”

Content that Concho was happy, she strolled over to a fallen tree, once abundant with lush green leaves but now lifeless with barren limbs that humbly extended from its massive trunk. Dany closed her eyes and relaxed against a protruding limb. A tear trickled down her cheek as she brought to life in her mind an image of the only man she had ever loved, but who would never share this dream with her. The same haunting questions she’d asked so many times before, once again raced through her head: *Why did David have to die? What was the reason?*

For as many times as she’s asked herself those questions, answers never came to light.

The noisy chattering of songbirds, high above in a tall cottonwood tree, brought a faint smile to her face as she opened her eyes. With a pensive glance at passing clouds, she struggled to get past the lump in her throat. “Montana was our dream together, David, not my dream alone.”

Restless from sitting, she wandered along the stream and considered her life in the small town of Carriage Hill, Tennessee.

David and Dany were childhood friends who were all but inseparable. That friendship blossomed into a young and gentle love. David was kind and sensitive, and he loved Dany more than anything in the world.

She remembered a sunny day in April, warmer than usual. She and David had ridden their horses into town to celebrate her nineteenth birthday. David took her hand, and as they crossed the street, a team of horses pulling a wagon loaded with lumber raced towards them. The strength of David’s hands was embedded in Dany’s mind as he pushed her out of the way, then she watched in horror as the runaway team left him lying on that dusty street.

Tears formed in her eyes and a shiver ran down her spine as she relived that fateful day.

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~ The Color of Tears ~

Carriage Hill, Tennessee, 1897

Terrified, Dany dropped to her knees next to David and cradled him in her arms. “It’ll be all right,” she whispered as she gently wiped the dirt from his face. “I won’t let anything happen to you. I promise. I love you.”

David struggled, reached in his pocket, and placed a small diamond ring in her hand.

Tears streamed down Dany’s face as she clenched the ring in terror and frantically pulled David closer.

“Promise me. Go to Montana. I’ll always be with...”

Dany felt David’s body go limp in her arms as his hand fell motionless by his side. Her body trembled and her voice broke. “I promise, David. I promise. We will go to Montana.”

She kissed his forehead as she held his lifeless body close to her chest. Frantic, irrational thoughts raced through her head. *If I hold him long enough, he’ll wake up. Don’t let go. Just don’t let go.*

The sheriff located her father, and the two of them persuaded her to let go of David’s body. Her father helped her to stand. Dany leaned on him for support as she gasped for air through hysterical cries. Her legs trembled and he held her with both arms to keep her from falling.

Numb with grief, and in a state of shock, she asked her father, “Where is David? Will Mama be here soon?”

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Montana, 1898

Dany shuffled her feet on the rocky ground as she brought to mind the heartrending words her father said. *No, your mama won’t be here soon. It’s just the two of us, now, but we’ll get through this together.* She flinched as she remembered his voice breaking. Her mother had died just a month before, when her carriage overturned.

Even though Dany’s father still mourned the loss of his wife, he had set aside his own grief to comfort his daughter.

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