

# One

Layers of soft gray clouds laced with shades of lavender and pink played peek-a-boo with the sun as they stretched lazily across the eastern Wyoming sky.

Twenty-six-year old Jessy Kalender stepped quietly onto the wrap-around porch of Brad Sheldon's sprawling single-story ranch house. She clenched her jaw, hoping Brad wouldn't wake up as the screen door squeaked in an array of off-beat rhythms. This morning she needed time alone. Time to think. With a mug of coffee in hand, she sat on the steps and stared pensively at the horizon.

"It's been over five years," Jessy whispered as she set the coffee mug down. She reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out a crumpled envelope that had been opened more than a few times over the past several days. She opened the envelope once again, and pulled out a letter.

Jessy's eyes watered as she read quietly to herself. She breathed in and exhaled slowly, then refolded the letter and stuffed it back into the envelope. *Why now, Uncle Frank? When I'm trying so hard to be happy? And how did you find me?* "Damn!" Jessy muttered as she clutched the envelope tightly in her hand, causing it to crinkle

that much more.

Her thoughts were broken by the sound of the screen door being opened, then closed. A strong, sturdy hand touched her shoulder. She looked up at the man she had tried to love, the man she'd wanted to love but couldn't, not the way he deserved to be loved.

"Morning, Brad. Did I wake you? I tried to be quiet when I got up."

Brad Sheldon was six-foot-one, handsome, with a firm square jaw, sandy-brown hair, and soft hazel eyes. "I heard you get up," he said as he sat next to her on the step. Brad glanced at the letter in Jessy's hand, then looked straight into her eyes. "We need to talk, don't we?"

Jessy's eyes shifted toward the horizon, then back to Brad. "Yes, I guess we do."

"This has been a long time coming," Brad said quietly, "but I knew it would, eventually."

A tear trickled down Jessy's cheek. "I don't know what to say except that I do love you."

"I know you love me, Jess, but you and I both know something is missing, and has been for most of the five and a half years that we've been together. When we make love, you give only half of your heart and part of yourself. The other half of your heart is three hundred miles north, in Deer Creek, Wyoming—with Matt Donovan. You're always going to love him, no matter who you're with. You haven't left Loving, Wyoming in over five years . . . but you're still running. It's time to stop. It's time to go home."

"You read the letter?" Jessy asked.

"Yes. You left it lying on the table. I don't pride myself on that, since it was addressed to you."

Jessy tenderly laid her hand on Brad's arm. "It's all right. Maybe that's why I left it there, for you to read. I couldn't face telling you straight on and figured that was the easier way to deal with it. Actually, I guess you could say it was a coward's way out."

Brad smiled. "No, honey, not a coward's way out. You're too softhearted, that's all. I'm sure you just didn't know how to say it, that you'll be leaving. That you are going home. It's time you find Matt and get the answers to those questions you've been asking yourself for so long."

The tears that had filled Jessy's eyes now rolled steadily down her cheeks.

"It's okay, sweetheart." Brad pulled Jessy close and wrapped his arms around her. "I love you enough to let you go. I won't pretend that it doesn't hurt, because it does."

"Brad, I'm sorry. You deserve someone who can give you her whole heart, the way I couldn't. I tried. I honestly tried."

"I know you did, and I'll never forget that." Brad tilted Jessy's chin up. "But your eyes have always said more to me than words could ever say."

"Will you go to the cemetery and put flowers on the grave?" Jessy asked.

"You know I will."

"Thank you." Jessy raised her eyes and met Brad's as she ran her forefinger gently down his cheek. "I want more than anything for you to find that special someone."

"I will, Jessy. I've stopped by Mary's flower shop a few times just to see how she's doing. We've had some good conversations over coffee. I've known her for a long time."

"She's a good woman, Brad, and I think she's been in love with you . . . probably forever."