



# Kristin Hannah

"Reminiscent  
of LaVyrle  
Spencer...A  
heartwarming  
love story  
that was a  
delight  
from start  
to finish."  
JILL MARIE  
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# A Handful of Heaven



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A  
HANDFUL  
OF



Kristin Hannah

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He kissed her the only way he knew, hard and without tenderness or thought or caring.

Pure instinct—a force he never questioned—drove him to kiss her harder and harder still. Lost in a sea of sensation, it took him a moment to realize what was happening. *She was letting him kiss her!*

Growling angrily, he wrenched his head up and shoved her away. "What the hell are you doing?"

Tenderly she tested the puffiness of her lips. "I give you credit for trying, Mr. MacKenna." Her voice was husky, her breathing uneven. "In your place, I would certainly have tried the same thing. However, you cannot scare me into leaving. I've made a decision to stay, and I never change my mind."

He backhanded the moisture from his lips. "You bitch," he snarled.

"Perhaps," she snapped back. "But I'm not a whore, Mr. MacKenna, and the next time you kiss me, you'd better protect your . . ." Her gaze lowered pointedly. ". . . privates. A knee can be a powerful weapon."

**Also by Kristin Hannah**  
***Published by Fawcett Books:***

**THE ENCHANTMENT**

To the men in my life, Benjamin and Tucker.  
I love you.

And to my mother, who always believed I could  
do anything.

*Special Thanks . . .*

To Rob Cohen and Elisa Wares, who gave me what every first-time author dreams of—a chance.

To Megan Chance and Nadine Miller for their unwavering support and excellent advice.

And, perhaps most importantly, to Andrea Schmidt, who kept my baby boy happy while I worked.

## Prologue

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EARLY MARCH 1896

"Hey, Stoneyman!"

The guttural shout hung like a foul odor in the tent's chill air. Stone Man MacKenna felt its intrusion in every pore and bone of his body. His big hands clenched, unclenched. Just once, he thought, let me hit the noisy bastard just once. . . .

"You gone deaf?"

He lifted his head slowly, pinning an ice-cold stare on the three men huddled around his Yukon stove. Just looking at the pea-brained, loudmouthed bunch made his gut ache. His rawboned face shifted into its customary scowl. "What do you want?"

Midas Magowin grinned, showing off a set of teeth more dead than alive. "You settin' over there thinkin' about how much you'd like to shoot us? Hell, we ain't doin' nothin' but talkin'."

Stone Man's scowl intensified. "That's plenty."

"Not to the Mounties downriver, it ain't. So, if you're gonna shoot us, shoot; and if you ain't, quit your glarin'. It gives me the willies."

"That's the idea."

"We're stayin'. It's colder'n spit out there right now, and you got the best stove in the pasture." Midas leaned back on his stool just far enough to get outside the stove's circle of heat, then he spat. The moment the slimy brown stream left his lips it froze solid. The rock-hard glob hurtled through the air and hit the planked floor with a solid *smack*, shattering into a dozen glasslike shards.



"This is a trading post, damn it," Stone Man growled. "I'm not running a hotel for gossip, good-for-nothing gold diggers."

Chuckling, Midas rubbed his bony hands together. "Truth is, Stoneyman, you ain't runnin' shit. This here's the sorriest excuse for a tradin' post I've ever seen."

Stone Man's bushy, jet-black eyebrows drew slowly together. Beneath the hairy ledge, eyes the color of aged bourbon narrowed. "You'd best remember where you are, old man." His big voice fell to a whisper. "This is my post. That's my stove. I haven't kicked your butt *yet*, and I've put up with your infernal jabbering. But no half-bald, gnat-sized, older-than-God miner is going to tell me how to run my post. Understood?"

Midas flashed a triumphant smile. "Fair enough."

"H-Hey Stone Man . . ."

With an irritated sigh, Stone Man turned to the speaker. It was the kid, Cornstalk, the gangly newcomer who listened to Midas's mindless chatter for hours on end and imitated his hero's every movement. "Yeah, kid?"

Cornstalk's thin, freckled face broke into an eager grin. "Thanks for letting us stay. It sure is warmer in here."

Stone Man grunted in response. His teeth ground together in a familiar surge of resentment. They'd won. They were staying—again. He couldn't get rid of them until closing time. He knew it; they knew it. Other people depended on the trading post's hours.

He certainly couldn't reason with them. He'd been trying *that* since the moment they'd moved into his peaceful valley, and all he'd gotten for his effort was a pounding headache.

What was it about mining that drew fools like buzzards to a dead elk, he wondered. They came four thousand miles for a golden dream, but most of them never even staked a claim. Instead they sat around, drinking, smoking, playing cards, and yapping.

He shoved a lock of raven-black hair out of his eyes and glared at the motley group. Their raised voices battered his ears, rending a hole in the silence he'd traveled thousands of miles to find. They sounded like a pack of hyenas fighting over a rabbit bone—howling, barking, hissing.

He squeezed his eyes shut and massaged his temples. All he wanted was to be left alone. Was that asking so goddamn much?

"Hey, Cornstalk," Midas's tobacco-graveled voice interrupted his thoughts. "What was I talkin' about before Stoneyman's surly presence interrupted me?"

Stone Man's eyelids felt as heavy as boulders. With supreme effort he opened his eyes and looked up. The first thing he saw was Midas's triumphant, gap-toothed grin. Just once, he thought, glancing at his fists. *Just once . . .*

The old fool started up again. "Cornstalk, I asked you what in the hell I was talkin' about."

"Christ, Midas," Stone Man snapped, "you only talk about two things: gold and ladies. Neither of which, by the way, you'd know from bear shit."

The old man's Cheshire cat grin flattened. Offering an injured sniff, he replied, "That proves what I've long suspected about you, Stoneyman. You're big *and* stupid. I don't talk about ladies. I talk about whores."

"Yeah!" Cornstalk agreed.

Midas affectionately slapped his skinny protégé on the back. "Like I was sayin' yesterday, a good whore's about the best thing that can happen to a man, but a lady—ooee! Hell, I'd rather tussle with mating wolverines than a purebred lady. 'Cause a lady's a fight just itchin' to happen, and once she starts a'talkin', only a heart attack can shut her up." He shot Cornstalk a knowing look. "Hers, that is. Yours won't cause more'n a stutter."

Suddenly the tent's canvas flaps flipped open. Freezing air blasted through the opening, and a man stumbled into the store. Snow swirled in after him, pooling and drifting around his mukluks as he hurriedly re-tied the flaps.

The air settled almost immediately. Hobbling slowly, the stranger moved over to the stove, pulled out a small three-legged stool, and sank onto its hard surface. His whole body seemed to deflate.

After a moment he shook his behooded head. Snow danced off his heavy parka and hit the hot stove in a spray. The hissing and popping of dying flakes filled the tent. Hands

trembling, he stripped off his huge mittens and eased the fur-lined hood from his face.

"Old Bill," Midas hollered at the Yukon's only mail carrier. "What the hell you doin' way out here?"

Bill tried to smile and failed. "Damn, it's cold out there," he muttered, pouring himself a cup of coffee. Curling his arthritic fingers around the hot tin, he lifted the cup and let the steam pelt his face.

"Come on, Bill. Whatcha doin' here?"

Bill took a sip before he answered. "I got a letter for Stone Man."

Everyone looked at Stone Man. He felt their eyes drilling through his chest. Mail was scarcer than gold on the Thron-  
diuck River, and gold was damned scarce.

Frowning, he walked over to Old Bill. As he entered the stove's small circle of warmth, an involuntary shiver rattled his bones. "Who the hell would write to me? I've never gotten a letter in my life. It must be a mistake."

Bill reached into his buckskin bag and withdrew a crumpled, dirt-smudged envelope. "It come outta St. Louis, and it's addressed to Cornelius J. MacKenna. That's you, ain't it?"

Stone Man took the letter in his weather-chapped hands and stared at it for a long moment. Whoever had written this letter had taken his time. The penmanship was flawless. Perfect.

It was an honest-to-God letter from someone *out there*.

His strong hands shook. Like the other hard-bitten, lonely souls who wandered the Yukon Territory, Stone Man had left civilization behind long ago. He'd come north because he didn't have friends or family or loved ones. He had stayed because he liked it that way.

And now . . . a letter.

Awkwardly, his big fingers unaccustomed to the task, he opened the envelope and slowly withdrew the letter. The brushed, bumpy paper was folded in exact quarters, the edges aligned with military precision.

Unfolding the paper, he began to read.

*Dear Mr. MacKenna,*

*I take pen in hand to respond to the advertisement*

*which you placed in the St. Louis Post Dispatch. As it is now November, I can only hope you are still in need of assistance. If so, I would like very much to be considered for the position of partner in your trading post.*

*The terms stated in your advertisement are entirely acceptable to me. I agree to manage the post for one year in exchange for one-half ownership in the post plus room and board.*

*Although I admit to inexperience in such a venture, you will find me a hard worker, well organized, and willing to work for our mutual success. I will be eagerly awaiting your reply.*

*Sincerely,  
Devon O'Shea*

*P.S. Should you choose to take me on as your equal partner, could you please advise me as to what I should bring to make my time in the Yukon Territory more enjoyable?*

He shook his head in disbelief. "Well I'll be . . ."

"What is it?" came the miners' chorus.

He smiled for the first time in weeks. Why not? He could afford to be sociable. This Mr. Devon O'Shea had answered his prayers. In another few months he'd be left alone again. He wouldn't have to worry about running the post, and he could photograph wildlife to his heart's content. And he'd never, never find himself trapped in a room with chattering miners again.

He closed his eyes. It was almost enough to make one believe in God.

"What is it?" Midas demanded.

"It's a reply to my advertisement."

"What advertisement?"

"When you fools first started straggling into my valley, I ran advertisements in about ten big-city papers seeking a partner in the post."

"Why'd ya do a damn fool thing like that?" Midas cut in. "You're mean as a wet cat. Ain't nobody in the world you could work with."

"I don't want to work with anybody. I want to be left alone. That's why I put the advertisements in. I need someone to protect my investment in the post while I take my pictures."

"Investment. Ha!"

Stone Man ignored Midas completely. "Anyway, it's been a while since I sent the ad. Nobody ever answered, and, hell, I forgot all about it."

Midas slapped his sinewy thigh in glee. "And now you got one? Yee-ha! Crack open another jug o' hootch, boys. This is our lucky day! There ain't a man alive who's meaner'n Stoneyman. His partner has to be an improvement."

"Maybe he plays poker!" Cornstalk chimed in, taking a big, dribbling swallow of hootch.

Midas grabbed the jug and greedily raised it to his lips. "You bet." The words came out in a watery gurgle. "And maybe . . ."

Their voices droned on, running together in Stone Man's mind until he had trouble thinking. They were even worse when they drank, he thought sourly. Then they talked all at once.

The pounding in his temples accelerated. For the first time in years he wished for one of the simpler amenities of civilization: transportation. If the post were in San Francisco or Boston, O'Shea could be at work in a week. But not here, not in Yukon Territory. Stone Man would be lucky to meet the man before the fall colors hit. Even if he wrote a letter hiring O'Shea today, Stone Man would still spend the next few months trapped with a bunch of worthless miners.

The smile slid off his face. It was going to be a long wait.

# Chapter One

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LATE SUMMER 1896

Willpower alone kept Devon O'Shea seated. Perched on the edge of her berth, she sat stiff as a new nail, her perfectly manicured hands curled into a bloodless ball in her lap.

Ten minutes. That's all she had to wait. In just ten short minutes she'd meet her new partner, Mr. Cornelius J. MacKenna.

Unfurling her fingers, she pressed one slim hand against her churning stomach. Why couldn't she calm down? She knew it was irrational to be so nervous, and Devon rarely acted irrationally. And yet, no matter how often she chided herself, she couldn't stem the trembling in her hands or the racing of her heart.

Today was so very important. It was the day her new life began: a life not shoved on her by adversity but one of her own making. *Her* life.

Sighing softly, she drummed her fingernails against the metal frame of her berth, listening with half an ear to the faintly metallic beat. In the cabin's quiet, it sounded like the cavalry coming.

She sighed again. If only she were more like her sister, Colleen. Colleen wouldn't be nervous now. She'd be far too busy spinning romantic fantasies about Mr. MacKenna to be anxious.

But Devon was nothing like her younger sister. Colleen was spontaneous, whimsical, impractical; Devon was calm, pragmatic, levelheaded. Unlike Colleen, she saw no point in spinning daydreams. Oh, she knew Colleen envisioned Mr.

MacKenna as tall and breathtakingly handsome, knew her sister pictured him alighting gracefully from a jet-black landaulet, doffing a natty top hat, and blathering romantic poetry.

But not Devon. She didn't spend her time wishing for a handful of heaven to call her own. Daydreaming, wishing, pretending, whatever one called it, was a silly waste of time. Mr. MacKenna, whatever he looked or acted like, was her partner for one year. For better or worse.

A knock rattled the narrow stateroom door. "Miss O'Shea? Miss O'Shea? I'm here for your bags."

Her perfectly coiffed head snapped up. *Oh my God.* This was it. The moment her new life began.

She forced herself to remain steady. It wouldn't do for a twenty-nine-year-old woman to go rushing about like a schoolgirl. She had an impression to make. The people she'd meet in the next moments would be her neighbors, her customers, perhaps even her friends.

Rising stiffly, she smoothed her shirtwaist's crisp white front and shook the wrinkles from her pin-striped serge traveling skirt. Her hands ran a quick check of the rust-colored hair that lay coiled at the base of her neck.

Glancing around the tiny cabin that had been her home for forty-four days, she smiled. Not a thing was out of place. Her two trunks were stacked in the corner, their brass corners perfectly matched, their bright metal locks aligned. Her leather gladstone valise shone like a general's boot, and her most prized possession, a bright red bicycle, gleamed. Everything was exactly as she liked it, orderly and spotless.

"Come in," she said. Her voice was low and throaty with just a touch of harshness, like the contented purr of an old tomcat. Its whispery sensuality contrasted sharply with the chiseled, almost austere lines of her face.

The narrow door popped open, and a young man scurried through. Offering a quick, perfunctory smile, he headed for the trunks. Halfway there he stopped dead. It was a full minute before he turned around, and when he did his eyes were as big as quarters. "A durn bi-cycle," he said, shaking his head.

Pride brightened Devon's moss-green eyes. "Isn't it grand?

It's a Royal Worcester Two-Speed Changeable-Geared Racycle—just like Miss Lillian Russell rides. My sister and her husband gave it to me as a going-away gift."

A hard swallow set the boy's Adam's apple to bobbing. "You're wantin' it to go, then?"

A small frown tugged at her perfectly arched eyebrows. "Of course."

"But—"

She cut him off with a wave of her pale, freckled hand. Picking up a book from her berth, she patted its leather spine. "Have you, perchance, read Mr. John McMoffat's *Guide for Alaska and Yukon Gold Seekers*?"

"Nope."

"I thought not. The *Guide* recommends bicycles for travel in the Yukon. As you know," she said smartly, "not many horses make it this far north."

The boy's lips quivered. "McMoffat, huh? Fella must live a fur piece away. Yer sis and her husband, they really buyed it fer ya, fer this trip?"

"They did, and I would take it as a personal favor if you'd stop grinning like that. The *Guide* makes the point that—"

"Thanks, ma'am!" He hefted the bright and shining bicycle onto his narrow shoulders, snatched up her valise, and bolted out of the cabin.

Odd young man, she thought as she moved over to her makeshift crate vanity and sat down. A sharp glance in the hand mirror assured her that she looked as good as a fairly plain, almost middle-aged woman could look. Her freckled skin was clean, and her hair, normally a pile of corkscrew curls the color of old rust, was well-contained.

Pinning her hat just so atop her sternly backswept hair, she plucked up her handbag, gloves, and umbrella. With a quick tilt of the chin, she sailed out of the cabin.

Outside rain fell hard and fast, pinging on the metal overhang above her head and running over the edge in a sheet of undulating silver.

She stood close to the ship's curved metal wall, her Curacoa kid walking boots pressed ankle to ankle and well out of harm's way. Her gloved hands, trembling ever so slightly, were curled tight around the chain handle of her handbag.



The sternwheeler edged toward the ribbon of brownish-gray muck that banked the Yukon River and began to slow.

She frowned. Why were they slowing down? This swampy wasteland couldn't be her destination. She'd expected a town like Circle City; a town with opera houses, dance halls, libraries, lights. A boom town.

She peered through the gloom. There was nothing out there; nothing except a single half-finished log cabin that sat like a skeletal king amidst a shoddy court of grayed canvas tents.

Tents! She shivered, pressing a hand to her breast as she stared at the six tents dotting the boggy pasture. What were they for? Certainly no man could survive a Yukon winter with so little to protect him from the elements?

"Devon O'Shea!"

Her name boomed across the decks, startling her.

"Devon O'Shea, report to the bow."

Clutching her handbag tighter, she popped open her umbrella and moved cautiously down the slick metal stairs. Her high heels clicked atop the wet, puckered metal as she hurried across the deck. "I'm Miss O'Shea," she said to the burly crewman handling the sternwheeler's bow line.

He cocked his head in her direction, looked her over—thoroughly—and then turned his attention back to the wrist-thick rope in his hands.

Nervously Devon tightened her grip on the umbrella. "Sir," she said to his broad back, "I am Miss O'Shea. Is there a problem?"

He turned to face her. Swiping the rain out of his bloodshot eyes, he shook his head. "If you're Devon O'Shea, and heaven help Stone Man if you are, there's no problem. You're gettin' off."

"Not here, I'm not."

Shoving his red wool cap high on his head, the crewman scratched his sweaty brow. "You told the cap'n you was gettin' off at MacKenna's post. Right?"

Her mouth went dry. It was all she could do to nod.

"Stone Man's place is here."

She fought to remain calm. "Who?"