

## EXCERPT:

She shivered. The fire had gone out. She kept on her jacket while she added logs to the fireplace and kindling to get it started. Within a couple of minutes, the fire was going. She'd had a fireplace as a kid, so relearning her way around this one hadn't been so bad. She went back to the kitchen and turned on the kettle for tea.

Bob growled low in his throat and stared toward the front door.

She froze. Her phone was in her hip pocket. Her gun was still in her waistband at the small of her back. This was something else Marshal Holloway had insisted upon. He'd taught her how to use a handgun. They'd held many target practices right behind this cabin.

A creak beyond the front door warned that someone was on the porch. She eased across the room and went to the special peephole that had been installed. There was one on each side of the cabin, allowing for views all the way around. A man stood on the porch. He was the typical local cowboy. Jeans and boots. Hat in his hands. Big truck in the drive. Just like Marshal Holloway.

But she did not know this man.

"Alice Stewart, if you're in there, it's okay for you to open the door. I'm Sheriff Colt Tanner. Branch sent me."

Her heart thudding, she held perfectly still. Branch would never send someone to her without letting her know first. If for some reason he couldn't tell her in advance, they had a protocol for these situations.

She reached back, fingers curled about the butt of her weapon. Bob moved stealthily toward the door.

"I know you're concerned about opening the door to a stranger, but you need to trust me. Branch has been in an accident, and he's in the hospital undergoing surgery right now. No matter that his injuries were serious, he refused to go into surgery until he spoke to me and I assured him I would look after you, ma'am."

Worry joined the mixture of fear and dread churning inside her. She hoped Branch wasn't hurt too badly. He had a wife and a daughter.

She opened her mouth to ask about his condition, but then she snapped it shut. The man at her door had not said the code word.