

USA Today Bestselling Author

TAYLOR HART



Chance



CROSS CREEK COWBOYS 

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CHANCE UNDERCOVER
COWBOY LOOKING FOR
GOLD AND LOVE

CROSS CREEK WYOMING RANCH ROMANCES

HART

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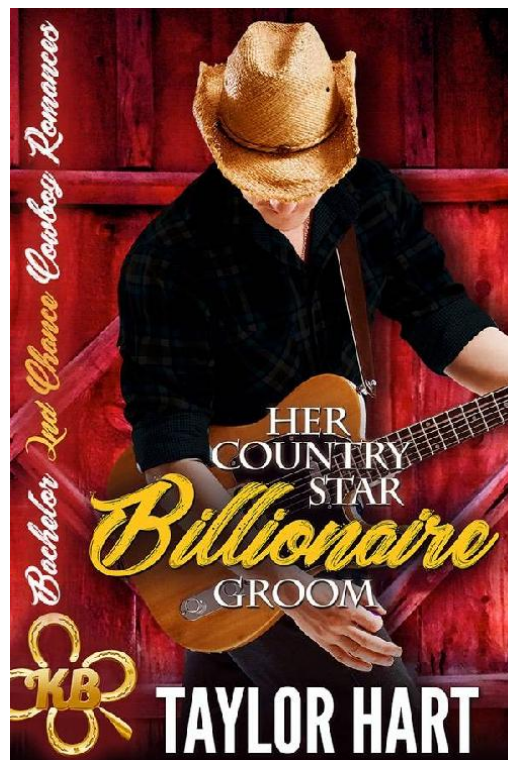
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If you would like to receive updates on new releases and receive a book FREE—*The Country Star Billionaire Groom* by Taylor Hart Click [HERE!](#)

The Country Star Billionaire Groom is about JJ Kelly and his four brothers who are challenged by their father's will to get **Married by Christmas!** Don't miss it!

CHAPTER 1

Chance Cross would not call himself a man of the world. He would not call himself sophisticated or well-traveled, but he *would* call himself street smart. After all, you don't become a sheriff without learning a few things about the world. About people. About good and evil. You don't become a sheriff, even in a small Wyoming town, without learning that some things in this world can be understood, and then there are others that are just plain unexplainable.

One of those mysteries was Truman Birch and his grueling drive to find the conquistador gold, even if it cost lives. It was the force that compelled the Cross family to reach the gold first—to get Truman away from their ranch. Logically, Chance knew it wasn't the Stone family's fault—or Raine Birch's fault—that Truman had turned into this maniac who was out for the gold, but it was hard not to be frustrated with the whole situation, especially in regards to the safety of the Cross ranch and his family.

The conquistador gold itself was *not* one of those unexplainable things. A lot of people knew about it, especially the Stone family, who'd originally, had the gold.

The ironic thing was that no one knew for sure whether the gold had been moved to Wyoming or not. All they had to go on was one letter between his father and the Stone patriarch, two Navy SEAL friends who had spoken about the conquistador gold in letter form. Though, Chance had to admit his family's ranch would be a great place to hide the gold.

After all, most of the nation didn't even know where Wyoming really was. They just knew it was some where in the Midwest. But it was actually considered in the west.

It was strange how a single letter about gold could turn so many lives upside down.

Chance rolled down his Jeep window as he pulled into South Port. It was hot, but there was a breeze. People said the humidity next to the ocean made a big difference in the temperature changes, and he had to agree.

Coming to a tourist trap like this town wouldn't be a picnic. Plus, he had to stay undercover and not let anyone know he'd come here from Wyoming to learn more about the gold. He didn't want to draw attention to himself; he wanted to give his family a reprieve from Truman Birch and his antics, all the while protecting the Stone family from media attention as well. Brooks Stone, the FBI brother of the family had put out fake media coverage that the gold was assumed to be in Alaska, and the two families were committed to letting that be the 'real' story for now.

He waited at a traffic light where most of the congestion centered in town. Everyone seemed to be turning into a gas station on his left. On his right, a park led to a public beach. The sight called to him. He'd gone on vacations to various beaches, and he'd even gone on a cruise with the whole family last year, but this beach was important to him.

This was a place he could engrave into a book of memories with a certain girl he'd grown up with. Her face flashed into his mind, and he pushed it away. Was it serendipitous that he found himself back here now?

He looked longingly at the couples strolling on the beach and swallowed the lump he'd been feeling in his throat lately. With Porter and now Colt married, the big joke was that either he or Blaze would be next. Nash said he was exempt because he was at law school and there were no second chance possibilities around.

The truth was, Chance would love to get married, but their small town in Wyoming didn't have many options. He'd gone

to the police academy after high school and then he'd just started working.

There had only been one girl in his life who he ever really thought about marrying ...Kelly Hamilton, his childhood sweetheart. The two of them had spent the summer at this beach with her family when they were twelve. She had gone off to college in Europe, and whenever he saw her grandparents around town, he would ask about her. The one who'd gotten away was in Europe now, leading the artist life. Whatever that meant. Too bad her grandparents had both passed away now.

The stoplight changed, and the congestion cleared out. Chance sucked in a long breath, pushing all thoughts of first love out of his mind. He didn't have time for that. He was here for a reason: to follow up on the leads he might have found from his father's journal, particularly strange hieroglyphs and an address he wasn't sure about. He had to focus on the task at hand.

No one in Cross Creek knew where he was. The Cross family had told everyone they had a sick uncle whom Chance would be helping out. Keeping a secret was hard enough without involving the town of Cross Creek. His status as the sheriff added to his presence in the public's mind. The state had sent a fill-in sheriff. Chance didn't know the guy, but Porter said he seemed all right.

It was sort of nice to get away from the problems there and be off on an adventure. After all, wasn't adventure the thing that had gotten Chance into his current job as sheriff? The possibility of mystery and justice?

He scoffed at himself and what Blaze would call his vigilante dreams. When Chance was younger, he had written some comic books about himself as a vigilante. In fact, he had done an art class with the girl he'd been in love with.

Why was he thinking so much about that woman right now? Maybe because he thought about her a lot. Which might seem strange. She was the only woman he'd ever loved.

Maybe it was just a flash in a pan, but it had been something to him.

He looked down at his phone and followed the directions to the Stone family Inn. He would be meeting with the Stone family to do a little debriefing and discuss the particulars. He wasn't nervous, per se, although interacting with the whole clan could be intimidating. He'd met with them two weeks ago, before Colt's wedding. Happiness filled him just thinking about how his brother and his high school girl had gotten back together. It was a magic story, truly. He was happy for Colt and Sierra.

Darn it, would true love ever be in the cards for him? Maybe he would meet someone. His father had always been encouraging when someone asked if his boys would ever get married. Chance wished his father wasn't gone. He would've been helpful in the search for the elusive treasure.

Well, 'if wishes were horses, then everyone would ride.' His father used to say that, and Chance laughed at the memory. Wishes weren't horses; that was for sure.

He pulled up to a large beach mansion. It was beautiful, and it loomed above him. Of course, he'd done some research on the Stone family, and he'd discovered that Trey, the oldest brother, had inherited the beach house and then married Ava a couple years ago. That was when the gold hunt had started—or it had been rekindled, as the articles online described.

A bunch of cars already occupied the driveway, so he parked on the side of the road.

Trey Stone came out the front door and started walking toward Chance. Trey was waving at him, but not in the sense that he was saying hello. When Chance started to get out of his vehicle, Trey shook his head and gestured for him to move. "You can't park there. This way."

So much for hellos. Chance fired up the Jeep and maneuvered around the other cars, settling in an open space by the huge garage. He stepped out, wondering what he'd gotten himself into.

Trey nodded, his face all business. “You will keep the Jeep in the garage.” He moved to grab a tarp. “Here, help me put this over it.”

Chance found himself helping cover the Jeep.

“You’ll take my old truck when you go places so no one asks about a guy from Wyoming.” He held out a key.

Chance put his hand out and Trey dropped the key into it. “Probably a good idea.” He hadn’t thought about the fact his Jeep, with Wyoming plates, would draw attention.

They finished covering it and Chance nodded. “Okay.” He was reminded that Trey was cut from the same cloth as their fathers had been: they were SEALs.

Trey gave him a half grin and stuck his hand out to shake. “And welcome.” They clasped hands.

“Thanks.”

“We have the family gathered, and we have some food for you. Our cover story is that you are our handyman. You’re one of Ava’s distant relatives, down on his luck. You will stay in one of the rooms on the main floor.”

Chance was befuddled by the way Trey was bossing him around so quickly. He reminded him of his older brother Porter. He chose to ignore the brashness and pulled up the tarp in the back so he could open the door and get out his luggage. “Sounds good.” He re-covered the Jeep, then turned to face Trey. “Did you give me a new name, too?”

Trey squinted and then snapped his fingers. “No, but maybe we should.”

Chance understood Trey’s need to protect his family and this town, but going undercover might be harder than he thought it would be.

He followed Trey through the garage, then Trey opened the door and waited for him to enter.

There was quite the commotion happening inside, with kids playing in the pool, women chatting by the food table, and men trading jokes. The Stone brothers and their wives

swarmed to him like moths to a flame, and Chance was soon overwhelmed with introductions.

Brooks wasted no time getting to business. “I’ve made a fake license for you while you’re here. You’ll be Rob Hendrix.” He pulled a license out of his back pocket.

“Are you serious? You didn’t say anything about that.” Trey turned to Chance. “I guess you *do* have a new name.”

Brooks coolly glanced at Trey. “I deal with things on a need-to-know basis. That includes time sensitivity.”

Marshall barked out a laugh. “That’s funny. FBI guy thinks he’s the boss.” He seized Chance’s hand and shook it. “Welcome.” He turned to a woman at his side. “This is my wife, Kat. I know you’ve seen her on Zoom calls, but you haven’t met in person.”

Chance shook the woman’s hand.

She held a baby on her hip. “Nice to meet you.”

“You, too.”

“And we will have to see you in church,” Hunter said, taking his hand to shake it. “I mean, that’s a given. If you’re living with Ava and Trey and posing as a cousin, then you’ll have to come to church. That’s the story.”

“Okay,” Chance agreed.

Hunter turned to a woman at his side. “This is Cheryse.”

Chance shook her hand. “Nice to meet you.”

Trent moved to Hunter’s side and stuck out his hand. “Don’t worry, *Rob*,” Trent told Chance with a grin. “You’ll get used to this. My brothers boss everyone around. I’m used to it.”

They shook hands.

Trent turned to a woman behind him. “This is my wife, Liberty.”

“Nice to meet you.”

Liberty nodded back. “You, too. And you do get used to all the bossing,” she said, grinning.

Trey cleared his throat and eyed Trent and Liberty. “Like we could ever boss either of you around.”

“What?” Trent turned to Trey. “I’m malleable. I’m easy. You always boss me around.”

Trey laughed. “Right.”

“Actually, I’m the only one who can boss you around.” Trent’s wife, Liberty, put her arm around Trent’s waist, and he kissed her cheek.

A woman he recognized as the Stone sister moved next to Trey. “I’m Kensi.” She smiled at him. “I’ve never been out to the ranch like my brothers.”

“Right, part of the OG here,” Chance said.

“The OG. I like that.”

They shook hands.

Kensi looked around. “I am grateful you came. Hopefully, we can put these shenanigans about the gold to rest. Finally. For both of our families. I understand your family has been through a lot too.”

Chance nodded, thinking about the recent fire on the ranch and the man who had almost killed Sadie. “Yep.”

“I’m Tim,” said the man next to Kensi. “I’m the sheriff in these parts. We appreciate you coming.”

Chance shook his hand, grateful to see his local counterpart. “Nice to meet you, Tim.” He seemed reliable, strong, and capable, much like the other Stone men.

Chance wasn’t able to respond further before Ava winked at him and said, “You’ll be staying with us. I have your room prepared.”

“Thank you,” he said, meaning it. “I want what you all want; closure on this whole deal.”

A man he recognized as Raine Birch clapped a hand down on Chance's shoulder. "Nice to see you. Welcome. This is my wife, Sarah. She's from Montana, a little town called Snow Valley."

He shook hands with both of them. "Hi there."

Cheryse, Hunter's wife, eyed Chance. "I'm thinking Sarah and I will give you a makeover to make you even more undercover than just a changed name."

Sarah grinned at Cheryse. "Yes, we'll give him a beach look."

"What?" Chance backed up. "Nobody said anything about a beach look."

Raine nodded. "I think it's a great idea. New hair, some new clothes."

"I've got that covered." A woman he didn't recognize stepped forward; she almost seemed like she was floating toward him. "I'm Lucy. I own the boutique in town. I went shopping over at Browne's surf shop today and picked out a few articles of clothing for you, *Rob*." She flashed a grin. "Might as well start the new name now."

A man put his arm around her. "I'm Matt, Lucy's husband. I've been best friends with the Stones my whole life."

"Hi." Chance looked around at everyone surrounding him; in this huge group, he felt uncomfortably small. "How many more people know about me being here?"

Trey grunted. "Only one more couple."

As if on cue, the last woman flashed a smile. "I'm Dawn. I've been friends with the Stones forever. This is my husband, Trevor. We actually only live here part time. Both of us are professors, and we have a place here where we stay for a couple months a year. Most of the time, we're in Wilmington."

Chance let out a light laugh and shook both of their hands. "Nice to meet you guys, too."

"You understand small towns," Tim said, turning to him. "Your friends become your family."

Chance wasn't sure about this large of a group. Would they all be able to keep this secret? "I guess I'll have to trust you all."

Tim nodded. "Any good sheriff would know that a small town has—and *keeps*—many secrets."

Chance couldn't disagree with that. "True."

"This might seem like a lot of people keeping this secret," Trey told Chance, "but these people are the only ones who know you're here to help us find the gold. You're mostly going to poke around with your dad's journal on your own. Of course, some of us will be available—I will for sure, as well as Marshall, Hunter, and Kensi. Everyone else will go back to their jobs. Brooks goes back to the FBI, and Trent is finishing up his last tour as a SEAL, but he's on leave this week. You can call on any of these people here to help you. That's why we wanted to be here when you got here, so you could feel you have support. We want to be transparent with you, and we expect you to be transparent with us."

"Of course." Suddenly, Chance felt like he was in an interrogation. "I brought my dad's journal, and there are a couple places I want to check out. I'm happy to go over them with you all, but I would like the latitude to do some searching by myself. I'll report back to you about what I find." He cocked an eyebrow at Trey. "I'm here to get answers."

Trey nodded. "Good, because we want answers."

Marshall coughed. "That's right."

Trey turned back to the group. "Okay. Let's go eat dinner, and we'll give you whatever info you need to get started."

"Sounds great." Chance let out an awkward laugh, feeling more and more unsure about this whole situation.

The Stone family gathered the children and said grace. Everyone dug in, and Chance enjoyed the steak and mashed potatoes—good home country food, in his opinion. They all talked about different gold adventures and what they knew. None of this discussion surprised him; they'd had a lot of conference calls on the topic.

After the conversation simmered down, Ava gestured to the hallway. “There is a bathroom down there, and the women want to make you over here. We’ll put some beach clothes on you and change your hair. Is that okay?”

It wasn’t like he had a choice. Chance braced himself for a makeover. He already knew that after he endured it, he would be going for a walk to clear his head. Even if his new name was Rob, he still needed some space for Chance. “Let’s do this.”

CHAPTER 2

*K*elly Hamilton shook hands with the realtor from South Port and took the keys for the little shop on Main Street. There was already a boutique up the street, meaning that technically there was another art store a few doors away, but Kelly meant to bring many kinds of art to South Port; not just 'boutique' type of art, but originals that she would design. She'd spent the past ten years learning at the finest of art schools, spending time in Europe, and working at a top gallery. Maybe it sounded arrogant, but she felt she was a talented artist herself. Several of her sculptures and paintings had sold in the past, giving her enough money to make a good living. Even before she'd inherited her grandparents' money.

Her grandparents. A pang of sadness washed through her. She missed them and if she thought too hard about her grandmother and how the ranch was actually sold ... she would tear up and go down a path in her mind to complete sadness. She scrunched her eyes together and clamped down on all of that emotion. No. Today would not be a sad day. This was a new beginning, not a sad ending. She had to focus on the beginning part.

She looked around downtown South Port. It was strange to be drawn to this town, of all towns. If someone were to ask why she'd chosen to settle in South Port, she'd have to tell them about a trip she'd taken here when she was twelve. She still had sentimental feelings about that trip.

Why not start over somewhere she could make a home? Especially if ... Her hand touched her stomach. No. She wasn't. She couldn't be. She removed her hand and fear spiked through her. She thought of Brian.

Shaking herself, Kelly looked around the front of the shop. Focus. She had to focus. She already had contacts to repaint the place and she would make her own sign for the front. She hadn't decided on what to name the gallery yet. In fact, because of her inheritance, she wasn't in too big of a hurry to get everything finished at once.

Her inheritance still brought on feelings of guilt, but she pushed them away. Nothing to do about that. She would take things one step at a time—that's what she'd do. The painting crew would come tomorrow, giving her the time to go on a little adventure. She'd heard of a gold hunt that had been happening here, one that was actually connected to her hometown. Weird.

Chance's face came to her mind. If things were different, she would have asked him about it, but ... they were way past a conversation.

When she'd gone to her grandmother's funeral only a year ago, he'd been in a relationship. Of course, she'd been dating Brian, even though he'd begged off coming to the funeral, saying he couldn't leave his finance firm in Oxford.

She'd been so angry with Brian then, so hurt. Why hadn't she seen how selfish he was? Why had she put up with him for so long? It was long enough to get her into this horrible situation.

Kelly pushed past the angst. She had to focus back on what to name the place. The name had to have flair, but also something that would signify sophistication and class to attract the right type of customers; tourists who wanted fine art.

She walked the pier, inspecting the other shops. Roxie's clothes. Lucy's boutique.

She paused, experiencing the now-familiar feeling that someone was watching her. Glancing back, she surveyed the

street. No one seemed out of the ordinary, just a bunch of tourists talking and laughing. Island-type music played low from the speakers on Main Street, creating a pleasing hum. The music had drawn her in a couple days ago when she'd first arrived and the realtor had initially shown her the spot on the pier for lease. The internet searches had been pretty spot on.

She pushed away the 'watched' feeling. It was nothing. She was just a tad paranoid right now. No one knew where she was.

Kelly continued to walk, passing Lucy's boutique. She gave it a once-over, peeking deeper into the windows. She didn't see any patrons in there, but she didn't want to go in and discuss her plans with the shop owner. She didn't know how the owner would feel about another place that sold art moving in.

She let that thought go and focused on the sunshine. She put her face up and reveled in the warmth. After leaving Oxford, this place was a breath of fresh air. She got halfway down the pier and smiled, breathing in the aroma of street tacos. It was almost six p.m., and she was starving. She bought two from the vendor, along with some water, and took the first bite as she made her way toward the end of the pier—a perfect place to sit and watch the sea while she ate.

Her stomach fluttered. She loved thinking of herself as a beach person. Even though she had only rented a small cottage down the beach, it still felt exciting. Quite the contrast to England, for sure.

She dug into the food, reminiscing about her grandma. Tears welled in her eyes, and she had to push away the emotion associated with her grandparents and how much she loved them. She'd enjoyed growing up on Hamilton Ranch, and she missed them. Her grandpa had passed nearly five years ago, but it'd felt like Grandma would never pass. She'd always imagined she'd go back to the ranch to paint or sculpt for a couple years and have time with Grandma.

But that time had been cut short.

Awareness prickled. It felt like she was being watched again. She shivered. Brian didn't know where she was. He didn't. No one was watching her.

Kelly scanned the area. Everyone seemed preoccupied with their own vacations. She sucked in a long breath. She'd purposely left her phone in Europe and gotten a new phone plan in the States, and she was off all social media, intending to never return. She and Brian had never shared banking information or anything, but just to be sure, she'd put a large amount of her inheritance into a South Port bank, closed her other bank accounts, and dispersed the rest of the funds to online banks.

She didn't want Brian to find her. Ever.

Kelly took slow breaths until calm returned. She thought back on the vacation she'd taken with her grandparents when she was twelve. Good memories; she needed them right now. Chance had been her best friend then, who'd turned into her high school sweetheart. The boy she'd thought she would marry. But life was funny sometimes, and if she'd learned anything, it was that most things didn't work out the way a person hoped.

What would her grandparents think about her settling down here? Would they be disappointed she'd sold the ranch and hadn't carried on the family legacy?

No. Of course not. They would be happy she was living the life she wanted. She created art and owned a gallery—she was following her dream.

Too bad the guilt still remained. She'd loved that ranch too.

Kelly stood, not wanting to ponder on all that guilt. She needed to create, so she headed for her place on the beach.

She was already excited to get back to her cottage and set up her potter's wheel. It'd been a while since she'd thrown clay, and she was itching to do it. The boxes had arrived the day before, and she was ready to get her studio unpacked and organized. Eventually, after she got the art shop going and

hired some staff, she would set aside certain days just to create. That made her most excited. She would paint, make pottery, and search for things to sell. She loved finding unknown artists.

Yes, this would be an amazing time for her. The sale of the ranch had allowed her to live this life.

Once again, she was assaulted by doubt. Was she making the right decision? How come she couldn't just feel settled in it? Why did it feel like something was missing?

It was insane, but Chance Cross's face popped into her mind again.

She tried ignoring the thought, but she couldn't resist the rush of memories. Kissing him for the last time before she'd left for London. Him promising he would wait for her.

Going to her grandma's funeral a year ago and seeing him with someone else.

It was stupid, but it'd felt like a knife through her heart, even though anyone looking at this love story from the outside would say it was her own fault.

After a year in Oxford, she'd come back to the ranch and given Chance an ultimatum; he had to move to Oxford with her if they were to be together.

She still remembered the stricken look on his face that night.

No. No. No. She didn't want to think about that look, but the memories kept flowing. Of course, Chance had insisted that he couldn't leave Cross Creek. His family ranch was there, and his brothers and sister were the people he loved most. He wouldn't leave them.

Her friend Marcy, who worked at a boutique in Cross Creek, had told her all about the recent developments with the Cross family. Porter had come home to take over the ranch and married Sadie. Colt had had his recent marriage to Sierra Shamrock. Crazy.

She'd read about something called the conquistador gold and how it had supposedly ended up in Wyoming. It was interesting that this town still had ties to Cross Creek, even though a recent article had reported a rumor that the gold was now in Alaska. Once again, she longed to reach out to Chance and get the full story, but she never would.

Marcy had also told her about a fire on the ranch. Kelly had asked about Chance, and she'd discovered that he and his girlfriend had broken up. Man, word got around. Kelly had been reticent to tell Marcy that she was moving back to the States. So she hadn't. No one from Cross Creek needed to know. No one cared.

Again, she was transported back to her final goodbye to Chance years ago. Why was it still painful for her? She'd been the one who'd refused to stay. Ugh. Maybe it was because Chance had been so certain that he would marry her. Maybe it was because even though she'd left him all those years before, he'd never gone after her or begged her to come back.

But maybes wouldn't pay the bills, as her grandmother had always told her. Maybes didn't matter. Call it pride, or call it the belief that one could never turn back, but she wasn't going back to Cross Creek. She was staying here in South Port, starting a new life.

As she got up and threw her trash away, a man caught her eye. When she turned to look more fully, he was staring in her direction. She didn't recognize him. Why would she? Suddenly, she wondered if her new start in life could be a new start at love too.

No. She didn't need love.

She shivered and pulled her sweater tighter around her. Her ex had taught her that love could be cruel. She didn't need love at all.

Kelly meandered back down the pier toward the beach and passed by the man. He was attractive. Tall. Blond. He looked like a surfer, but older. She didn't pay much attention, but she secretly smiled as she picked up a rock and chucked it into the ocean.

That guy had sort of looked like Chance Cross.

CHAPTER 3

The morning after the meeting with the Stones, Chance took Trey's old pickup and went to Wilmington, about an hour inland from South Port. From there, he took a private speedboat out to the shoals, where ships came in and out of the inlet. It was tricky moving around there, as the shoals were known to tear ships apart. Many pirates had tried to hide in the shoals, or so the stories claimed.

He looked at the hieroglyphs in his dad's journal, and a sketch of the shoals his father had in there, as well. The Stone family had said this area had already been examined, but he felt compelled to investigate it himself.

The guide spoke to him as if he were a tourist, which was fine with him. He hadn't been here before, and with his blond hair and beach clothes, he definitely fit the part of the tourist perfectly—not to mention the sunglasses and the stupid visor the women had insisted he wear. No one from Cross Creek would recognize him; that was for sure. Mission accomplished.

The guide gestured to the little island. "There are some caves out here, like you mentioned. They have some hieroglyphs in them. It's not a huge tourist spot because, well, as you know, this area of the ocean tends to rip boats apart. But I'm a pro at it, so don't worry. There's another private boat. My competition."

The other speedboat was heading past them. Chance watched, but he was careful to keep his head down. It was fast

enough to be a blur, but he was able to make out a passenger—a woman wearing a dress, a huge hat, and sunglasses. Kelly? He pushed that thought away. She was in Europe. Why was he always seeing that woman wherever he went? It was ridiculous. Why would a world-class artist be here? Yet he couldn't help but turn and watch the boat disappear behind them.

Chance shook himself and pushed thoughts of the woman away. He had to focus on exploring these caves with the hieroglyphs. He didn't know what they would show him, but he had to find out something. He'd gone through so many scenarios about the gold with his brothers, and now with the Stone family.

If the gold hadn't been moved to Cross Creek—and since nothing was turning up, it was a major possibility—then it could still be around these parts. He had seen the gold piece that Hunter and Trent had found with Brooks—just the one piece of gold and the picture of the Stone parents. They had moved it.

Sure, the Stone parents had left that video that told everyone they'd taken it to a place where no one would find it, but after the letter between their fathers, everyone had assumed the gold had gone to Cross Creek. Though maybe it was just another red herring.

Chance hadn't become a sheriff because he believed everything at face value. Maybe this wasn't a *Hardy Boys* or *Nancy Drew* novel, but something didn't seem right. They were missing something; he just knew it.

They got to the little island, and Chance hopped out of the boat. He'd worn swim shoes with rubber soles. He assumed he'd be getting wet on this excursion. In fact, he'd be surprised if he wasn't soaked by the end of the day.

The guide led him toward the cave but stopped at the threshold. "I don't much like going into the cave." He shifted nervously. "There is lore about pirates always booby-trapping their treasure, and I've been around long enough to know that

weird stuff happens. Proceed with caution. I will wait for you. You have a flashlight on your phone—I'd use it."

With his phone light turned on, Chance headed into the cave and began searching. There were the normal hieroglyphs of stick men and women. There was also the usual graffiti that defaced even historical sites like this. He searched through the symbols for upwards of an hour. His phone wasn't keeping much of a charge; the battery was at a little less than half.

He heard the guide shouting at him. "Let's get going! I said an hour."

Frustrated, Chance ignored him.

As he continued to look, he found something that didn't exactly match the hieroglyphs. The treasure chest engraving was near the lower edge, where it wouldn't catch people's eyes. It looked more modern than the other markings, but what really got his attention was the symbol on it—the same broken arrow that was on the ranch's missile silos.

He snapped some pictures of it and then finally began heading back toward the guide waiting at the end of the cave. Maybe he'd come back here, but that might have to wait until after he'd investigated an address from his father's journal.

He'd googled the address last night and discovered it was the site of a church in Wilmington. How would a church fit into all of this?

CHAPTER 4

*K*elly sat at a coffee shop in Wilmington later that afternoon, after her little adventure out to the cave. She'd wanted to tour local places that could inspire her and she had a plethora of ideas from the cave, which was perfect because she wanted her art to have significance to this area. It was an idea she'd been flirting with ever since she'd decided to stay in this area.

The art she wanted to create needed mystique and meaning that reflected history, not like regular beach art. She was surprised there wasn't much 'historical' type of art around already. She'd spent the rest of the morning after her jaunt to the cave, looking in galleries around Wilmington. She hadn't seen any of the symbols represented in the art being sold. In all of her wanderings through different galleries in Wilmington and South Port and adjacent beach areas the past couple of days, she'd discovered that most of the art was commercial, with beachscapes, landscapes, and a few depictions of the Revolutionary War. Admittedly, the ports had been significant in those times. But none of the art focused on the symbols of the time—symbols that were sketched by natives early on.

Kelly sketched a couple of the symbols she'd found in the caves. She was very interested in some of the ones with turtles and different fish. She'd read a lot about the hunt for the conquistador gold. There were also different skulls, and she'd read up on the conquistador gold that had a skull on it and different palm tree shapes. She'd also read up on any articles about the gold in Cross Creek. One particular hieroglyph had caught her eye at the cave—a treasure chest with a broken

arrow on it. The same broken arrow that had been burnt into the Cross farm, according to the internet article she'd read.

Strange. How could South Port and Cross Creek be so tied together?

Kelly spent around an hour sketching. Finally, because she couldn't get rid of her unrest, she thought about the possibility of life growing inside her. Without thinking, she placed her hand over her belly and wondered what it would be like to explore this area with a child.

Her child?

Familiar panic washed through her. Could she really do this? Raise a child by herself? And what if Brian found her? Would he have rights? Could he take the child away? He lived in Oxford, England. Did that matter? She'd been afraid to find out. Of course, she hadn't told him. She didn't understand how she hadn't seen signs of his sociopathic disorder sooner. Kelly let out a sardonic laugh. Because he was a *sociopath*, that was why. She'd done more research on it since discovering she'd been deceived on so many levels.

The fear grew bigger inside her chest, and she pulled out her laptop and typed in "Planned Parenthood." Maybe she should just end things.

Guilt filled her. Could she do that?

No. Immediately, she rejected the idea.

Worry filled her. The least she should do was find out her options, right? She couldn't even be sure she was pregnant in the first place. She'd only missed one period, and the nausea she'd experienced lately could be from anything.

She hadn't been raised to think abortion was a possibility.

It wasn't, she told herself. She wanted to keep any child she'd helped create.

But she also didn't want Brian to constantly be in her life. Would having a sociopathic father be good for the child?

What if the child was a sociopath? She hadn't even thought of that until now.

Adrenaline spiked through her, and she stared at the Planned Parenthood page. The nearest building was closer than she'd thought, just down the next street. Maybe she could walk in and talk to someone. Find out options. Of course, she could give the child up for adoption. It would be better than the other way.

Tears slipped down her cheeks. She hadn't even realized they'd been waiting to fall. How could she kill her child or let them go? If only Grandma and Grandpa were still alive. They would talk her through this. She could have gone to the ranch and been safe, but now there was no safety for her.

Why was she having a breakdown right now in a coffee shop?

Kelly slammed her laptop shut and put it in her bag, along with the cord and her sketchbook. She took another sip of the coffee she'd barely touched. Maybe it was ridiculous, but ever since she'd started thinking she might be pregnant, she'd been drinking a lot less coffee. She didn't want to hurt the baby.

Except she was thinking about abortion ... wasn't that even worse?

Kelly slung her backpack over her shoulders, put her sunglasses in place, and headed for the door. She walked out into the sunshine, the sounds of the city soothing her. Which was funny, because after living in Oxford for so long, she'd told herself she hated the city and wanted out. Still, Wilmington wasn't as oppressive as Oxford. The buildings weren't as high, and it wasn't overcast today like it usually was in England.

As she began walking down the street, she noted a man getting out of an Uber. Wait, wasn't that the same guy she'd seen yesterday? She'd first spotted him last night on the pier and then today on a passing speedboat out to the shoals.

Panic froze her to the spot. Had Brian sent someone to find her? Should she be running or hiding?

After the guy shut the door from the Uber, he walked to the sidewalk and then stared up at the church. As if he could

sense her attention, he turned to face her. Between his blond hair, his hat, and the sunglasses, she didn't recognize this man.

He quickly pulled off his sunglasses and asked, "Kelly?"

Then it hit her, and she couldn't help but ask, "Chance?"

CHAPTER 5

Chance wouldn't have been more surprised if an earthquake suddenly engulfed the whole town of Wilmington. "Kelly?" he asked again. He quickly crossed the street so he could speak without raising his voice.

She looked dazed. "That can't be you. You look *so* different."

Reflexively, he touched his hair. He hadn't even recognized himself this morning. "Uh, yeah."

She frowned. "Why do you look so different?"

He ignored her question. "What are you doing here?" His mind raced, and he thought about how he'd seen someone last night walking the beach, then earlier today on the speedboat. He spotted a large hat tucked behind her backpack. "That was you today? On the speedboat, coming back from the shoals?"

None of this made sense.

She took a step back and put her hand on her heart. "Oh my gosh. I think I'm having a heart attack."

Chance reflexively stepped forward. She'd been like this growing up; anxiety would hit her and she'd pass out. Not that she was a frail person, but he'd had to keep her from falling when they'd been exploring or when she'd gotten really bad news. He put his hands on her shoulders. "You okay?"

She sucked in a long breath, then blew it out slowly. "No. I'm not okay. Why do you look like that?" She shook her head, as if coming back to herself. Then she pulled her

sunglasses off and shrugged out of his grasp. “What is going on? Why do you look that way, and why are you here? Did he send you? Are you a private eye for him or something?”

Chance shook his head, even more confused now. “I’m not a private eye. You know that. I’m a sheriff. And who would send me? What are you talking about?”

She put a hand to her head and sucked in a long breath. “Nothing.”

“Why would you think someone is after you?” Alarm bells rang in his head. Maybe he wasn’t a sheriff in *this* town, and maybe he was even on a super-secret undercover mission where he didn’t want anyone to know him, but his first love had dropped into his lap, and the way she was looking at him right now... well, needed answers. “What’s going on?” He crossed his arms and leaned back. Blaze would often tease that this was his sheriff position.

For a long time, she didn’t say anything, and then she pulled a water bottle from her backpack’s side pocket and took a sip. “I just need to get my bearings.”

He gestured to a little table and chairs a nearby coffee shop. “Should we sit down? When did you eat last?”

She didn’t move, her gaze still locked with his. “What are you doing here?”

Lightly, he touched her shoulder and gestured to the chair. “Let’s sit first, and then we’ll give each other some answers.”

Honestly, he wasn’t sure what to tell her. The truth? Oh no. The Stone family would hogtie him if he did that. He didn’t need a complication from Cross Creek.

She let him guide her to the seat, and he helped her take her backpack off. Her face was pale, and she put a hand to her stomach. “I’m going to be sick.”

Concerned, Chance gestured to a server who had just come out. “Can I get some water and maybe some crackers or a piece of bread?”

The server looked between them. “I’ll be back.”

Kelly squeezed her eyes shut. “Chance, I know you haven’t seen me in a long time, but I’m going to lose it.”

“What do you mean?”

She bolted out of her seat and toward a trashcan, then heaved into it.

Was it disgusting? Heck yeah. Had he seen worse? Yes. He hurried over to pull her hair back. It was longer than he’d ever seen it. It had been in a scrunchie, but it’d come loose when she had started throwing up. Now she was dry heaving.

When she was finished, he offered her a handkerchief from his pocket. She took it, wiping her mouth clean. Tears streaked down her cheeks. “I’m sorry.”

All his old feelings for her crept up. She looked so young and vulnerable. “It’s fine.” He held onto her shoulder and gently walked her back to the little chair. “Nothing to be sorry about. Are you okay?”

She sat and then sucked in a long breath. “Bad food, I think.”

The server returned with some water and, to Chance’s delight, some crackers. “Here you go,” he said. Chance pulled his wallet out, but the server waved him off. “It’s okay.”

Chance handed him a five-dollar bill. “Then for you. Thank you.”

The server looked at Kelly. “I guess that coffee didn’t sit well? Hope you feel better.”

All she’d had was coffee? Hmm. That didn’t make sense that she’d barf it up.

She took a napkin and wiped her face, then sipped the water. “Thank you. Sorry.”

Chance didn’t know what to do, but an upset stomach usually did better with some salt. He offered her a cracker.

She reached for it, meeting his eyes.

He had forgotten her cat eyes. Green with flecks of gold. Almond-shaped. Gosh, the woman was gorgeous. Even after

throwing up, her cheeks were flushed and hollowed in a way that made her look like a runway model. No. He wouldn't think about that. "Are you okay?" he asked again.

She nibbled on the cracker. Maybe it was just from throwing up, but her eyes were misty. "I'm okay. Must be food poisoning. I had tacos from a taco truck last night. I'm just sensitive." She let out a light chuckle, but Chance could tell she was embarrassed. "This is not how I thought I'd ever run into you. This isn't really the romantic version of running into your past love. You look completely different, and I just barfed in a trashcan."

It wasn't lost on him that she'd called him her *past love*. "Don't worry about it."

She pointed her partially eaten cracker at him. "Though I did see you at Grandma's funeral, even if we didn't talk."

Ouch. He remembered that day. He'd wanted to talk to Kelly, but it just never felt like a good time. Especially not with Trinity on his arm. "Sorry about that."

She waved a hand. "It's fine. Really. I mean, our past is my fault, right?"

He wasn't prepared for this candid conversation, and he couldn't tell if she was being real about it or sarcastic.

"Please, ignore me." She took a sip, then shook her head. "I'm just feeling off today, that's all."

On impulse, he smiled. In some ways, it felt natural for her to be telling him she was off. She'd always had this thing about off days or on days, creative days or noncreative days.

He blinked and tried to focus. "Uh. So what are you doing here, again?"

CHAPTER 6

“*W*hat are *you* doing here?” Kelly asked, countering Chance’s question with her own. The water and crackers were helping, despite the fact that her puking was a further sign that she might be pregnant.

He cocked an eyebrow. “You first.”

As if they had been transported back in time, she found herself wagging her finger in his face. “No way. You first.”

Chance was good at getting answers out of people and never having to answer back. Over the years, she’d often reflected that he would make a great sheriff because he had a knack for getting people to talk.

“No, you just threw up and I got you crackers. I think you owe me answers first.”

She laughed. “Whatever. I don’t owe you anything. Plus, when I saw you at Grandma’s funeral, you ignored me. So I’d say you owe me.”

He shook his head. “Ignored you?” He sputtered out a grunt. “I don’t think that’s how it happened.”

“But, you’re not the judge.”

“In this situation, I’m the one who helped you, so you talk first.”

She let out a long breath, then shrugged. “Fine, I’ll play *my* card then. Marissa told me you were going to marry Trinity.” She glanced at his finger. “Why didn’t you marry her?”

He sputtered out a laugh. “That is *not* the reason you’re here. That was the topic we were talking about. Plus, I don’t owe you an explanation.”

She shrugged. “True.”

“And,” he said, his face turning somber, “Marissa told me you guys talked. She told me what she told you and she also told me about Brian. Your *serious* boyfriend. The one who couldn’t come with you to your grandma’s funeral. What’s that about?”

Kelly was caught off guard by his accusatory look. “Marissa told you that?” She looked down at her crackers and then took another bite, digesting this information. Chance had talked about her with Marissa. Why had she never thought about that? Of course he would talk to her. That’s what happened in a small town. Hadn’t she and Marissa done the same thing?

She squeezed her eyes shut. If only he didn’t know about Brian.

“Kel, what’s going on?”

Irritated, she flashed her eyes open. He spoke as if they were still familiar with each other, as if no time had gone by. “You can’t call me that? I’m not ‘Kel’ to you anymore. You have to talk behind my back?”

He snorted. “Seems like you’re being defensive. Where is Brian?” Now he crossed his arms like he was interrogating her.

She shook her head, ticked off. “You know, you acted like a cop even in high school. But you see, this isn’t Cross Creek, and you’re not *my* sheriff.”

He let out a disbelieving laugh. “You always acted like this when you didn’t want to answer. Don’t you remember your grandma always telling you that you are too sassy for your own good?”

“Don’t talk about Grandma,” she said, jabbing a finger toward his face.

“I think I can talk about your grandma more than you can. I saw her nearly every day. I checked in on her. I checked in on her after your grandpa passed away. You didn’t.”

His words stabbed a deep place in the center of her chest. He was right. Grandma had told her that he checked in on her. She deflated. “You’re right. Thank you for always checking in on her.”

“I wanted to. I loved her.” His tone softened too, and he sighed. “I shouldn’t have made you feel guilty.”

She was defenseless against this guy, so she focused on the present. “Why do you look like that? Your hair and everything?” Her memory caught up, and she snapped her fingers. “You were the guy from last night. You were standing on the pier, watching me.”

His eyes widened. “Because I thought that was you. But I knew that couldn’t be you, because you were in Oxford, running your gallery, right?”

“I was. Until two weeks ago.” She didn’t know why, but she knew she could trust him.

He squinted. “What are you doing here? Vacationing? Is your boyfriend somewhere?”

She looked down and nibbled on another cracker. She was grateful that her stomach was settling down. She decided to just tell him the truth. “We broke things off. It’s been a couple weeks. He took it hard.” She left out the whole stalking and psycho thing.

For a long time, Chance said nothing, only surveyed her. “But you’re worried he’s looking for you?”

She only shrugged.

His brows knit together. “Hmm.”

She took the time to examine him as well. “You look so different with blond hair. With the sides shaved and the long hair on top, you look like a beach guy. I wouldn’t have recognized you if you hadn’t said my name.”

He grunted and then pulled his visor off and ran a hand through his hair.

Attraction sizzled through her, which was ridiculous. She couldn't be attracted to Chance Cross after all these years. Of course, she had always been attracted to him, ever since she'd met him. Well, strike that. They'd been best friends since she was eight and had moved to Cross Creek to live with her grandparents. Truthfully, she hadn't thought of him as more than a friend until he'd kissed her when they were fifteen.

"Kel, you still haven't told me what are you doing here?" He leaned in, putting his arms down on the table and taking a sip of her water without asking.

If anyone else did that, including Brian, she would tell them never to do it again. She didn't like sharing water or anything. But this was Chance Cross, and they had always done stuff like that. It sparked a memory of them even swapping gum at times.

He glared at her. "What are you thinking about?"

She couldn't help but burst out laughing. "I was just thinking about how we used to share gum when we were in junior high. Remember Mr. Matthew's class?"

He thought about that, and then he laughed for real. It sounded so good. "Yeah, one of us would buy Hubba Bubba and we'd bring it to class and share with each other."

She grinned, thinking of the memory. "But by the end, you would always hog the last piece, and then when I complained, you would laugh and give me half of what was in your mouth."

"And you would take it."

"Those were different days."

He closed his eyes for a second. "Yes, they were. Very different days."

Neither of them spoke for several minutes. It wasn't an awkward silence, it was like they were trying to process all the

years that had passed since then. But they couldn't, and they were unsure of each other.

Kelly stood and picked up her backpack, putting it back on. "Well, it was nice seeing you. I actually have to go run an errand."

"Oh, you think you can bump into me in this town and then run off like this? No. You're not just leaving me. You tell me what's going on."

She winced and shook her head. "I don't have to tell you anything." She started walking away from him, down the street toward where Google had said the clinic was. "Plus, you told me nothing as well."

He hurried to step in her path, stopping her. "Kel, what's going on? Are you okay?"

She lifted her brows. "Chance Cross, if you don't answer me first, then you won't get answers out of me."

CHAPTER 7

Chance stared at this beautiful woman, an older, more mature version of the girl he'd once loved. He hated that she was forcing answers from him, but he could play along if it meant getting more of her story. "Uh, I'm here on vacation. Just taking in the sights."

She looked doubtful. "In Wilmington?"

"I was going to this church to see what's in it. It's historical."

"And what were you doing at the shoals today?"

"What were *you* doing?"

She sighed and then grabbed her water bottle and took a drink. "As you know, I'm an artist. I've been wanting to create art around this area. So when people told me there were hieroglyphs in those caves, I thought it would be good to take a look at them and possibly create pieces about them."

Finally, she was telling the truth. But it led to more questions. "Why around here? Why in South Port last night? Is that where Brian is?"

She let out an annoyed breath. "We're not together, remember? We're done. And I don't know why I'm telling you this, because it doesn't matter, but I'm actually going to be living in South Port. I rented a little place on the pier for my gallery. I want to sell unique pieces of art, some of mine and some others."

“What? You’re moving to South Port?” All he could think about was the trip they’d taken when they were twelve.

She nodded. “Already have. I’m sure you know that I sold the ranch. I’m not a ranch girl. Grandma left it to me, but I didn’t know what to do with it.”

Chance couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Yeah. I mean, I knew you sold. We actually thought about buying it, but at the time, we were cash poor. Though I don’t think anyone has even moved into it.” He laughed. “I cannot believe you are settling in South Port. That trip with your grandparents ...”

She hesitated, then grinned at him. “That was a fun trip. Grandma and Grandpa did so much to make sure we had fun.”

So many memories washed over him. “Hey, I bet I’m still better at skipping rocks than you.”

She laughed, and he loved the sound. It made her seem younger. “No, I beat you all the time.”

“You did *then*, but you wouldn’t now. I’ve practiced.”

“Wait, you’ve practiced all these years?” She giggled, much to his surprise. “Just to make sure that if we ever met again, you could beat me?”

“That’s exactly right. I’ve had serious practice at the river every morning. Two hours. I’ve made all my brothers take me on just to make sure if there was *ever* a time I met you again, I would beat you at rock skipping.”

She giggled harder. “Stop.”

“It’s true.” Dang, this woman. Of course it wasn’t true, but he liked getting this reaction out of her and he didn’t care if it meant making himself look silly.

She wasn’t with Brian anymore. And he was single. His father had always gone on and on about having the right timing with a person.

No. No. No. He didn’t want to think that way about this woman.

“Well, I can’t believe we’re standing here having a conversation. I can’t believe you look like this.” She waved a hand at him. “I mean, you’re the *cowboy* type. Not the beach bum type.”

Her comment set him laughing. “You’re exactly right. In fact, I’m missing my Wranglers and my Stetson and boots about now.”

It was weird how life put you in certain places. In the past two years, he’d seen two of his brothers find their high school sweethearts, and here he was, staring in the face of his own. A chill washed through him. It was almost like maybe his father had orchestrated all of this from beyond the grave.

“What?” she asked.

“Nothing.” He would not tell her what he was thinking.

“No, you were thinking something. I know that look.”

Did it hurt his feelings that she cared what he was thinking? Heck no. But he couldn’t give himself away this quickly. “Did you come to South Port because of that trip we took?” He couldn’t help himself; he had to know. “Because I have to admit that when I was coming this way, it was all I could think about.”

“And you still haven’t told me why you come this way.”

He was silent.

She sighed. “To answer your question, no. I didn’t move my whole life here because of that summer trip, but I would be lying if that trip and this beach area didn’t have an impact on me.”

His heart raced. Maybe he had the same effect on her that she had on him. But he couldn’t push his luck now, so he looked up at the church. “Well, since I’m going in here, and you’re looking for things to do for local art, maybe you want to come into the church with me?”

Was that the dumbest idea he’d ever had? Probably. It felt easy to ask her, and he didn’t want this conversation to be over. At some point, he would have to deal with the fact that

he was in South Port under an assumed name and she couldn't tell anyone who he was. South Port was a small town too.

She hesitated, then looked up at the church, seeming unsure.

“It's a Catholic Church. Built in the 1700s. It's clearly been redone a couple times, but I thought it would be an interesting place to look.” He wasn't ready to tell her about the deep dive into the conquistador gold, about his family and the Stones.

She pulled her phone out and checked it, then looked back up at the church like she was trying to decide.

“I know you mentioned an errand. Can you do it later?”

She let out a long breath, then gave him a slow smile. “Sure. I can do it later. Let's go in.”

CHAPTER 8

*K*elly couldn't believe that she was walking into a church with Chance Cross. When she was young and dumb, she'd thought about having a church wedding with this man. So much had happened in her life since then, and she couldn't help but have her own questions about him. Wasn't it a coincidence that they had ended up at the same place today?

The church felt cooler than the daylight outside, and it had a musky smell to it. The chapel doors were open, and there was no one around.

"Are you looking for a priest?" she asked. Now she wasn't so sure she wanted to be here. "Do you need to confess something?"

He paused and cocked an eyebrow at her. "Or maybe you do? You still haven't really answered my questions. So tell me about your last relationship. You said it didn't work out. What happened to this ... what was his name?"

She rolled her eyes. "You know his name is Brian. We just let bygones be bygones, and we're done. I wanted to start over in South Port. Open my own gallery. End of story."

His gaze skimmed the interior of the building. "I believe that's the truth, just not the *whole* truth. You're worried he's looking for you."

She didn't answer.

He winked at her, then moved toward some of the pictures hanging on the wall. "But since I know you're in South Port,

I'll have time to get to the bottom of that later. Right now, I need to focus on some of these pictures and symbols."

It caught her off guard and made her nervous to learn that he would be in South Port. It also made her curious. "Tell me what you're looking for."

He tugged a journal out of a backpack and opened it up to a page.

A drawing of a shoal caught her eye, along with what appeared to be a broken arrow.

"My dad wrote some of these symbols down in his journal. Let me know if you see them." He pointed to the journal. "There are also several other pictures of different plants, maybe a palm tree or maybe a marijuana plant. I'm not sure."

"Why were these in your dad's journal?" She hesitated. "I was sorry to hear about his passing. He was a good man."

He jerked to face her, then turned back to a picture on the wall of the Savior on the cross. "Thank you."

She riffled through the journal. "You're also looking at crosses?"

He hesitated, then moved on to a stained-glass window that had different pictures inside each pane. "Yes. No. Honestly, I'm not sure. Just keep your eyes open for any of those and let me know what you think."

The stained glass seemed to be depicting the whole story of Christ, including his birth and some of the miracles he had performed. She studied it for a long time, thinking about all of the times her grandmother had her read the Bible and how they would talk about Jesus and all he'd done for them.

"What's up?" Chance softly nudged her.

She jolted. "Nothing. I was just thinking about reading the Bible with Grandma and how much she loved the stories of Jesus."

Chance softly chuckled. "Yes, she did. I remember her making us read with her before we left for a date."

She hadn't thought about that in a long time. It made her tear up.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just miss her sometimes."

Chance put his arm around her shoulders. It should have been weird, but it felt so normal. "Yeah, I miss her too. And my parents."

They stood like that for a long time.

"Do you believe it?"

Chance turned to her. "What?"

Kelly nodded to the depiction of Christ's life. "That someone died for our sins? That we needed a Savior?"

He frowned. "Of course. Don't you?"

She shrugged and pulled away from him. "I don't know anymore. Maybe it's just a story." She moved on to another picture and stared blankly at it.

He moved to her side. "I believe it because I *feel* it." He tapped his chest. "Right here. Always have. Don't you?"

It was nerve wracking, having this man put her on the spot. She turned to him and was stunned to remember how plain and honest he was. He did believe it. She wasn't ready to keep discussing it, so she pointed to another cross. "There's a cool cross."

Chance tugged a phone out of his pocket and snapped a picture of it. Then he snapped a couple pictures of other parts of the stained glass. "Good catch."

Her curiosity grew as they kept walking and he took pictures of different things. She paused when she saw a chest in the side corner that had a skull carved on it. She wouldn't have noticed it if she hadn't been looking for those symbols. "There's a chest, although it seems out of the way."

Chance froze and then rushed over to it. "Another good call." He took a picture and then carefully examined the whole

thing from the front. He looked around, then pulled it out from the wall.

Touching old things made her nervous—not just because it wasn't good practice, but because of her schooling and her dealings with antiques. “You probably shouldn't be doing that.”

Her objection seemed to fall on deaf ears. “Just keep a lookout, would you?”

She glanced around. They could get in trouble for this. People took antiques seriously, and she was one of those people. “What are you looking for? Why do you need to know about these symbols?” She snapped a picture with her own phone. “The same chest was in the shoals cave.”

He nodded, and then, before she could say another word, he opened the chest. “Yep.”

“Chance,” she whispered, tapping his shoulder. “What are you doing?”

To her disappointment, there was nothing in it.

Someone cleared their throat. “Can I help you? Or can I at least tell you not to touch those things?”

They both turned to find a priest, wearing the white collar and all.

Chance put his hands up. “Sorry, Father. We were just letting curiosity get the better of us. We thought this church looked interesting.”

The priest studied them, his eyebrows low. “Well, we would prefer that our guests don't touch things.”

Chance nodded. “Of course. My fault. Can you tell us anything about this church?”

Seemingly satisfied that they were contrite enough, the priest gestured around the church. “I imagine if you were doing any type of history online, you would see that this church is named after our Lady of Guadalupe. It burned to the ground, but it was rebuilt. A lot of the possessions in this church are old.” He nodded to the chest. “It is rumored that

that chest came from a ship carrying the conquistador gold. You might have heard of it recently in the press.”

Chance nodded. “I have. In fact, one of our stopping points will be the Stone family inn. And we’re going to that museum in South Port tomorrow, right?” He nudged Kelly and then put his arm around her. “We just got married. She can’t get enough of this stuff.”

She was totally confused now. Her heart pounded and she didn’t know what was going on, but she took his cue. “Yeah.”

The priest’s whole demeanor changed. “Really? Congratulations. I’m happy to see that you’re spending your honeymoon in the South Port area. We have some of the best history here in Wilmington.” He moved them out toward the center of the church. “If you come this way, you’ll get to see one of the oldest crosses. This cross was rumored to be stolen by slaves from the conquistador ship.” There was a glint to his eye. “It’s our pride and joy that this cross, made of pure gold, was rescued from that ship. At least, that’s the story.”

She looked up at the gold cross, impressed by its size. It hadn’t caught her eye at first, but now that she looked at it, she couldn’t believe that she hadn’t seen it before. “It’s beautiful. I’m an artist, Father; would you mind if I take a picture of it?”

The priest waved a hand. “Of course. There are pictures online, but I think the story of this cross gets lost. The slaves took it and started their own church. It was a couple miles into the swampland. The church burned down, and years later, the cross was donated to our church. The story is that the slaves felt like our Lady of Guadalupe could protect it for them. And it has survived two other fires.” He sighed and gazed proudly at the cross. “It’s a real national treasure, if you ask me.”

Chance also snapped a picture. “Agreed. It’s magnificent.”

Kelly’s fingers already itched to paint it. She backed up and took a larger picture of the whole inside of the church. With the right filter, this would be art at its finest for certain buyers. Her mind raced with ideas of how she could market it. Maybe she could link it to the conquistador gold?

She still wasn't sure about this whole situation, meeting Chance like this. As they talked to the priest and learned more about the history of the cross, she mused that even though Chance looked so different, the bond between them was as strong as ever, like they were on some sort of adventure together. Plus, he'd said they were married. That was weird. Why had he said that?

After a bit, the priest turned away from them. "Well, you can look around, or you can sit and ponder. I have duties to attend to."

"Thank you for your time," Chance said. Then he turned to her with a huge grin on his face. "Isn't this cool? This cross looks like the exact one that was in my dad's journal." He began looking at the other artwork on the walls.

She tagged along with him. "It is cool. And I'm grateful that I came with you, because this has given me some great ideas for my gallery. But I still don't understand what you're doing and why you have pictures from your dad's journal. Chance, what's going on?"

Chance gestured toward the doors. "Should we leave?"

She nodded, and they went outside. He stopped in front and took a few more pictures of the church's exterior. Like he was busying himself so he wouldn't have to answer her questions.

"Chance, what are you doing here?"

"How about we go to dinner tonight and talk about it? I have to get back to South Port, but I could pick you up wherever you are. We can talk about everything."

Part of her didn't want to agree to dinner. It felt ... contrived, maybe. She'd come to South Port looking to get away from her life, and now she was back in her past.

Not that he was Brian. She shuddered.

Chance frowned. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she said too quickly. She pulled her phone out and checked the time. The clinic was still open; she could

make it. “I’m going to run the errands I was going to do. I can’t do dinner tonight. Maybe another day? After you tell me what you’re doing here.”

He flashed a grin. “I can’t tell you that, but I can tell you that I’ll tell you more at dinner *tomorrow* night. Should we say seven?”

With a bit of reluctance, she agreed. Her curiosity got the better of her. He handed her his phone, and she put in her contact details.

He smiled, looking like he wanted to hug her.

She took a step back before he could act on it. “Okay. I’ll look forward to tomorrow night, then, and you can tell me more.”

He snapped his fingers. “Yes, I’ll tell you more. But one more thing. As far as anyone else knows, my name is Rob. Please don’t tell anyone you know me from Cross Creek.” Before she could ask about that, his phone rang and he put his finger up. “I have to get this. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

And with that, he dashed away.

CHAPTER 9

Chance got off the phone with his brother, Blaze, who was back in Cross Creek, gathered around the conference table with the rest of his brothers. They all wanted an update.

He told them about his discoveries at the Shoals and then at the church, but he didn't mention Kelly. He didn't know how to mention her yet. Not that he and his brothers had secrets, but he wasn't ready for them to barrage him with questions about *her* every second.

He went back to the parking lot where he had parked Trey Stone's old truck. He got in and started it. Considering what he'd learned about Kelly's situation, it felt like she was in hiding from her ex.

Later, back in South Port, Chance drove slowly down Main Street toward the pier. He took the street with all the shops and paused in front of the one that looked like it was being repainted. It was a couple down from Lucy's boutique and Roxy's clothing. On the other side of the street was Oliver Browne's beach store. Cheryse could be seen in her salon through the large window. There was also a deli and a bakery. Marshall's wife had mentioned that she used to own those.

Chance didn't get out of the truck, and for a few minutes, he wondered about Kelly. Then he got out and inspected the front of the store being painted. It seemed to be in good condition. How much would she be paying for rent? Not that it was his business. He peered through the glass front door,

though most of it was blocked by paper. All that was visible was a guy spraying paint on the walls.

So many questions and so few answers. That seemed to be the theme of his life at the moment.

“How are you doing today?” someone asked, startling him from his thoughts.

Chance turned and saw Tim Tucker, Kensi’s husband. He couldn’t help but smile at him and put his hand out. “I’m doing well today, Sheriff. How are you?” A lot of people knew about the deception. He had to admire the way the Stone family, including Tim, was handling his attempt to look for the gold.

Tim shook his hand and grinned back. He looked at the shop behind him. “I hear this place has been rented, in case you were thinking about it.”

“I have other things on my mind, but I was just looking around down here.” He didn’t want to talk about Kelly; his first instinct was to protect her. Which was stupid, because he didn’t even know what he was protecting her from.

Tim crossed his arms and leaned back on his heels. “This is a good town. It’s been through its fair share of drama. As I know your town has.”

Chance nodded and gestured to the pier. “You want to walk out there with me? I was here last night, and I really enjoyed the view.”

Tim nodded and pulled his hat off, rubbing his hair back. He was sweating in the hot sunlight. “I would. Let’s walk.”

They crossed the street together, and Chance wondered again if he should ask Tim to keep an eye on that place or if he should just stay out of it. Ugh. He wouldn’t be able to stay out of it.

“Did you find anything today?” Tim asked quietly. They walked past a bunch of restaurants and then stepped onto the pier.

“I don’t know,” Chance said honestly, pulling out his phone and going to his photos. “There was an address that led me to this church in Wilmington. Check out these pictures.”

Tim scanned through the photos on the phone. “I’ve been past that church before. Haven’t thought much about it. They have some history, don’t they?”

Chance nodded. “I didn’t know until today that the cross from that sketch in my dad’s journal, and from the caves at the shoals, was an actual cross that had been saved from a conquistador ship. The story is that some slaves saved it and used it for their own church for many years.”

“Right. Their church burnt down twice, and then with segregation and everything, the church was built again closer to the center of Wilmington.”

“It’s in a Catholic church, and it’s a pretty marvelous sight to behold. The priest I spoke with said it was made of pure gold.”

Tim flashed him a look and then kept searching the pictures, hovering over different pictures of the cross. “What are you thinking?”

“I don’t know,” Chance said, shrugging. “I would love to pull that cross down and inspect it. But that seems impossible.”

Tim pulled out his own phone and texted something. “I think we should keep the group informed. Let’s ask Brooks if he knows anything about the cross.”

Before Chance could object, Tim called Brooks.

Chance found himself pulled into a conference call with all of them.

Later that evening, Ava asked if Chance wanted to eat dinner with them. He didn’t feel like doing that, so he told her he wanted to go for a walk and have some time to himself. It was true, but he also wanted to check out the address where Kelly had said she was living. He checked it out on Google Maps. It was a mile and a half down the beach line, through town.

As he walked the beach, it was fun to see the tourists finishing up their beach days and enjoying summer. What would it be like to visit South Port with a family? How different would his life be if he'd married Kelly? Would they live here, or in Cross Creek? How many kids would they have?

No. He couldn't be thinking like that.

Unrest filled him. Something was amiss with her. Was she feeling better after the food poisoning? Why had she and Brian ended things? He itched to text her, but it didn't feel right.

He got to the public park outside of town and approached a couple of food trucks. Tacos sounded good. He hadn't realized until now that he'd gone the whole day without eating. Hopefully this wasn't the food truck that had gotten her sick.

Chance sat at a park bench and ate the tacos, watching the sun go down. It stayed light out, since it was summer and the sun didn't set until much later. Peace settled over everything. He liked nightfall, although as a cop in a small town, night tended to be when the problems started.

He wanted to call in and check on his family, but they would be eating supper right now. He opted to call Cheyenne. Since she was in college, her schedule was erratic.

It went straight to voicemail, and then he got a text.

What's going on, bro? I have a late class tonight. Remember I'm doing summer classes?

He texted her back. *That's right. Just wanted to check in. Hope you're doing well. Love you.*

Cheyenne was, of course, the darling of the family. Not only was she the youngest, but she was also the only girl. Their father had passed away when she was only in high school. At first, he'd been resentful that Porter had been the one assigned to be her guardian, but as he'd watched him take over and live up to being a father figure in her life, he'd seen that it was a good decision.

Chance and his brothers would always take care of her. If she ever needed any of them, they would be there for her, just

like they'd be there for each other.

He stood and threw the trash away, then went back to the beach. He didn't want Kelly to think he was stalking her, but he wanted to get a look at the place she was living at.

As he went farther down, the sun drew closer to the horizon. When he approached her place, he passed by a lot of beach area before reaching a little fence bordering an overgrown yard. The house was older, and the lights were on. The windows were open, and he smiled as he heard a Neil Diamond song, "Sweet Caroline."

Then he was frozen to the spot as he saw Kelly sitting at a potter's wheel. She was completely immersed in whatever she was creating. The wheel was spinning, and her hands were in the clay. He didn't know what she was creating. He had never seen her do this. It must've been something she learned at college. Gosh, she was beautiful. She was wearing a tank top, and her blond hair was up on her head with a turquoise scarf wrapped around it. Her large loop earrings gave her a Romanian vibe.

She was glowing, just like she would whenever they were doing anything creative as kids. It was part of the reason he'd fallen for her. They had been in a play together in high school, and as they'd spent hours in the lead roles in *Oklahoma*. She had been beautiful and bossy and totally in command of their scenes.

Attraction burned through him, along with admiration for her and her creative ability.

For a brief moment, she stopped and reached up to wipe her head, using her wrist that didn't have clay on it. He stepped behind a bush, not wanting her to look up and see him. His heart raced. He should go, but after a minute, he moved back so he could see her. She was once again fully immersed in her project.

Chance wasn't sure how long he watched her, but it was way past sundown when he strode back along the beach toward the Stone family inn. The moon was out, and the waves

seemed to pulse through him even though he wasn't in the water.

All he could see in his mind was the woman he had loved for most of his life.

CHAPTER 10

*K*elly woke early the next morning and spent an hour or two unpacking boxes and getting her things settled. She had rented this beach house with an option to purchase. The owner had told her she had twelve months to decide; then she would have to either buy it or leave.

The more she pattered around the place, the more she liked it. It wasn't big, as it was more of a cottage, but it did have two bedrooms and two bathrooms. Nothing was modern—it was more remodeled and had a seventies feel, which she didn't mind. It was part of the reason she'd played "Sweet Caroline" last night along with some other Neil Diamond songs.

A wave of nausea hit her while she was picking up a box. She paused and sucked in a long breath. They'd verified at the clinic last night that she was pregnant, about fourteen weeks. Which was crazy because she could swear she'd only missed one period. But the doctor had assured her the tests were pretty accurate these days. He had been careful about not asking her too many questions, but she had told him that it was just her, no father.

It felt strange to even think about that word. *Father*. She'd been so young when her parents had died, and she barely remembered her father. Of course, she had some pictures and some of his things packed away in another box, but she wished she had her own memories of him. Her grandmother had told her stories about him over the years. He'd loved Neil Diamond.

She moved into the kitchen and got a drink of water, then ate a few crackers. That helped her feel a little better, at least physically.

What was she going to do?

She wouldn't even think about telling Brian. She felt so stupid for falling for him, for getting trapped in that cycle of violence. Of course, she'd read about domestic violence, but she'd thought it was for stupid people. How had it happened to her? She was a strong woman. She'd left her small town and gotten an education in Europe. She'd worked at the finest galleries. Yet she had found herself making up lies about being clumsy and falling into a door.

She suspected her last gallery owner had known. Oftentimes he would say things about the laws and how people couldn't hurt each other.

Ashamed of herself, she moved to the window and gazed out at the ocean, ignoring the boxes that still needed to be unpacked. Brian didn't know where she was. Again, she reminded herself that she was completely off all social media. Plus, she'd always been the one in charge of the finances, and he never had access to her money. At least there was that.

Too bad, at the edge of her thoughts, she could still hear him. He'd say things like, *I love you so much that I'll kill you if you ever leave me. That's how much I love you.* When he'd first said stuff like that, she'd thought he was joking. The longer she'd been with him, the more intense he'd become.

When the violence had started, she'd actually gone to the police and reported it. They'd taken Brian in, but not before he'd pleaded with her. He'd told her that it was just a mistake and she'd provoked him. He'd been brought up that way, and he would do better. Didn't he deserve a second chance? Part of the reason she and Brian had grown close in the first place was because he didn't have family. He had no parents, and he'd been in foster care. It had been the two of them against the world. So she'd caved.

When it happened again and again, each time he'd feel so terrible, he'd be so pathetic, he'd have so many excuses. Then

he would become Mr. Prince Charming. He knew just how to play her. She hated herself for putting up with it.

Well, it was over now.

Kelly sucked in a long breath and let it out slowly. She still wasn't sure what to do about being pregnant, but she couldn't think about it today. She had to go check out her soon-to-be gallery and see how the painters were doing.

She paused next to the potter's wheel and stared at her creation. After she'd thrown different parts of it, she'd worked intricately on the piece to make it perfect. Now she picked it up and smiled. It looked just like the cross from the church. Of course, it wasn't as big, but she'd remembered the intricate carvings and where the jewels were. She could already picture the end result. She knew someone who owned a kiln; she would call him in the next day or two. Then it would be perfect.

She hesitated. Could she cut the top off so it had a secret compartment? Maybe.

A strange sensation crept over her, and she looked around. When she glanced out the window, she saw the back of someone who was now walking away from her place.

Brian?

Her heart raced, and she wanted to rush out of the house to see if it was him, but she was afraid. It couldn't be him, right? No. She wouldn't allow herself to think it was him.

After a quick shower and assembly of a light summer dress and just the right amount of makeup, she headed toward her gallery. She still wasn't sure what to call it. Something magnificent, of course. Something creative and meaningful. She needed the right words.

It was ten in the morning when she parked her car and got out, and most of the shops were just starting to open. It made sense, as most of the tourists weren't out and about until around lunchtime. She liked that about having a gallery in a beach town. She didn't have to get up too early, and if she did,

she could work or exercise or just live her life before coming into work.

Kelly unlocked the doors and stepped inside, pleasantly surprised that the first coat of paint was on the walls. Just like the painter had said. It was a nice, soft gray-blue color. She could never be certain how much she would like some pieces of art until it was finished, but she was already starting to like this gallery.

Giddiness swept through her. She was so close to achieving her dream. If construction stayed on course, she'd probably be able to open in two or three weeks.

As if on cue, the guy she'd hired to 'general' this project for her showed up. "I hope you're satisfied with the first coat." He put his hand out. "Good morning."

Kelly smiled. This guy felt like one she could trust. He was married to Lucy, the boutique owner down the street. "Matt, good morning. Your guys did a good job."

Matt nodded and then pulled out some paper plans from his bag. "I was hoping you would be around. I want to go over the design of the shelves and how you want them. If the second coat of paint gets on today, I'm thinking we can start putting the shelves up and designing this with all the cupboards and the storage in the back office pretty quick."

Delighted, she moved with him to a makeshift table in the center of the space. Matt spread out the plans. She had worked on them extensively, and with Matt's help, they'd created a vision.

Matt pointed to the back wall. "As we talked about, we demolished this wall yesterday, and I will have my drywall guy fix it today. That will open up to make your office bigger." He pointed to a different area of the shop. "And then you want this whole room back here for storage. That comes in from the street, right?"

She nodded. "Exactly. Can we go look at it?"

Matt looked over the paper and then grinned at her. "Let's go."

She followed him to the back and was impressed by the wall that had been removed and already reframed. He would be able to put drywall up today. “You work fast. I’m grateful.”

When you hired people, you never knew how things would turn out, but she’d been lucky to stop in at Lucy’s boutique and get a referral.

“I like working hard and getting done fast. And I pride myself on both quality and speed.”

Kelly grinned up at him. “Who knew contractors would have those two principles work hand in hand?” She followed the hallway back to the room that would be her office, and then they headed into the storage room. “This will be perfect.” She pointed to a wall. “Could you just make sure there are three shelves that give plenty of room for me to put paintings there and other collectibles? I want cabinets that can lock to keep them safe when they’re in storage.”

Matt nodded. “Of course. If you want to go look at Lucy’s storage, you might like it. We can actually push this wall out into the street and give you another five feet. That’s what we did with hers. The easement on the property allows that. Of course, you’d have to check with the owner, but it’s Ms. Roxie next door. I bet she won’t mind.”

That thought delighted Kelly. Five more feet of space would certainly help; she could store things without needing a rental unit. “I’d like that.”

Matt moved toward the back door. “Ms. Roxie gets in about now. Let’s go talk to her.”

CHAPTER 11

Chance woke the next morning in a 007-themed room. He was getting used to the themed room and it made him smile. Ava had told him the night before that it was normally Brooks's room, playing along with the whole FBI thing. It was one they usually didn't rent out, and Brooks had agreed that Chance could stay here.

He stretched in front of the window that faced the beach, admiring the beauty of the ocean. A beach town had its perks; he could see why Kelly would choose this place. He thought of that summer when her grandparents had taken them all here. Even though they had only been twelve, it had been so much fun.

Chance dropped to his knees and started his day with prayer. His mother and father had taught all his siblings to pray. It was helpful in getting him through the different things in his work life that troubled him. He found himself praying for Kelly, for the Stone family, and for his brothers and sister.

Once he finished, he flipped through the journal, hoping for more clarity today. He paused on the scribbles of the cross that matched the one in Wilmington. He tried to think about how two Navy SEALs—his father and the Stones' father—would handle a situation like the gold. They must have been very good friends if his father had agreed to help.

There still wasn't clear evidence, besides the letter, that his father had taken the gold off their hands. Heaven knew they'd spent a long time looking for the gold on the property.

Chance moved into the bathroom and paused as he saw his reflection in the mirror. At first he'd hated the changes, but now he sort of liked seeing himself as a beach guy. He had a day's worth of growth on his face, and he decided to leave it. He was on vacation, after all.

He thought about taking Kelly to dinner tonight, and something akin to teenage nervousness bubbled inside of him. Which was ridiculous. They weren't teenagers. From their brief conversation, he knew she had to be running from something. And he was determined to find out what.

Half an hour later, Chance walked into the Stone family kitchen. Ava and Trey were both there, and they looked like they were expecting him.

Trey gestured to the seat at the table. "We thought we could talk today. You came in last night and went straight to bed. We wanted to hear more about that cross you told everyone about on the call yesterday."

Ava put down a plate of food. "Eat, and let's chat."

"Thank you." Chance was starving. He sat, said a simple prayer over the food, and began eating.

Trey put the tips of his fingers together and squinted. "I have this feeling that you're not telling me something. I've learned to trust those feelings in my life." It was a little daunting to see the look on this man's face—almost like he could see into Chance's soul.

With a sigh, Chance said, "There might be a slight complication to this whole mission. I ran into a woman I knew from Cross Creek a long time ago."

Ava lifted her brows. "A woman? You mean someone you dated?"

Leave it to a woman to ask those questions.

He nodded. "We've been friends since we were young, but we also dated."

"Seems like there was more to it than that." Trey leaned in. "What did you say to her?"

Against Chance's better judgment, he told them about the whole conversation. "We were friends growing up, and she lived on her grandparent's ranch. Funny thing was, when we were twelve, we went with her grandparents on this RV trip and crossed the US. We actually vacationed in South Port for a week. She says that's the reason she decided to put down roots here."

Ava shook her head. "Putting down roots? What's her name? I haven't heard of anyone new."

"Kelly Hamilton."

Trey laughed. "Oh gosh. Just what we need—a woman to complicate things."

Chance couldn't help but smile. "Believe me, it's not my preference."

Ava sat down on the other side of him. "So was she your *true* love?"

"Ava." Trey rolled his eyes.

Chance couldn't help but laugh. "She was definitely important to me."

"Did you almost marry her?" Ava squinted at him. "You can tell us."

"Ava!" Something akin to compassion washed over Trey's face as he turned to Chance. "I'm sorry. My wife and the other women around here are obsessed with this stuff."

Chance tried not to appear uncomfortable. "She may have been someone I would have married."

Surprising him, Ava put her hand gently on his shoulder. "That's rough. But I am sensing a second-chance romance here."

Chance shook his head. "No, but I do need to talk to her tonight. I told her to call me Rob and not tell anyone I'm from Cross Creek."

"That's so exciting." Ava sighed wistfully.

Trey shook his head. “Ignore my wife. You know how these women are, always matchmaking and thinking everything is a romance novel. You do need to make sure she doesn’t blow your cover. What have you told her?”

“Nothing, except that I’m here on vacation. And to call me Rob.” Chance cleared his throat. “We’re meeting tonight for dinner. I guess she’s opening a gallery on the pier.”

“What?” Ava asked. She pulled out her phone and sent a text.

Trey scowled. “Ava, you should wait to ask Lucy until we know more.”

“Lucy says that Matt is contracted to be her general contractor, and the new place is just a couple doors down from her. Ms. Roxie is letting her make some pretty major renovations to the empty space that’s been available for some time.”

Chance wasn’t surprised that they could find these connections so quickly. After all, he was from Cross Creek; he knew how small towns could be.

“Well, that’s that,” Trey said. “Let’s go meet this woman.”

Nearly spitting out the sip he’d just taken from his water, Chance gave them a wide-eyed look. “Right now?”

Ava moved to open a sliding glass door, calling out to their kids in the backyard. “Micah, you’re in charge. Dad and I have to go run an errand.”

Micah simply waved a hand in reply, and the two smaller kids continued playing.

Ava turned back and smiled. “You know, Trey and I have had our own second-chance romance in this town.”

Trey rolled his eyes. “Woman, enough. Let’s go.”

She winked at Chance and put her arm through Trey’s. “I’ll tell you another time. But I’m just saying this is a great town for that.”

Chance ended up insisting he would just follow them down to the Main Street shop. The whole way there, he was nervous and didn't know what to expect.

As they got out of the cars, he saw that the shop doors were open and there were people inside. Before they could even go in, someone hollered, "Trey!"

Chance turned back and saw Marshall, Trent, and Hunter walking across the street.

Marshall nodded to them. "We saw you guys headed this way and decided to see what you're doing. It's cool that this place finally rented, right? I heard it's going to be some type of gallery."

Trey let out a long breath and then turned to Chance. "We might as well fill them in. Since everyone insists that you have a secret identity, we need to let them know she'll be in on it."

Chance didn't know how to feel about it, but he listened as Trey gave them the simple basics about how Chance had known Kelly his whole life and that she'd recently relocated here. Chance's brothers had often teased him about being a town gossip, but he'd never thought much of it because everyone in Cross Creek was like family to him. Now he was on the other side of all the gossip, and he didn't like it.

Hunter grinned at him. "The past will get you, dude. It did me."

Marshall roared a laugh. "Hey, it got all of us. Brooks is the only one who didn't marry someone from his past. And we like her ... okay."

The brothers laughed, and Ava smacked Marshall's shoulder. "Stop. We love Serenity."

A new voice called out, "I didn't know we were having a town reunion." Lucy approached, wearing a sundress with heels and a hat to match. She practically glided toward them, looking like she'd just stepped out of a magazine. Chance instantly recognized her, even though she looked different today.

Ava gave her a hug. "You met Chance the other night."

“Of course, *Rob*.” Lucy winked at him and then turned to the others. “I gathered from Ava’s text that the person who rented this place has some connection to Chance.”

Ava took a second to fill her in.

Then Lucy gave him a wide smile. “Another second-chance romance in South Port.”

Marshall pointed at them. “I thought it was cool until you guys acted so sappy.”

Chance had no idea how to react to all this drama. He didn’t have a chance to think about it, because Lucy’s husband Matt walked out of the shop. “You all came. Great. I need you to grab hammers and help me with some shelves.”

CHAPTER 12

*K*elly was stunned to see Chance in the group of people filing into the gallery. She would've been less surprised to see mountains instead of a beach in South Port. Strangely, Chance looked quite at home among them.

He walked over to her and smiled. "Hey. I wanted to bring some people down to meet you."

Her brow furrowed. "O-kay."

Another man moved forward and shook her hand. "I'm Trey Stone. This is my wife, Ava, and we own the Stone family inn where Chance is staying."

As if sensing her confusion, Chance leaned into her. "This group of people knows that I'm Chance. But most of the time we need to use Rob."

Trey nodded. "My bad."

A very dressed-up woman slipped into the conversation. "We met briefly the other day."

"Right. Lucy."

She grinned at her. "I'm friends with the Stones, and I didn't realize that this guy knew you."

Kelly was surprised at all of the connections and a bit unsettled by it. "It's crazy." She gave a 'what is going on' look and Chance only shrugged.

Lucy looked confused. “Kelly, tell us how you got into art.”

Kelly found herself explaining to Lucy—and everyone else, because they were all listening—how she had studied in Europe and had run a gallery there for a couple years, and now she wanted to create and sell her art here. “I want to have a special emphasis on the things around South Port that make it historic. I ran into Chance yesterday at the church in Wilmington. We actually got a good look at the cross, and I want to re-create it to sell.”

The others lost interest as the conversation drew on, and Matt started showing them the construction that needed to be done.

Trey cut in. “I don’t know how much *Rob* has told you, but I feel like we should probably bring you into the loop, because we want to make sure that no one knows who he really is.”

Taken aback, Kelly said, “Okay.”

Chance cleared his throat. “Trey, I’m actually going to dinner with this lady tonight. Would you care if I just fill her in then?” He looked around, and Kelly noted that a few tourists had walked into the shop. “I think there’s already enough people who know the story. Let’s keep it quiet.”

Trey nodded. “Good point.”

“I am happy to do whatever needs to be done,” Kelly said. “But I have to admit, I am totally confused.”

Ava patted her shoulder. “Don’t worry. He’ll bring you up to speed tonight. I’ll have you over another day, and you can meet the family and we can get to know you better too. Maybe Sunday would work? We all go to Pastor Henry’s church in the center of town. You’re welcome to join us. Or if you don’t want to do church, just come at about four for lunch or dinner. We just combine it on Sundays.”

“Thank you. I’ll go to dinner for sure.” Honestly, Kelly couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt so included. It was probably when she’d been in Cross Creek and her grandmother would invite people over for Sunday dinners.

Lucy flitted her fingers at Matt. “Okay, handsome. I’m heading back to my shop. Get to work.” She gestured to all the men. “The rest of you could help for an hour. I think he has some demolishing to do, and then you could start framing in the back area.”

Kelly liked Lucy immediately. She was a take charge and strong-headed kind of woman.

The men groaned, and then Trey turned to Matt. “We can give you an hour. Right, guys?”

The one named Marshall put a finger in the air. “One hour. I’ll just have to tell Kat she has the shop by herself.”

A sudden wave of nausea had Kelly putting her hand to her stomach. She looked at all of them and said, “Thank you. Sorry, I’m not feeling well.”

She rushed to the back and then into the alley just in time to throw up out of earshot. There wasn’t much in her stomach, but she was shaking and felt unsteady.

Then a hand settled on her back. “Kelly, what’s going on?”

Kelly’s cheeks burned. “Nothing.” She tried to wipe her mouth clean, and Chance was quick to offer her his handkerchief again. She couldn’t help but laugh. “I don’t know if any other man in this whole town has a handkerchief in his pocket. What else would I expect from a cowboy sheriff?”

He frowned at her. “What’s going on, Kelly?”

She wouldn’t explain here—wouldn’t tell him the whole story. Honestly, she didn’t want to tell anyone. “I’m fine. I just haven’t been feeling well.”

Chance looked her up and down, then put his hand on her forehead. “No fever.”

“Chance.” She pulled away, although she appreciated that he was trying to help her.

“Rob.” He gave her a stern look.

One of Matt's workers passed by them, and he hesitated and stared at them for a moment.

"Sorry. Rob. I mean Rob."

Chance waited until the worker was gone before releasing her. "You'll tell me what's going on with you tonight." He turned to walk back into the shop.

Nerves gripped her. Could she tell him the truth? Could she really tell him that she was pregnant and terrified and had even thought about getting rid of it?

Tears slipped down her cheeks, and she quickly brushed them away. Grandma always said to "think happy thoughts" when she was sad.

Happy thoughts, happy thoughts, happy thoughts, she chanted to herself, trailing after Chance.

She was opening a gallery. That was a very happy thought.

Kelly sucked in a breath and gestured down the hallway. "Excuse me. I have to get back to this. Matt and I were just going over how I want my storage room to look. But I will see you later for dinner, okay?" Her eyes met his, and she could see the concern there.

He frowned. "Okay. I'll pick you up at six at the address you gave me. Deal?"

She knew Chance. If she didn't agree, he would drag her somewhere else and make her explain everything right now. "Deal."

CHAPTER 13

That night, as Chance stared into the mirror in the bathroom next to the O07 room, he put some product in his hair to make it intentionally messy. It felt strange to wear it this way, but earlier he had spoken to Porter's wife, Sadie, and she had given him this idea. Of course, they were all interested to discover that Kelly was living in South Port. All of his brothers and even Cheyenne were texting him things about dating Kelly.

He had actually facetimes Sadie and had her help him decide what to wear. He'd settled on khaki pants and a white, short-sleeved shirt. Sadie had said he looked really good. He trusted her. Dang, he was nervous.

As he walked down the stairs, Ava was waiting for him by the front door. No one was at the counter. Chance had seen Micah working there yesterday, but maybe they didn't need as much help manning things today. Ava and Trey had mentioned that two of the families had left this morning.

Ava grinned at him. "I was hoping to catch you. You look great."

Trey sauntered down the hallway and put his arm around Ava. "You do look good."

Chance felt ridiculous. "Thanks. It'll be easier to explain everything and get her cooperation in keeping my presence quiet if I have a chance to butter her up with dinner."

"How come she threw up earlier?" Ava asked, frowning.

“I don’t know. Yesterday she did the same thing. She said she had food poisoning. I am going to ask if she’s feeling better tonight. I’m worried about her.” Chance barely knew these people, but they were already starting to feel like family. Maybe that was what shared secrets did for people.

Trey cocked an eyebrow. “Is she okay?”

“I don’t know what’s going on, but I think she might be running from her ex or something.”

“Really?” Ava bit her nail. “That’s not good. Poor thing.”

Trey shook his head slowly. “We can handle jerks around here.”

Chance couldn’t help but grin at him. He appreciated strong men who took care of women. Heck, he was one of them. He didn’t care if it was chauvinistic; he liked to help people, especially women and children. He felt like it was a man’s duty to protect them and help them when he could. “I’ll find out more tonight.”

“Where are you going to eat?” Trey asked.

Trent shrugged. “I don’t know. I haven’t gotten that far. I guess I should think about that.”

“Go to the Italian place on Second Street. It’s one of our favorites.” Ava gazed up at Trey and smiled.

Trey winked at him. “That’s where Ava was convinced to be my business partner, and it was where our second-chance romance began.” He gently kissed his wife on the lips.

Chance couldn’t help but laugh. “Okay. Another surprise about you, Trey. I would expect that from the women, but from you?”

Trey actually blushed. “Yeah, yeah. I guess all these women have rubbed off on me. Plus, I got to see my brothers and their second-chance romances, and it’s kind of fun.” He frowned. “If you need backup, you’ve got my number. If there’s something that needs to be investigated, we can call Tim. I know you have connections, but please keep us in the loop.”

“I will. Thank you.” Who knew that in coming to South Port, Chance would inherit another family? Maybe the gold was good for something after all. He’d never considered that his family and the Stone family could be close. Yet, why not? Their fathers had been, and sorting this whole mess out would take all of them.

A couple of minutes later, Chance pulled up to Kelly’s house. She was already coming out the door when he parked Trey’s truck. He got out and walked around to open her door. “I was going to come to the door and knock and be all official.”

She shook her head. “It’s a mess in there. I need a couple days to settle in, and then I’ll show you.”

He marveled at how beautiful she looked. Her long blond hair and green eyes were stunning. She wore black shorts and a silk turquoise top that outlined her curves. His eyes traveled along the strappy shoes that went up her legs and heels. “You look amazing.” His heart raced, and suddenly he was a nervous teenager again.

This was more than just a teenage love thing, though. They’d been best friends for most of their lives. He’d always enjoyed her flair for fashion. Maybe it was the artsy part of her that always had her designing the next thing to wear.

“Thank you.” She reached for her ear, holding out a longer earring. “I actually designed these. I thought I would wear them with this top.”

He looked closer, seeing that it was an infinity symbol shaped in topaz. “Wow. You’re talented. And that symbol. You’ve always loved the infinity symbol.”

“Good memory.” She got into the truck when he opened the door for her.

When they made it to the restaurant and got seated, Chance decided that he really liked the ambiance. “Trey recommended this place.” He left out the part about how this was where they would supposedly get back together.

Kelly pointed to the outside patio. “I saw this when I walked past on the beach the other day. I wanted to try it, so I’m glad we’re here.”

Chance ordered an Italian dish with steak. She ordered fish.

When the server left, Chance reached for some breadsticks. “That’s funny. I’m the meat guy; you’re the fish girl.”

It had always been their little joke.

She nibbled on a breadstick. “True. I guess the more things change, the more they stay the same.”

He looked up, and her eyes were riveted on his. Those nervous flutters began in his gut, and he couldn’t stop himself from saying, “Tell me about Brian. What happened? Is he the reason you’re here?”

Her expression instantly changed to annoyance. “No way. You tell me about your family and South Port. If you remember, I’m the one keeping your identity a secret.” Then she looked around, seeming concerned.

“What’s wrong?”

“Um. Nothing. I mean, I don’t know ...” she trailed off, still looking around suspiciously. “Well, I might as well tell you. I feel like someone’s been watching me. I mean, it’s probably nothing,” she said, taking a sip of water. “But sometimes I just randomly feel like someone is watching. My ex, maybe?”

“What?” He didn’t like the sound of that. “Tell me about it.”

She shrugged. “No, it’s fine. Probably nothing.”

Chance hesitated. She was being skittish again. He’d have to play the long game. “Okay. So how is the construction going? Looks like it will be quick. Matt will get you up and running in no time.”

Her face fell, and she shook her head. “It looked that way, except now there are some busted pipes. Matt says it’ll

probably be at least two weeks before those can all be pulled out and fixed, and then they can get back to construction.”

Their conversation was interrupted as a man walked toward them. “Rob. How are you doing tonight?”

Raine Birch.

Chance stood, and they shook hands. He had met Raine a couple times when the Stones had been to the ranch and on the Zoom calls. Raine was also the foster brother of Truman, who had caused the Cross family all sorts of problems. “Hey.”

Raine turned and looked at Kelly.

“Where are my manners?” Chance was suddenly nervous. “This is Kelly Hamilton. She just relocated here. She’s opening a shop on Main Street.”

“I heard.” Raine’s expression brightened as his wife walked up to him. “You remember Sarah,” he told Chance. He gestured to Kelly. “Kelly, Sarah. Sarah, Kelly.”

Kelly looked uncomfortable, but she smiled and shook her hand. “Nice to meet both of you.”

Raine explained to his wife that Kelly was going to open a shop.

Sarah turned to Kelly. “What kinds of things are you going to sell?”

Kelly went into a little spiel about historic art, and then she showed off her earrings and explained her whole idea about selling jewelry to match the art.

Sarah grinned widely. “That’s a great idea. So cool. I’ve seen Matt over there with his crew, rebuilding the place. It’s nice to meet the owner.” She tugged on Raine’s arm. “Honey, let’s get seated.”

Raine patted Chance on the shoulder with a familiarity Chance didn’t really appreciate. “See you later, Rob.”

“Yeah. See ya.” Chance watched as they headed off. It felt so weird when people called him Rob.

Kelly folded her arms. “Let me guess: those people know that you’re Chance too. Does anyone in town actually think your name is Rob?”

Chance was irritated by the situation too. “We’re trying to keep on the down low.”

A server dropped off their drinks. Kelly took a sip from hers and then flashed a smile. “Right. Because there’s gold.” She said the last words as if they were in a treasure hunt movie. “You better tell me what’s going on or I’m going to yell your name and ‘gold’ at the top of my lungs.”

He didn’t like that she was taking it so lightly. “Did you know that our ranch was set on fire a couple months ago? Sadie and her baby were almost killed. And we had an incident a year ago on the ranch where men actually were killed.”

Her face turned somber, much to Chance’s satisfaction. “I read some of that on the internet, but I didn’t know ... Sadie and the baby were almost killed.”

“We made sure to leave that out of the press.”

“Gosh, I’m sorry. Please, will you just tell me what’s going on?”

Chance started from the beginning and told her about the conquistador gold and the Stone family. How Trey and Porter thought the gold would be on the ranch, and how it had been a mess.

Their server came and dropped off their meals. As he walked away, Kelly put a hand over Chance’s. “I’m so sorry. I knew some of the story, but not all of it. That’s so frustrating. I can see why you’re trying to keep your presence here on the down low.”

He liked the touch of her hand. He always had. But he tugged away; he didn’t want to get wrapped up in that. “Let’s eat.”

She gave him a questioning look. “Don’t you pray over the food?”

“Do you?”

She shrugged. “I just thought you always did.”

“I guess we should.”

She waited, and he said a little prayer over the food.

They began eating, and he was hungry enough that it didn't take long to scarf down a bunch of bites. When he looked up, she was grinning. “What?”

“You still eat like it's your last meal.”

His mom and dad had always said about him. It made him smile. “I haven't eaten much today. Just breakfast.”

She took a bite of her own. “I don't care. You look great. Fit as a fiddle, as my grandma would say.”

Chance liked her compliment far too much. He leaned back and dabbed at his mouth with the napkin. “Your turn. Quid pro quo. Tell me about Brian. All I know is what Marissa told me—that you guys were supposed to get married. What happened?”

She hesitated, then threw her napkin on the table. “Marissa is such a gossip.”

“I guess I am too, but I like learning about the people I care about. Which I guess is the whole town of Cross Creek.”

She sipped her water. “Am I just one of the residents of Cross Creek that you care about?”

He didn't take the bait. “Tell me about Brian.”

“No. I don't have to.” She crossed her arms. “As we've established, you're the one who has to keep me happy. I could let it slip that I know the sheriff from Cross Creek, Wyoming.”

Anger surged inside him—not just because she was trying to leverage him again, but because he was done with this game. He wanted answers. “I think I have leverage on you, too.”

“Right. Are you going to tell people where I kept my secret stash of bubblegum in our tree house when we were in

sixth grade?”

Chance weighed and measured his next move. He hoped his suspicions weren't true, but he also wanted to know, and there was no better way of getting information out of a witness than to just throw it out there. “I could tell them you're pregnant.”

Her lips flattened into a thin line, and he realized he shouldn't have played that card. She shoved away from the table and got to her feet. “This dinner is over.”

He took her by the arm before she could walk away. “Whoa. I'm sorry. I won't say anything, but I do want answers.”

There were tears in her eyes, but she stayed calm. “I can't do this here.”

“That's fine. Let's go.” Chance pulled his wallet out and tossed some cash onto the table. It would cover their bill plus a nice tip.

They walked out of the restaurant and were crossing the street, heading toward Trey's truck, when she took off running. “Just leave me alone,” she called over her shoulder. “I can't do this.”

He caught up to her, but not before she tripped and fell. She cursed, and it surprised him. He'd never heard her curse. Clearly, he didn't know this woman any longer.

He tried to help her up, but she jerked out of his grasp. “Chance, I swear. Let me go. In fact, you'll get your way. I'll act like I don't know you. All of these people want me to pretend you're someone you're not, so I'll just pretend you don't even exist.”

Her words would've been maddening if she didn't have tears running down her face. He'd never been great with tears. “Get in the truck, and I'll take you home.”

She yanked the door open before he could do it. He just hopped in and started the truck. It only took a couple minutes to get to her little house.

Clearly, she hadn't wanted anyone to know about the baby. And he'd brought it up like an idiot.

When they pulled up, he turned to her. "Look. It doesn't have to be like this. I want to help you."

She barked out a laugh and swiped at her cheeks. "You can help me by pretending we don't know each other. In fact, I think that's the best thing for both of us." She jumped out and slammed the door shut.

"No. It's not." He caught up to her just as she reached the front door. By the time she opened it, he was walking in behind her.

She stopped and turned back, and he ran into her. "What are you doing? Get out."

He flipped on the light and stared into her piercing green eyes. The look he found there was steeped in pain and anger. All he'd done was scratch the surface, and her whole heart had shattered. What had Brian done to her? "I'm *not* leaving."

She crossed her arms and glared up at him. "I'll call the cops."

He couldn't help but smirk. "Go ahead."

"Wait. Don't tell me. You know the cops. In fact, the cops are probably in on this whole charade just like the rest of the town. Why are you even pretending if everyone knows?"

He didn't answer.

Her lips pressed together, and then she cursed again. "Chance, you have to leave. I thought I was coming to this town where no one would know me. I thought I could start over, and now I clearly can't. Please. Just leave me alone."

CHAPTER 14

*K*elly just wanted Chance to go. She had plans, and he was wrecking them. She had uprooted her life across the ocean, and now she felt trapped again.

Suddenly, his arms were around her.

She tried to wriggle away from him. “Let me go. Chance, stop.”

He wasn’t hurting her; he was just holding her. “Kelly, calm down. I’m here to help you. Maybe it’s not a coincidence I’m here. Maybe you need a friend and God sent me to you. Did you ever think of that?”

Fueled by another shot of adrenaline, she pounded her fists on his chest. “How could God let this happen to me?”

He finally let go, clearly confused.

“Chance, I don’t believe in God anymore. I don’t believe in a God who hasn’t answered my prayers in a long, long time. I don’t believe in a God who killed my parents when I was eight. Who took my grandparents too early. Chance, how can you even say that?”

She’d prayed so many times after Brian had started abusing her, and it hadn’t stopped.

He took her hand and held it between both of his own. “Kelly, I don’t want to debate God tonight. Though I *do* want the truth from you. What happened? Woman, what happened to you?”

For a long time, she only stared into those beautiful blue eyes. They reminded her of the Wyoming sky. Her grandmother had always said that when you rode a horse out on the ranch, the sky went on forever. Then she would laugh when people called Montana ‘big sky country.’ *Like they can claim the sky*, she would say.

“Talk to me, Kel,” Chance murmured.

Kelly didn’t want to bring anyone else into this. She wanted to make this choice by herself, and she didn’t need Chance Cross standing in front of her. “If there is a God, He must think this is a huge joke on me.” She yanked her hand away and stormed down the hallway to turn on the lights. Boxes were everywhere, and she would’ve been embarrassed by the mess if she wasn’t so furious with this man who had known her forever. “I guess you can come in, because it’s apparent you’re not leaving. In fact, I need all of these boxes moved to my room. Why don’t you focus on that?”

She was just saying it to be rude, but Chance immediately picked up a box from the stack. “Where’s your room?”

“No. Just put it down. I’m mad at you, and I wanted to boss you around.”

His jaw clenched. “Tell me what room to put these in.”

She felt like an idiot. She felt naked and vulnerable and completely caught off guard. How had she gotten to the point where this man was hauling boxes for her? Frustrated, she pointed to the room on the left and turned on the light in there. “That one. In the corner, please.”

He obeyed, then moved past her. “Stay here. I’ll get the others, and you can direct me.”

“Don’t. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“But you did, and I’m glad you did. I want to help you.” He snatched away a box she’d started to pick up.

She threw her hands in the air. “You can’t do that. This is my place. If I want to move boxes, I will.”

He pointed to the couch. “Go sit down, would you? Moving stuff makes me feel *manly*. You wouldn’t want to take that away from me, would you?”

His words made her smile, and she hated it. “Stop it. That’s misogynistic.”

Chance just pointed to the couch again. “Woman, sit down. Let me move the boxes, please.”

She could hardly believe he was talking to her in a civil way and actually being nice to her. Much to her annoyance, she was tired and did need to sit down. The emotional shock was getting to her. “Fine,” she said, relenting and moving to the couch.

It didn’t take Chance long to move all the boxes into that back room. In fact, it was probably less than ten minutes. By that time, she had her shoes off and her feet on the coffee table. She had propped herself up with a pillow and closed her eyes. Chance Cross knew. She was angry and hurt and mad—mostly at herself for being in this situation, but somehow she also felt relieved.

“Do you need water?”

Kelly hated that he was so good. She’d tried to forget all these things about him, but it was impossible. She dreamed about him. And she did think of him—a lot. More than she wanted to admit. “No. Thank you. And thank you for moving the boxes.” She hoped he would just get up and leave. Boom. Done. They could ignore each other for however long he was here doing this old thing. That was fine with her.

Chance sat on the couch across from her. “Kel, talk to me. I know you’re pregnant. Talk to me.”

Her eyes cracked open. “What gave it away? The throwing up? I used to call you Sherlock because you were always evaluating people.” She wagged her finger at him. “Even when we were young, you always sized people up and created a story about them or their motives. To tell you the truth, when I heard you were the sheriff, it didn’t surprise me. You’re the youngest sheriff in Cross Creek. Grandma always liked to

keep me in the loop with what the Cross family was doing, even though I told her repeatedly that I didn't care. Especially not about you."

She knew the last part was hurtful, and Chance's mouth turned down in a frown. Did she want to hurt him? Sort of. It was confusing and complicated, and she didn't want to dwell on the fact that he was being nice to her.

"I never liked Brian," he said.

She couldn't help but scoff at the ridiculous statement. "You didn't know him."

Chance shrugged, and then the side of his lip turned up. "Do you ever like the guy who took your place? I mean, when you told me you didn't want to marry me, it hurt, Kel. It hurt for a long time."

His honesty disarmed her, and she softened. She turned onto her side to face him. "I'm sorry," she said quietly, and she meant it. "I wanted a life outside of Cross Creek."

They were both quiet for a few seconds.

"Plus, I did ask you to come with me. You could have been the man at my side."

He snorted. "Living in Europe wouldn't have been for me, and we both know it."

"Probably right. I guess it wasn't for me, either." Maybe it was ridiculous, but she hurt too. "Let the record show that I didn't really care for the girl at *your* side at my grandma's funeral. I didn't really think you needed to bring her."

"Well, maybe that was bad form, but we both knew your grandma. We both talked to her, and Trinity loved your grandma. It wasn't like I was bringing her just to rub it in your face."

That was a good point, and she hadn't thought about it before. "Right. I know you guys visited my grandma. Thank you. I should've been closer. I should've left Europe when she was diagnosed with cancer. I blame myself for that." To her horror, she was crying again. She dabbed at her eyes with the

back of her hand. “I regret so much, Chance. I hate it. I hate that you’re here when I’m down and out. I hate that you figured out that I’m pregnant.”

Chance stood and walked down the hallway to the bathroom, and then he was back with crumpled-up toilet paper. “I hate it when you cry,” he said, handing it to her. “I always have. I’m glad I’m here. If you need me, there’s no place I’d rather be.”

“Dang it,” she said. “Why do you have to be so good?” She broke down into tears again, pulling her legs up against her chest. She couldn’t handle this.

Chance scooted her over and wrapped his arms around her. “I’m here, Kel. I’m right here, and you’re not getting rid of me. Not this time.”

“I don’t deserve your kindness, Chance. I don’t.” She had to admit that it felt good to be in his arms, to be held by this man. “Do you remember what I told you when I left after that first year in Oxford?”

“Yes.”

“I guess I screwed everything up.”

“You told me it’s okay to have a life, a vision. It’s okay to let the past go and move on.”

“That was rude of me to say.”

“No, it was the truth.”

“Except I had the wrong vision, didn’t I?”

He was quiet for a minute, and then he pulled back and turned her to face him. “Kel, I don’t know what God’s plan is for you, but I do know there is one.”

“Is there? I messed up so many things.”

“I know you don’t want to tell me about it right now, but I want you around, Kelly Hamilton. Isn’t it crazy that we ended up in the small town together?” He paused. “Are you still talking to him?”

“Brian?”

He nodded.

“No. This is a new number; he doesn’t even have it.” Kelly stood and paced, trying to digest everything. How could she be here talking to the man she’d loved once upon a time, in a town that neither of them should be in? Had God sent him? “I don’t want Brian to know where I am.”

“Tell me what happened,” he said quietly. “Please.”

Despite herself, she complied. “It’s a cliché story. I was alone and lonely. He worked for a finance firm and he would come in for ‘community events.’ We dated, and he was Prince Charming. He’s American, but he was going to school there, too. He began working at a law firm. We clicked, and the first couple of months were amazing. Then I did exactly what Grandma never wanted me to do: I moved in with him. That’s when things went bad. The first time it happened, I just thought we were getting into a fight, but he claimed I purposefully provoked him, and he pushed me. Unfortunately, I was standing by some stairs and fell down. I ended up in a hospital.”

Chance went still. “What?”

“I should’ve pressed charges, but ...”

“Why didn’t you?” He crossed his arms, and the look on his face told Kelly he wanted to punch someone.

“He was so sorry and sad and pitiful. He told me about how he’d been abused and that he should go to a counselor, but if I were to press charges, it would ruin him. So I didn’t.” She stomped her foot, and the tears started again. “I hate myself for that. Why didn’t I press charges the first time?” She moved to the window and stood there, looking out at her little garden and the beach in the background. She took a few calming breaths.

Chance was soon standing next to her. His voice was soft as he said, “And then there were other incidents, I imagine.”

She nodded. “If I upset him, he would strike out at me. The straw that broke the camel’s back was when he pushed me

down the stairs again.” Without meaning to, she put her hand on her right side.

“Does your side still hurt?” he asked softly.

She pulled her hand back. “I think I may have had a broken rib, but it’s better.”

“How long ago was this?”

“I left a month ago. One month to this day.”

“And you came here.”

“Yeah, because it was a good memory. Of Grandma and Grandpa and ... you.” She couldn’t look at him.

“Yeah, it was.” He took her hand. “When I decided to come here and look for the gold, all I could think about was that week we spent here as kids.”

She found such relief in his eyes. “I suspected I might be pregnant, but I wasn’t sure until yesterday.”

“So that puts you at ...”

“Around fourteen weeks. I’m scared, and I’m not sure I’ll keep the baby.” She blinked furiously, more emotion welling inside her, and she didn’t want to cry. “Please don’t try to convince me of anything. I can’t handle it.”

Chance hesitated, then pulled her into him. She wanted to push him away, but she let him hold her. It felt good to be in his arms.

She wasn’t sure how long they stood like that, but then he let go and stared down at her. “And you think Brian might be watching you?”

“I hope not.”

“Hope is for losers,” he muttered. He turned away, running a hand through his hair.

“What?”

“My dad used to always say, ‘You don’t hope; you make things happen. Because hoping is the thing losers do.’”

“That sounds harsh.”

“I guess it is harsh, but I take your security seriously. If you just hope you’re not being stalked by your ex, that’s not comforting to me.”

She sucked in a long breath. Chance Cross was a lot to take, for good and for bad. “I don’t know for sure. It might just be my own anxiety about the situation. Please don’t worry.”

“Right.” After a minute of quiet, he sighed and said, “Listen, I have a proposition for you. You mentioned that your gallery opening is pushed back because of the plumbing issues. Why don’t you help me on my gold hunt?”

She jerked out of her worries. “What?”

“I understand you have a lot to figure out. It’s difficult, and I know you don’t want to talk to me about it, but you could get your mind off everything by helping me out. Remember what your grandma used to say about serving others?”

Kelly remembered the cross-stitched quote on her grandma’s kitchen wall. “Matthew 20:26. ‘But whoever shall be great among you, shall be your servant.’” The thought made her eyes mist again.

“Right, so help a friend out.”

She couldn’t help but laugh. Chance made it sound like she was in a position to help him. “Really?”

“Really,” he said, nodding vigorously. “I need help figuring out where this gold is, and I think a fresh pair of eyes that I can trust is just the thing.”

“And it has nothing to do with the fact that a distraction is just the thing I need? Or the fact you want to keep an eye on me?”

He shook his head. “Hey, those are just perks. Right? You get a distraction, and I get some help and ... to keep an eye on you. Plus, it gives you time to pray about this little one growing inside you.”

She would have been ticked off if anyone else besides Chance had said that. She pulled in a cleansing breath. “Okay. But I’m not sure about praying.”

Chance cocked an eyebrow. “Praying is easy.”

“I haven’t done it in a long time.”

“Just ... pretend like you’re talking to someone you love. Just pour your heart out. It actually makes you feel good.”

She wasn’t certain about that, but she nodded. “Maybe.”

“But you’ll help me? Be on the gold hunt with me?” he asked, sounding more than pleased. “Really?”

She shoved him gently in the shoulder. “Don’t make me regret it.”

He laughed and pulled her into a hug.

She let him, feeling more comforted by his presence than she’d been in as long as she could remember. “I’m glad you’re here, *Rob*.”

“Me too.” He released her and winked as he headed toward the door. “Get some sleep. We’re starting early tomorrow.” He snapped his fingers. “And wear a swimsuit underneath your clothes. We’re going diving too.”

“What?” she asked, following him to the door.

“Just trust me, Kel. We’re going to have fun.”

She scrunched up her nose.

“Get some rest. I’ll text you.” He paused. “Oh, and Kelly?”

“Yes?”

“And ... I’m going to challenge you to start praying tonight.”

“What?”

“Don’t you think your grandmother would say this if she were here?”

She didn’t want to argue about it because he was probably right.

“Pray about this pregnancy. Pray for guidance, direction, help. Pray for your child. Pray for yourself.”

Before she could figure out what to say to that, he pulled the door shut behind him.

Anger poured through her. How dare he just tell her what to do? She rushed to the door and flung it open, yelling out, “Chance!”

He turned back, just as he got to the truck door. “Yes?”

“I might pray and I might not, but quit bossing me around! And you can go on your stupid treasure hunt by yourself!” She slammed the door and turned her back to it, leaning on it.

Chance Cross was infuriating!

CHAPTER 15

Chance got back to the inn, trying to digest everything that had happened. He didn't want to be noisy, since it was almost eleven thirty at night.

Kelly had reacted poorly to his request she pray. Ugh! But he couldn't quit telling her to do it. Pfft. That was impossible. No way was he doing that. She needed to pray.

Impulsively, he pulled out his phone and texted her. *This isn't over.*

Her reply came instantly. *Yes, it is.*

Out of sorts, he went to the kitchen and got himself a drink of water.

She was pregnant. That truth hit him over and over again. She was pregnant with the jerk face Brian. He wanted to punch something.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he'd known that. Though he hadn't wanted to pull it out and look at it until it had been thrown in his face. She was pregnant with another man's child. Worse, she didn't even know if she wanted it.

He cursed. Life was precious, even precious enough to die for. Hadn't every person who served in the military thought another's life was important enough to die for?

Even his own service, as a sheriff, showed that he was willing to die protecting others.

Furious, he walked through the back sliding glass door, letting his feet take him across the pool area and then to the

little gate that led to the beach. He slid his shoes off, and it startled him when he saw a familiar figure. “Trey?”

Trey jolted and turned back. He was in a swimming suit and sitting on the beach, next to the waves. “Hi. How’d the date go?”

“Okay.” Unable to resist the cool water, Chance tugged off his shirt, leaving him wearing just his khaki shorts. He dove into the water and swam hard and fast as long as he could.

When he emerged, Trey was next to him. “You’re a fair swimmer.”

They were both treading water.

Chance shook his head. “I’d rather be left alone.”

Trey grunted. “You know what they say about small towns. You’re never alone.”

Chance dipped back into the water and swam out further. The ocean was quiet and he could swim for a long time.

Again, when he emerged, Trey was next to him. “Dang. The date went that well?”

Chance cursed.

Trey turned serious. “Let’s swim back in and talk.”

Chance agreed, mostly because he couldn’t tread water in the middle of the ocean that long. They swam back, but he stayed to his neck in the water, his feet touching the sand.

Trey emerged and only stared at him.

For several minutes, there was silence. Chance bobbed up and down in the water. The waves were kicking up.

Trey looked at him. “So you got everything square with her? She’s not gonna say anything?”

For some reason, Chance found himself telling the truth. “She’s pregnant. With her ex’s child. Fourteen weeks. She’s afraid of him. She wouldn’t give me all the details, but she wanted to disappear here and was surprised when I showed up.”

Trey didn't act shocked, Chance was pretty sure Trey Stone wasn't easily surprised. "Are you worried about it? We should tell Tim, just so he's aware that there might be someone after her."

Chance shook his head. "Not yet. Let's give it...time. I ticked her off, though."

"How?"

"She told me she might not keep the baby and I told her to pray about it."

Trey sucked in a long breath. "I can imagine telling someone to pray that would tick them off."

"Yeah, probably not the best thing for me to say."

"I didn't say that. But maybe we should do something."

"What's that?"

"Maybe we should say a prayer for her."

Chance was shocked that he hadn't thought of that. "Okay."

Trey stood taller in the water and bowed his head. "Want me to say it?"

Chance suddenly felt emotional and ... grateful for the Stone family. For Trey. "Yes, please." He bowed his head.

Trey cleared his throat. "Dear Lord, we would tell you how grateful we are for this day. We are so grateful for Your goodness and mercy. Lord, we ask for a blessing on Kelly Hamilton. And...her baby. We ask that Your will be done in this situation and that Kelly can feel Your love for her. And we would ask that Chance can feel of Your love. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen."

"Amen," Chance said quickly, feeling warm chills and instant peace.

Trey let out a breath and put a hand on Chance's shoulder. "Don't worry. It's going to be okay."

Chance began moving out of the water. “Thank you. Truly.”

Trey followed. “This can’t get in the way of stuff that we need to pay attention to. Not that it’s *not* important. Just make sure you’re keeping tabs on everything else too.”

“I’ve got it handled.” Chance would’ve been slightly offended if he didn’t have an older brother who was just as severe as Trey.

“Okay.” Trey nodded. “My brother Trent has agreed to take you scuba diving out to Bird Island. We were all talking earlier, and we think the broken arrow, the treasure chest, and the cross are symbols that we might’ve overlooked out there. You know that’s where my father found one piece of gold.” He let out a sardonic laugh.

Chance already knew the stories about the gold. “Okay. I’d like a chance to look over the information in your library first.”

“Perfect.”

Chance picked up his shirt and his cell phone, noting there was a text. It was from Kelly.

He stared in shock as he read it.

Pick me up tomorrow. I’m coming with you.

Trey paused. “Everything okay?”

Chance let out a light laugh. “Well, I guess God heard your prayer because Kelly just said she wants to come tomorrow.”

Trey sighed. “Are you sure that’s a good idea? I don’t mind you having a second-chance romance, but I have a rule: no one in my family gets hurt on my watch.” He turned as he stepped onto the beach. “Now that’s your watch, too.”

CHAPTER 16

*K*elly stared at the door long after Chance had left. How dare he challenge her to pray about it?

No. Heck no.

Ugh. She stomped her foot, feeling like a child. She couldn't believe she'd told him the whole truth.

No, she reminded herself. It made sense that she'd open up to him. He'd been her friend since she was eight years old. He'd been her confidante, and it wasn't until she'd run into him yesterday that she'd realized how much she missed him. Just like she missed her grandparents and so many people in Cross Creek who she'd taken for granted.

Kelly turned and walked out onto her patio. The moon was up, and the waves soothed her. She never would have guessed that coming to South Port would bring her back to Chance. Was it orchestrated by God? Maybe it was just her emotions getting the best of her, but suddenly she felt this overwhelming warmth inside her. Like her grandmother was there, holding her.

For the first time in as long as she could remember, she folded her arms and bowed her head in prayer. She poured her heart out to God and told Him she was afraid. She told Him about Brian, even though God already knew. It felt good to talk to Him again. She told Him about Chance and about the pregnancy and everything, all while tears streamed down her face. She wasn't sure how long she talked to God, but when

she said, “Amen,” and opened her eyes, she knew she would keep this baby.

She put her hands to her stomach. “I’m sorry for ever doubting, God. I love this baby already. How could I not?”

Another surge of warmth blossomed in her chest. Her grandmother had always taught her that the Holy Spirit would comfort her when she needed him.

“Thank you. Thank you, God.”

Then she texted Chance that she would go with him in the morning.

* * *

THE NEXT DAY, Chance picked Kelly up around nine and drove her to the Stone family inn. On the way, he told her they would be diving at Bird Island to check out the hieroglyphs on the walls. He also told her a story about how some of the Stone brothers found a piece of gold out there—a piece of gold that their father had hidden.

The whole thing felt fantastical. Chance was right; it was a huge distraction from her life. She’d thought it might be awkward this morning, but Chance acted perfectly normal, as if no time had been lost between them and they were best friends.

When they arrived at the inn, she was impressed at how big it was. She met Ava and Trey and their children, and as she looked around the inn, she was even more impressed with their style and the way they ran the place.

Ava took time to go over a whole wall devoted to the conquistador gold and the stories dating back to when they were young. “You said you want to do historical art. You are always welcome to look through our family journals.”

Kelly was touched by her kindness and acceptance. “Thank you.”

Trey led them into an office, where another person was waiting for them. The man stood and shook her hand. “I’m Trent Stone. I’ll be taking you guys out to Bird Island and scuba diving today.”

“Nice to meet you,” she said, slightly overwhelmed that she was on this gold hunt.

Trey shut the door, and they all sat down at a conference table. “You’ll notice the contract in front of you. A nondisclosure agreement. My FBI brother, Brooks, is getting on a call with us, and he wants to chat with you.”

“Is that necessary?” Chance asked.

Trey nodded. “It is.”

Kelly felt bad that her presence seemed to be causing tension. “I don’t need to be in on all this.”

Chance put his hand over hers. “Yes, you do. I want you here.”

She looked at their hands, and something familiar and right washed through her. She wanted to be on this adventure with this man, too.

Trey tapped a Zoom link on his computer. While they waited for the call to go through, Kelly looked over the contract in front of her.

A face popped up on the screen. “Hi, Kelly. I’m Brooks Stone, FBI. I’ve been briefed on the situation. It appears you’re a past family friend of Chance Cross.”

“I am.”

Brooks nodded. “Okay, and he says you’ll be working with him as he looks for more clues to this crazy treasure hunt of a puzzle we have going on. Anything that you two find needs to be disclosed to our family. Chance told me you are trustworthy, but I just want to make sure you understand there are lives on the line. I don’t know how much you know about what my family and the Crosses have gone through, but my family doesn’t know you. We can press charges if you disclose any knowledge about what is going on now or in the future.”

Kelly swallowed hard, suddenly hesitant. “You don’t have to worry. I’m not gonna say anything. I am just opening my shop, and I’d like to be able to study different hieroglyphs and artwork that is original to this area. I’ll create paintings and pottery and jewelry to sell. And maybe,” she said more quietly as she turned to Chance, “I can be of service to you all.”

Brooks squinted and then nodded. “Right. You will be privy to some conversations and activities going on. This contract is just making sure you know that you can’t disclose this to anyone or talk about what you find while you’re out with Chance. I’m doing this to protect Chance’s family as well.”

Chance cleared his throat. “Brooks, I looped my family in this morning. They trust her.”

Hearing that his family trusted her made a big difference. She knew his family well, and she was grateful. Maybe it was also because she was feeling emotional and she had no link to home, to Cross Creek, besides a few people. She wanted to hold on to that. “I’ll sign whatever you need me to sign. I just want to help. Chance’s family is important to me, and I want the heat off of everyone’s back. If I can be helpful in finding this treasure and put the whole matter to rest, that would be great.”

Brooks nodded. “Okay, I’ll let Trey talk you through everything. I gotta go. Bye, everyone.” The call went dead.

Trey let out a light laugh. “As you can tell, my brother is all business and not long-winded. It’s something I appreciate.”

Ava patted Kelly’s shoulder. “You’ll find that most of the men in this family are to the point.” She elbowed Trent, who was sitting next to her. “Except Trent. I would say he’s more long-winded.”

Trent dramatically put his hand to his chest. “What? Are you insulting me? Don’t make me put you in a headlock.”

Ava giggled, then shoved him. “I’d like to see you try.”

Trey laughed. “I’d like to see him try too. Because you have to get through the big brother, and we know that’s not

going happen.”

Kelly couldn't help but grin at their antics.

Chance pulled his hand back. “What do you think?”

Kelly began to sign and initial the agreement. She didn't need to read it. “Like I told Brooks, I'm just along for the ride, and if I can be of help, that would be awesome.” It did feel awesome to have a purpose beyond herself.

Her mind flashed to her pregnancy. Had Chance told any of them? She hoped not. Guilt filled her, and she pushed it aside. She *was* keeping the baby, and she had to tell Chance soon.

Trent stood and let out a long breath. “Well, that's over. We should get going with your tour. This gives me the perfect opportunity to make you guys my first scuba clients. Let's go. I have the boat parked at the dock right outside.” He and Trey left.

Ava put an arm around Kelly and gave her a half hug, making her stiffen. She wasn't used to people touching her. Ava noticed the discomfort and said, “Sorry. I hope I didn't make you uncomfortable. I just wanted to say welcome to the family. Because now we're in this together.”

“Oh, it's fine,” Kelly said quickly. She used to be hugged all the time. Grandma had been known to be extra huggy. “I just hope we can find something. This sounds like it's been horrible for your family.”

Ava rolled her eyes. “We are all ready for this to be over, but it is what it is.”

Kelly felt some trepidation as they walked through the family room and then out to the pool, where several people were playing and relaxing. She turned to Ava. “The place is beautiful, by the way.”

Ava smiled at her. “I love it. This year, we made a decision to not host as many families at once. Now we're only taking on one or two families at a time. I really get to know them, and it makes it feel less chaotic. Trey keeps talking about not

hosting people anymore. He gets weary of all of the security, and this whole gold thing has taken a toll on him.”

Kelly could see Trey and Trent up ahead on a speedboat. “That makes sense. I haven’t gone through anything like that, but I can see myself getting really worn out if my family was in constant danger. Not that I have a family.” She said it too quickly, and she felt stupid. “I mean, I don’t know how much you know about me, but my parents passed away when I was young, and I was raised by my grandparents in Cross Creek.” She glanced at Chance, but he wasn’t looking at her. “My grandma passed away a couple months ago, and I ended up selling the ranch. So I guess what I meant is that I don’t really have a family at all.”

Ava gave her a soft smile and then said, “You never know how family becomes what it is. I never thought I would be part of this huge Stone family, but things worked out that way, and life and God had much more in store for me than I ever thought. My mom died when I was young, and I was raised by my father. He’s gone now, so I remember feeling pretty alone. I don’t know if you’ve heard, but I got divorced when Micah was sixteen. I remember feeling very afraid and not knowing my way forward. And then Trey came back in my life, and now ...” She trailed off, her eyes misting with tears.

Chance walked over to them.

Ava turned to Chance. “Sorry. I don’t mean to get emotional. But ... Chance, will you go ahead and let me talk to Kelly for just a second?”

Chance seemed surprised, and he looked to Kelly in question. When she nodded, he left to join Trey and Trent.

“What’s up?” Kelly asked.

Ava grinned at her. “Trey and I have Trey Junior together. He’s just over three years now. I just found out the other day that I’m pregnant. I think that’s partly why I am emotional too. And that’s also why I didn’t want to come out to Bird Island. I’m not feeling too great.”

It felt serendipitous that Ava was admitting this to her. Kelly didn't know what to say. "Well, that makes sense. I hope you feel better." Her heart raced, and she felt a bit sick.

Ava seemed to sense it. "Are you okay?"

Kelly couldn't deal with talking about someone being pregnant. She couldn't deal with thinking about how she wasn't sure what to do. As Ava had spoken about being alone and then finding the Stone family, Kelly's thoughts had kept coming back to Chance. But she did want a distraction. "I'm good. I'll talk to you later."

Chance was headed back to her, a look of concern on his face. "Hey. What's going on?"

CHAPTER 17

Chance didn't like how much he already worried about Kelly. "Are you sure you want to come with us?" he whispered.

She gave him a determined look. "That's why I came today. To be of service to my friend."

Raine Birch approached them just then. "Hold up. Can I talk to you, Chance?"

Chance hesitated.

Ava nodded at him. "Kelly, you come with me. Let's go talk to Trent while he gets loaded and let these two chat."

Kelly looked uncertain but went with Ava.

Chance turned and found himself face to face with Raine.

"Hey," Raine said, stuffing his hands into his pockets. "Sorry to catch you right before you're leaving, but I was just talking with Hunter about everything, and he told me you guys were going out to Bird Island. I just ..."

"Yes?"

Raine shrugged. "Look, I don't know. This could be something, or it could be nothing. As you know, Truman is my foster brother."

"I'm well aware," Chance said. Raine was the one who'd told Truman about the gold and pointed him toward Wyoming in the first place.

“Listen, I’m sorry about that, but I keep having this nagging feeling that something is going to happen. I mean, I’m always worried about Truman, but lately I’ve had dreams where he’s talking to me, telling me he’s close. Telling me no one is safe.”

Chance didn’t like people trying to warn him of something if they didn’t have any evidence. “Thank you, but we’re safe.”

“I’m praying for you all. And him,” Raine hedged. He swallowed hard. “I hate this whole situation for everyone.”

“It’s okay. Thank you for ... warning me.” Chance didn’t know what to do. Was he supposed to comfort the guy who had brought chaos down on his family?

Raine nodded to the boat. “I’ll let you get going. Just be careful.”

When Chance boarded, the group headed out to Bird Island. His mind wandered back to how he could convince Kelly to keep the baby.

Once they got there, it wasn’t hard to unload, walk across the island, and get everything set up in the cave. Clearly, Trent was a pro.

Trent took them through the paces of how to dive. He demonstrated how to use his equipment, and then he helped them with theirs. “This isn’t a deep dive, so it won’t be hard. But I’m going to have each of you practice before we go deeper.” He jumped into the water.

“And what do you think we’ll see here?” Chance asked.

A big grin formed on Trent’s face. “The last time I was here diving, we found a treasure chest and that piece of gold with the skull on it. Plus, there was the picture of my parents.”

Chance’s heart went out to him. They’d lost their parents as well, and all of them were like kids as they tried to retrace the past and find signs of something their parents had done. He cleared his throat and pushed back his own emotions. “Well, hopefully we can find something that might lead to another clue.”

Trent shrugged and adjusted his equipment. “Hopefully.”

Kelly turned to both of them. “I want to hear about all the treasure hunting you guys have done. I know what the papers have said, and I’ve Googled it, but it seems like there are bigger stories here.”

Trent laughed and slapped his leg. “You should hear Hunter tell the story about coming here, or even Lucy and Oliver Stone, or Oliver Brown. He had to come rescue us on a helicopter.”

Chance snickered. “I actually heard the story from Kensi. Her account was pretty good.”

“The thing is, our family has really mixed feelings about this gold,” Trent explained. “On one hand, we’ve grown up with the stories. It feels like each of us siblings had a hand in uncovering something during the hunt. But we started tapering off after we found a VHS tape of our parents telling us that the gold was gone and we needed to quit looking.” He sucked in a long breath and said, “I can’t believe I’m still feeling this way after all this time, but my parents told us that we were the real treasure. Our family. They said that we should stop looking because they didn’t want us to get hurt.” He sighed. “Yet here we are, caught up in this again.”

Chance nudged Kelly. “I told you how our dads were Navy SEALs together. There was a letter between them that led us to believe the gold might have been taken and hidden on our ranch in Wyoming.”

Kelly nodded. “That’s crazy. I remember riding horses on your ranch and going to that one cave—do you remember that cave with that cross in it?” She snapped her fingers several times. “The cave on the east bench where everyone would go to make out.” She blushed, much to Chance’s delight. “Have you looked there?”

Chance laughed. “I do remember that cave, and I can’t remember seeing any of these hieroglyphs. Mostly graffiti. But we have looked there. I did, anyway.”

“I’d like to look again. I could swear there was a skull like that one.” She pointed to the wall of the cave.

“That skull was on the treasure chest,” Trent said.

Chance felt rocked by this information. It was the same type of skull that had been found on the gold bar. That was crazy.

Trent coughed. “Well, one step forward, two steps back. That’s how it always seems with this treasure. But we’re here. Let’s get to diving and looking around, okay? I’ll be back in a sec.” He dove under.

Chance turned to Kelly. He didn’t want to tick her off, but he was concerned. “Are you sure you should do this?”

Kelly cocked an eyebrow at him. “Do you mean dive, because I’m pregnant?”

Chance nodded, hoping she wouldn’t get offended.

She nudged him. “I wasn’t going to tell you like this, but I’m keeping the baby.”

“What?” His heart raced and he felt flabbergasted.

“I took your advice last night, and I prayed. I’m keeping it.”

He was so happy that he threw his arms around her. “Oh my gosh, I’m so happy.”

She laughed. “I looked up if it was okay for pregnant women to go diving, and I should be good in my first trimester.” She leaned in and kissed his cheek. “Thanks.”

He wanted to ask a million questions, but then Trent popped up, ripping out his oxygen. “It’s good. Let’s go.”

CHAPTER 18

*K*elly found the rush of diving indescribable. Trent took them down a couple times with him, and then he let them go on their own. Of course, they were connected to an oxygen tank, and it wasn't that deep. It was so cool to be underwater and look around.

"You don't want to go anywhere without a partner," Trent had cautioned them. "Sometimes you can get disoriented, and your partner will save your life."

Hand in hand, Kelly and Chance went over every nook and cranny. There was a little cave in this area, and she waved Chance forward. He shone his water flashlight on the walls, and they inspected the hieroglyphs engraved into the cave face. She wondered if this area of the caves had been out in the open a long time ago. Since her phone was waterproof, she took pictures of all the symbols. They found matches for the cross and the skull, and there were other carvings as well—bird carvings that she hadn't seen before, as well as different versions of the cross and skull. Maybe they could somehow date them and figure out how long the symbols had been there.

There was something else that she couldn't recognize at first. After staring at it for a minute, she realized it looked like a rose. She snapped a picture of it.

Chance took her to another area of the cave, where she snapped pictures of swords and what looked like some kind of face. She stooped low, and Chance had to come with her as she found something else. It looked like a heart, but it was

broken and there was an L and a D in it. Had the Stones' parents engraved it, or was it older?

Everything fascinated her, and she was startled when Trent started yanking on the ropes. They went up, and he asked them how they were doing as he helped them take off the gear.

"I'm great." She felt exhilarated and happy and like she finally had a purpose in her life. Then she remembered that she was pregnant with Brian's baby. No. *Her* baby.

Chance paused in taking off his gear, seeming to notice her change of mood. "What's wrong?"

She didn't want to tell him what she was thinking. "Nothing. This has been the best." She smiled at Trent and then made a joke about the broken heart they'd found at the bottom.

Trent's face lit up. "We have a story about L and D. They were lost lovers, and maybe when D found her, she was already dead, and he wrote their initials at the bottom to commemorate her."

"Is that true?" That sounded horrible.

Chance laughed. "It can't be true."

"I think my sister Kensi wrote a story about it," Trent said. "You should ask her."

"Kensi writes stories?"

Trent puffed his chest out proudly. "She writes all kinds of stories and has started publishing them online. She writes under the name Kensi Stone, and she has a whole bunch of stories about me and my family. Of course, she's changed our names. I've read them, and she's talented."

Kelly was finding out a lot about the Stone family today. She didn't remember reading anything about Kensi being a writer.

Trent looked around, seeming disappointed. "I don't think we found anything. That's a bummer. I guess I'm used to it by now, but it's still hard."

Suddenly, the tide seemed to shift and all the water in the cave started moving.

“What’s going on?” Kelly asked, clinging to Chance.

Trent hurried to toss some of his scuba gear farther up on the shore. “Honestly, I don’t know. It seems like the tide changed, or something happened. I’ve never seen this before.”

The water churned faster and faster, and some of Trent’s scuba gear started going with it. He dove down to try to retrieve it.

Kelly wasn’t sure how long the water drained; maybe five or ten minutes. It settled down over time, but she was worried about Trent.

Luckily, he reemerged, and he was laughing. “I can’t believe it. There’s a whole intricate system of caves down here that I’ve never seen. When the tide took all of that water, some of the dirt moved with it, like it was sucked out. Let’s put on our gear and check it out.”

* * *

CHANCE AND KELLY put their gear back on. Then they waded out into the water and dove down. Trent had them all hold hands, and he guided them toward a cave that Chance hadn’t seen only minutes before. How strange that the seas would change so suddenly. It felt like something else was in control of all this.

Maybe God’s hand?

He wondered what Kelly would think of that. He still was reeling from their conversation the night before. She’d said she wasn’t sure if she would keep the baby, and then her mind had changed overnight. Would he want to be part of her life, even if she had a baby?

Of course.

He was startled by how quickly the answer came to him.

If she wanted him around.

Trent was gesturing around the cave. They couldn't hear what he was saying, but he seemed emphatic about this place.

They all started exploring. In the corner was a chest. It wasn't clear until Chance ran his hand across the top and felt the metal. Trent signaled for them to pick it up and take it. Chance tugged at it, but it was heavy. With some heaving, they managed to carry the chest back, and he was grateful for his flippers propelling him onward.

Chance kept his eye on Kelly as she tagged along with them.

When they got back to their base camp, he and Trent lobbed the chest to the top.

Trent ripped his mouth guard out and said, "I can't believe this. I seriously can't believe this."

They all scrambled to get up on the side and took their scuba gear off.

The chest was locked, and Trent messed with the combination. It wasn't ancient, probably manufactured in the eighties. "We'll have to take this back and just smash it or cut it or blowtorch it."

Trent pulled out his phone and called Trey.

Suddenly, it turned into a family call with all of the siblings.

They tried different combinations. Then Kensi said, "Try Mom and Dad's anniversary. 10-26-69."

Trent gave her an incredulous look, but he obeyed.

Amazingly, the lock clicked open.

CHAPTER 19

If someone had told Kelly that she would be part of an actual treasure hunt, she never would've believed them. But here she was, opening a treasure chest with the man she'd almost married.

Trent dumped out the contents. A lot of water came out, and an old glass bottle. "Oh my gosh, this is crazy. This is kind of what happened before." He procured a pocketknife from some pocket in his swimming suit and carefully broke the seal on the bottle.

"Do you think this is from your dad?" Chance asked.

"I have no idea." Trent used his pocketknife to maneuver the paper out. He unrolled it and stared at it, wide-eyed.

Kelly and Chance gathered around the paper.

If you happen to come at the right time, and the tide went out, then I would call it destiny. Remember, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost have all the answers. Windsong.

All of them were quiet for a few seconds.

"What is Windsong?" Trent asked.

Her mind raced and she turned to Chance. "Windsong Reservation in Wyoming?"

He looked baffled. "I don't know."

All of the siblings were chattering on the phone.

"Let's get back to everyone," Trent said. He shoved the paper back into the bottle, stuffing it shut with the cork.

“We’re coming. Talk soon.” He ended the call.

They all scrambled to gather the scuba gear, and they ended up putting some inside the chest. They were working so fast that Kelly had no time to ask a million questions. When they emerged from the cave and started walking toward the speedboat, she had her chance. “Who wrote that? Whose writing was that?”

Trent had a weird look on his face. He said, “I think it might be my dad’s writing.”

When they got to the speedboat, Trent called his brother Brooks, who once again looped in everyone on the call, even the Cross family.

Quickly, Trent briefed them all on the situation.

Finally, Chance said, “It must be Windsong Reservation, which is about a half hour outside the ranch.”

“Does Ms. Connie have something to do with it?” Kelly asked.

“Who is that?” Brooks asked.

“A teacher who lived on the reservation,” Chance said.

Porter piped in. “She was good friends with Dad. There are even donations to the schools on the reservation that Ms. Connie ran.”

Chance let out a light laugh. “Maybe she’s the missing link in all this.”

“She was good friends with my grandparents too. I remember her coming over a lot on Sunday afternoons to chat,” Kelly added.

Chance frowned. “That’s ... interesting.”

“I guess you’re going back to Wyoming,” Trent said to Chance. “We need this figured out.”

CHAPTER 20

*A*fter they got back to the Stone house, there was a conference call with everyone. They all took turns looking at the piece of paper, and it was decided that Chance would return to Cross Creek.

That night, Chance took Kelly back to her house. He hugged her for a long time.

She kissed his cheek and said, “Good luck on your gold hunt, friend. And thanks for helping me figure out something important in my life.” She patted her stomach. “I’m keeping this baby. I didn’t like it when you told me I should pray about it, but I’m sure glad I did.”

She went inside, and that was that. What else could it be?

Yet, as he walked back to the truck, it didn’t sit right with him. He would be leaving in the morning, separated from her again.

The next morning, he stood outside her door, holding his breath. He hadn’t been able to sleep the night before and had spent most of it praying. He thought he had an answer; she just needed to say yes.

He was trying to work up the courage to knock, but his mind spun with questions. Would she even want to go? Did she have feelings for him? Was she insistent that she live in South Port, or would she come back to Cross Creek with him?

Was he really thinking there would be a ... them?

Ahh!

It was all muddled, but he had to take it one step at a time. That's what his father had always said. *You just deal with the problems as they come. You can't get too ahead of yourself.* It was solid advice that Chance used in his daily life. Even when he investigated something, he remembered to focus on the next step, and then the next. Living in the future never helped anyone.

He knocked on the door and was surprised when she answered quickly. He was shocked to see the tear stains on her face, and it was easy to open his arms and pull her into them. For several minutes, they held each other.

She wiped her face. "I was just crying because I would never see you again. At least, that's how it felt."

To his shame, he was a little happy to learn that she would miss him so badly. He cleared his throat. "Well, I took my own advice and prayed. This might sound stupid, but I had this overwhelming feeling I should ask you to come with me."

She looked confused.

He pressed on. "I mean, you already signed the nondisclosure, and you don't have anything to do for a couple weeks. There's nothing here for you right now, but you have a friend who would like your help. Your parents were close with Ms. Connie, and I'm thinking you might be just what we need. Maybe she'll give us information if we're together."

Tears filled her eyes, and she hiccupped a sob.

He felt awful. He didn't want to upset her. "I'm sorry."

She shook her head. "You're not upsetting me. I actually want to go. You're right. I don't have anyone here, and when I thought you would be leaving, that fact smacked me in the face and I felt so alone. I want to go."

He grabbed her and hugged her. "You do?"

She let out a light laugh. "I do. I do."

CHAPTER 21

Chance and his brothers made a command decision for him to catch a flight back to Wyoming. They had told the whole town that he would be gone and helping out an uncle, just so it wouldn't look suspicious if he came home sooner. They didn't want to take a risk. Plus, Chance lived on a part of the ranch that was off the highway. Few drivers passed his area of land, and his house was farther back from the road.

He and Kelly took a flight into Cody and then rented a car. Even though she seemed excited to be with him on this journey, he could tell she was nervous too.

It was easy to catch up on the gossip of the town and fill her in on Porter and Sadie's story of getting back together. Plus, she had the opportunity to catch up with Blaze and Nash on the phone while they were driving. She'd asked Chance if any of them thought they would ever get married, to which he'd answered of course; they were just waiting for the right girl.

As the sun was setting and they pulled into his home, she asked, "Are you sure you want me here? I know we're trying to be as undercover as we can, but is it hard to have me?"

He heard the vulnerability in her voice, and he knew the real question she was asking. "You mean is it hard to be around the girl who broke my heart? Well, I would have to say yes, but what can you do? Life throws curveballs." Gingerly, he took her hand. "Plus, maybe our love story is not over yet."

She blushed. “Are you serious?”

This whole situation had been niggling at him. Even though they were on a hunt for gold and they didn’t know what they would face, he couldn’t deny his attraction to her, or the serendipitous way she’d been placed back into his life. “Yeah, I’m serious.” He parked the rental car and turned it off.

She turned to face him. “Even though I’m pregnant with another man’s child? That doesn’t bother you? I’d understand if it puts you off dating me.”

Her question irritated him, but he refused to show it. Did it bother *her*? That was the better question—and he wasn’t sure he was ready for the answer.

He stepped out, not wanting to tackle this whole situation right now.

She followed suit without waiting for him and looked around. “Chance, your house is gorgeous.”

Chance had almost forgotten that she’d never seen it. He’d built it five years ago, with his brothers’ help. He took a couple steps to see if it looked okay. He’d set everything to automatic timers, but Colt was supposed to check on it and the animals. “Thanks.” Wanting things to be normal, he gestured for her to follow him. “I’ll give you the tour.”

He started with the front door. He unlocked it, and they stepped in. “This is the front room. I was going for a cabin feel, but a little more modern.” Was it prideful to really like his home?

Kelly studied it for a long moment. He sensed that she was looking at it through her artist’s eyes. Then she turned and smiled at him. “It fits you. It’s masculine and cowboy. And it’s modern. I like the lines and the way you tempered the cowboy theme with almost a contemporary feel. I like the light fixtures, and I really love all the windows and the skylight.”

He felt a little thrill that she approved of his home.

She strolled through the house toward the kitchen and opened the windows. “I remember when we were kids, we

would ride out here and you would tell me that you wanted your backyard to be the river. I guess you got it.”

Chance moved to her side, and once again, the past met the present. “I guess I did.” He sucked in a breath and relished the green pastures around the river. He wasn’t right on top of the river; he didn’t think that would be safe for children. And he did plan on having some. That’s why he was confused as he stood next to Kelly, who was pregnant with someone else’s child. When he had been in high school, and even that year after she’d gone to Oxford and come home, he had hoped she’d be the one.

He opted to focus on something else. “I’m grateful for this view, and that I get to live out here. I like to sit out on the deck and look at the stars, putter around my garden, and—of course—go for rides on Sparky and Shayla.”

She turned with a twinkle in her eyes. “Are those your horses’ names?” It was an inside joke between them. They had caught frogs one year at the river, put them in a cage, and named them Sparky and Shayla.

He grinned back at her. “I thought the names worked well for the horses. If you play your card cards right, I’ll let you ride them with me.”

She gulped, but she held his gaze. The tension grew thick between them.

Suddenly, she put a hand to her stomach. “Oh, shoot. Where’s your bathroom?”

He pointed down the hall. “Second door on the right.”

She sprinted down the hallway, and he heard her throwing up. Moving around in the kitchen, he found some saltines in the pantry and filled up a glass of cold water. Then he waited by the kitchen counter, grateful that everything seemed to be in order. Colton had even picked up his mail and set it in a pile next to his landline phone.

Kelly came back, looking peaky. “Sorry,” she mumbled.

It would take a lot to get used to the situation, but Chance wouldn’t make it awkward. He gestured to the crackers and

the water. “Maybe it’s cliché, I don’t know, but do crackers and water help you? I dug some out of the pantry.”

She sat at the counter and munched on a cracker. “Actually, it does.” She took a sip of water. “Thank you.”

He stared at her, maybe longer than he should.

She met his gaze and gave him a little smile. “I guess life doesn’t turn out the way we think, does it? Here I am, pregnant and back in Cross Creek. If Grandma could see me now ...” Then she blinked rapidly. “I think I would be a huge disappointment.”

He didn’t know what to say, but it hurt to hear her speak that way about herself. “I think you’re being a tad harsh. Your grandma would have wanted you here. She would take you any way she could get you.”

As he said it, he realized those words had a deeper meaning.

He wasn’t just talking about her grandma anymore.

CHAPTER 22

*K*elly was surprised at how easy it was to get settled into Chance's cozy guest room. He'd built the bed himself, and its large posts had a masculine feel to fit the whole cabin. There was also a couch and a television. She teased him about being ready for guests at any moment, and he muttered something about never having anyone stay in that room besides Nash.

They had agreed that she would lie down for an hour. It would give Chance time to run down to Porter's place by himself. He was going to take his horse, as he didn't want people seeing his vehicle.

Kelly tried to relax and not be weirded out by the whole situation. She was tired.

She rested her hand on her stomach and thought about everything they knew. Ms. Connie had been rather famous in Cross Creek and on the reservation. She'd been very supportive of the schools out on the reservation, and she was always fundraising in town. She actually lived out on the reservation and had taught school for years.

Kelly's grandma and grandpa had Ms. Connie over several times for Sunday dinners. They had been friends. She'd always sensed a little tension between her grandfather and Ms. Connie, but she'd never thought much about it. Now Chance was tasked with going out to the reservation to talk to her.

How had that sealed bottle gotten in a treasure chest? The Stones had been looking for so long, and she, Chance, and

Trent had happened to be out there right when the tide changed. She did not believe in coincidences. It was overwhelming.

Kelly was just starting to fall asleep when she heard a door open. It had to be Chance, but it had only been twenty minutes since he left. Surely it would take longer than that to go to Porter's. She called out, "Chance?"

No answer. Footsteps started down the hallway toward her door.

Her heart thumped nervously. There was no reason for anyone else to be here. Okay, maybe his brothers could've shown up, but they were all supposed to be talking right now.

Whoever it was walked past her room, and she sat up, scrambling for her phone. She texted Chance. *Someone is in your house.*

Noise sounded from the kitchen. Kelly told herself she was just being silly, that nothing was going on. It had to be one of his brothers.

All those times she'd felt watched in South Port. She'd thought it was her imagination, and when she'd found out Chance was in South Port, it'd made more sense. He'd admitted to watching her when she'd walked along the beach on his first night there, and she'd thought it was all explained.

Unable to stop herself, she moved toward the door. She opened it and decided to just make her presence known. "Who's there?"

Pain lanced through her skull, and everything went dark.

CHAPTER 23

Chance tied Sparky up in Porter's corral and was careful about walking to the house. He had been in communication with his brothers, and they were all planning to meet in the boardroom.

He'd had a frank conversation with Porter the night before, going through every detail, and they'd even talked about Kelly. He had figured he should give his family a heads-up that he was bringing her home.

Home. That sounded good. She'd come home with him. This was her home too, or was it? It wasn't for him to decide, but the more time he spent with her, the more he wanted her with him. Maybe that was selfish; she wanted to have her gallery and create. Still, ever since they'd rented the car and started the drive toward Cross Creek, he couldn't get a vision out of his head: her in an art room, a bonus room that he would build for her. She could have her pottery and her paints and anything she wanted. They could rent a space in Cross Creek, have a gallery here too, but she could also go back and forth. *They* could go back and forth, between South Port and Cross Creek.

No. Why was he even thinking this? It was definitely putting the cart before the horse.

Sadie greeted him at the door and hugged him. "How are you?"

"I'm good. It's good to be here."

She nodded toward the huge office that used to be his father's. "They're all in there. I'm coming too."

Chance didn't even make it inside the office before Nash accosted him with a hug. "You can't stay away from us, bro. The house looks good, right? Colt put me in charge of checking on it."

"Nash, you don't have to say that," Colt grumbled behind him.

Chance laughed and hugged Colt. "I was thinking the garden looked good, and that explains it."

Colt pointed at him. "Hey, I delegated. Give me a break."

Blaze was next, and they embraced. "You weren't lying that you look like a beach bum. It's a good undercover outfit." He nodded toward the side of the house where his clinic was. "I can't stay too long; I have appointments. But I can clear my schedule for the next couple days so we won't have too many people coming out here, if needed."

"That's probably a good idea," Chance agreed. The less people around as they figured this out, the better.

Porter reached out to shake his hand, but Chance hugged him instead. Chance always had to smile at Porter's reluctance to hug anyone. He didn't get away with it. All of them hugged each other; that's just how it was.

Porter let out a breath. "I thought we'd get a break from all this drama for a while, but here it is."

"That's the greeting a brother longs for. Good to see you too." Chance was already moving around the table, unconcerned about Porter's lack of social skills; Porter was just being pragmatic. "Let's sit."

All of them sat, and Sadie sat next to Porter. Sierra wasn't here, but there was no time to ask.

"I told them all about our conversation," Porter began. "I thought it would be best if I prep them."

Blaze wiggled his eyebrows. "So you brought back your pregnant ex-girlfriend."

For some reason, Chance felt protective of her. “If you talk about her like that, you’re getting slogged in the face.”

All of the men let out a little “Whoa.”

“I was just kidding,” Blaze said, his tone lowering. He looked around as if Kelly would appear. “I wouldn’t say that in front of her.”

Chance pointed at him. “Don’t say it behind her back either. ‘By the grace of God go I’—isn’t that what Mama used to say? Maybe you shouldn’t judge others until you’ve walked in their shoes.”

“That’s enough,” Porter cut in. “No one’s judging anyone.”

Blaze frowned and put his hands up. “Sorry. I just meant it’s an ironic situation.”

Chance nodded. “It is. But she’s afraid. That ex did a number on her. She thinks he’s following her. I don’t know, but I’m glad she’s here. She’s safer at the ranch. Let’s get down to details about Ms. Connie and the reservation. We may go out there tomorrow. Kelly actually knows the woman pretty well; I guess she was good friends with her grandmother. So maybe that’s a plus. What do you guys think?”

Porter let out a long breath. “I think I’m already tired of the Stone family constantly asking for updates.”

“They’re just antsy, like we are. But they’re good people. It’s been nice to get to know them. In fact, I was thinking they feel like extended family or something.”

Porter cocked an eyebrow. “I wouldn’t go that far.”

Chance had to laugh at the way his family could pull in ranks and shut people out. It reminded him of the Stones and how they’d made Kelly fill out the nondisclosure. They were big personalities, and they’d all been through a lot. Just like his family. “I think Ms. Connie might know something. You guys remember how Dad would always go out to the reservation, and when we would ask him where he was going, he would say it was a fundraising meeting?”

Nash snapped his fingers. “That’s right. I never thought about that. But Dad went out there once a month, at least.”

“I remember asking Dad if our ranch donated to a certain cause, and he would just tell me not to worry, that I would find out when he died and everything got settled.” Colt shook his head. “I haven’t even thought about it until now.”

Porter frowned and steepled his fingers. “There are donations in the accounting. There are some causes that Dad gave to, and there were some tax exemptions that Dad took as far as owning ranch property.”

Chance’s phone buzzed. He was tempted to ignore it, but he glanced down and saw the message.

Someone is in the house.

He bolted to his feet. “Kelly said someone’s in the house.”

Without any further discussion, the Cross men hurried out of the house and into their vehicles; they were a sight to behold. Chance got in with Colt, and the rest of them piled in the back of his Dodge Ram truck.

Colt turned to him. “Who else did you tell you were here?”

“No one.” Chance looked at all of them. “Did any of you say anything to anyone? The security? Blaze, to anyone at your clinic? Nash? Any girlfriends?”

All of them shook their heads. “No.” A resounding answer.

Porter pulled out the weapon he always had attached to his side. He turned off the safety. “I don’t think it’s a social visit. I have that feeling.”

Colt gestured to Chance. “Get my rifle.”

“I’m packing,” Blaze said, taking his gun out.

“Same,” Nash chimed in.

When they pulled up to the ranch, there was no one in sight. Before Colt even parked, Chance threw open the truck door and rushed to the house. He fumbled to unlock the door and walked inside, calling out, “Kelly? Kelly?”

His brothers came in behind him, all of them ready for an assault.

A piece of white paper rested on the counter, grabbing Chance's attention. There was a broken arrow and the words, *She's with me now*.

"Truman!" Colt shouted.

Chance stared down at the broken arrow. He was already turning back to go to his truck. "I'm going to call the police department and get every cop out there on this case."

Before Chance could call anyone, a random number lit up his phone. His heart thumped loudly, and he answered it. "Who is this?"

"We don't know each other," an unfamiliar voice said. "But I'm Brian. I've been having a private investigator follow Kelly. Look, I know we have our differences, but she's pregnant with my child, and I know you and your family are mixed up with some bad stuff."

Chance's mouth fell open. He'd never thought he would be talking to Brian.

"I'm concerned because she's headed toward Windsong Reservation."

CHAPTER 24

*K*elly awoke, her head bobbing against the passenger door of a car. Pain wracked through her head. Blearily, she looked up at the driver. “Who are you?”

The man smirked, keeping his eyes on the road. “I’m not one of Brian’s guys, if that’s what you’re afraid of. But he’s been tailing you. One of his guys has, anyway. Maybe it’s a good thing I got to you first.”

“Where are we going?”

The man laughed, and the scar on his face contorted strangely. “You see, the Crosses and the Stones think I’m stupid. They think they’re untouchable. That’s been the number one problem this whole time. They don’t think their places can be bugged. That I know every move they’re going to make.”

Her mind raced, and she remembered hearing them mention Raine Birch’s brother. “Truman?”

A genuine happy look lit up his face. “You’re smarter than I thought. Good for you.”

Her mind whirled with confusion, and she tried to sort out everything she knew about the gold hunt and this Truman who had caused Chance’s family so much heartache. “I guess we’re going to Ms. Connie’s. You’re not going to hurt her, are you?”

“Listen, honestly, I don’t care about you, about Ms. Connie, about any of them. I just want to find this treasure. Because that’s the person I am. The person *smarter* than

everyone else.” He scoffed. “That’s why they’re afraid of me, even my own brother. You should hear the stuff he says.”

They passed a big sign for the Windsong Reservation. Kelly had been here a handful of times while growing up. Her grandmother had been close friends with Ms. Connie. She could only imagine how old Ms. Connie was now; she’d seemed old back when Kelly was small.

She tried to think of a way out of this. “We don’t need to go to Ms. Connie’s house. I already figured out where we need to go. I don’t have any loyalties to anyone either. Just take me to those caves on the south part of the reservation. I’ll show you where the gold is.”

In all her life, she’d never thought about being so deceptive, about trying to trick a literal killer into going somewhere with her. His gun had been placed carelessly in the middle of the car between them. She looked around and noted the tarp and duct tape in his back seat. Wasn’t this the serial killer’s MO in every podcast she’d ever listened to? People who carry around a tarp and duct tape are basically guaranteed serial killers, right?

He laughed again. “Sweetheart, I know you’re caught in the crosshairs, but you’re really too nice for this. I don’t mind taking advantage of nice people. You might know I grew up in foster care, and I had a lot of people take advantage of me.”

Fear spread through her; the look in his eyes told her he might want to do something else. She reached for her pockets, hoping her phone would be in one of them. “Let’s just think about this. I don’t think this is a smart move. They’ll find you.” She hoped they would.

“Chance’s first move will be to call the cops and look for me. They don’t know that I know about the reservation and Ms. Connie. They’re idiots. You see, me taking you...distracts them.” He let out a villainous laugh. “It’s perfect.”

Truman pulled up to the reservation school, which was old and in shambles—a good representation of his dark heart. “We’re here. Let’s go see the old lady. I figure you’re good leverage.”

She didn't move as he got out and went around the car to open her door. For the first time, she started to cry. "Please, let me show you where the gold is. Let's not go see her. She's a good person."

Truman threw the passenger side door open. "You're lying." He yanked Kelly out of the car, and then he did something she would never forget.

He punched her hard in the stomach.

All the air whooshed out of her, and she flashed back to a time when she was little and fell out of a tree on the ranch. She couldn't breathe for a long time.

She started to crumble to the ground, but Truman grabbed her and pulled her along. "You'll be fine. I need you compliant. Let's go talk to the old lady."

CHAPTER 25

When Chance and his brothers pulled up to Ms. Connie's old schoolhouse, they could see the little makeshift apartment she'd always lived in. Porter took control, using silent signals to send people around the back. Nash found a tree and climbed up to the second level of the house. Chance and Porter took the front, guns out.

They didn't knock, just turned the knob and walked in. Screaming and crying echoed in the distance. Chance and Porter sprinted up the stairs to the little apartment. Glass shattered, and they burst through the door in time to see Nash barreling through the broken window.

Chance wasn't prepared for what he saw. Kelly was on the ground, her eyes closed, and the man who must be Truman had his arm around Ms. Connie's neck, a gun to her head.

"Let the lady go," Chance ordered.

Porter had a clear shot. "I'll take the shot and you'll die, man. Let her go."

Truman glared at them, and then a cruel smile turned his lips upward. "If I were you, I'd be taking Kelly to the hospital. She's bleeding. You know where. It might've been the punches I threw too many times."

Anger and adrenaline shot through Chance, and he lunged toward Kelly.

"Ms. Connie!" Porter yelled.

“Kill him, Porter. Kill him!” Ms. Connie grunted.

There was a shot, but Chance didn't see any of it. He'd fallen to Kelly's side.

CHAPTER 26

*K*elly heard voices, but they were muffled and distorted, like she was at the bottom of a swimming pool. She fought to swim to the top until her eyelashes fluttered open. Everything was blurry, and she moaned.

“She’s opening her eyes,” Chance’s voice said. Then she felt his hand in hers.

Her body swayed and then jostled, and then she felt something soft beneath her. A truck’s engine roared to life.

She tried to ask about Ms. Connie, but the darkness claimed her again before she could get the words out.

Sometime later, she awoke to the sound of someone else moving to her side. “I’m going to raise her up and give her some water.”

Kelly tried to move her hands, but only one responded. The other was bound firmly. When she opened her eyes, she saw a nurse checking her vitals.

With a start, she remembered Truman throwing her down as Ms. Connie screamed. Truman had demanded she tell them where the gold was; he said that she must know, because she was friends with the Crosses’ father. She’d denied it, and then Truman had started punching Kelly, over and over, until she’d fallen and he’d switched to kicking her.

She had to be heavily medicated, because the memory didn’t spur anything besides distant sadness.

A straw touched her lips, and she sucked down the water. It was cool and calming.

When the nurse pulled the drink away, Kelly turned to Chance. He was the only other person in the room. “Chance?”

He put his hand on her shoulder, his expression infinitely gentle. “I’m so sorry, Kel... but you lost the baby.”

Kelly blinked furiously. Even with the medication, the news hit somewhere deep in her chest, and she started to cry. But she pushed through to her other question. “Ms. Connie?”

“She’s okay.” With his free hand, he cradled both of hers. “Rest now.”

She closed her eyes, feeling battered both emotionally and physically. She was so tired; all she could do was allow sleep to claim her again.

CHAPTER 27

Chance left Kelly's room, feeling overwhelmed and grateful that she would be all right. He hadn't yet processed the loss of the baby.

Porter marched up to him. "I know this is not an ideal time, brother, but we have to talk to the Stones. I commandeered the hospital's conference room so we can have a Zoom call. Everyone else is already gathering."

Chance nodded and followed him down the hall. Numbness spread through his body, but he forced himself to put one foot in front of the other.

When he entered the conference room and the door was closed behind him, the rest of his family gathered around.

Porter put a hand on Chance's shoulder. "Now that everyone's here, how is she?"

Tears slipped down Chance's cheeks, and he shook his head. "The baby's gone."

His family instantly converged on him, and he found himself in a group hug.

Slowly, the circle pulled away, and his brothers and sisters-in-law had tears in their eyes. Sadie and Sierra were unabashedly crying. Sadie grabbed his hand and squeezed. "I'm so sorry."

"She lost the baby, but she's okay. She'll heal." He had to say the words. If he had learned anything as a sheriff, it was

that you always had to say things out loud to process them, even if you weren't sure they were true.

Blaze nodded and took his other hand briefly. "She will. And that bastard is dead."

There was a rustling slight sound, and Chance realized the Stones had joined the Zoom call already. He couldn't even muster embarrassment that he was crying in front of them.

"We are so sorry, Chance," Trey said.

There was a murmur of assent from the rest of them.

Chance spotted Raine, and he moved away from the others and stared at the computer. "I can't say I'm sorry he's gone, but I do know that losing someone hurts, Raine."

"But he deserved to die." Raine shook his head. "I can't believe he would do this."

Chance pointed at Raine. "This is not on you, brother. Do you hear that?"

Raine nodded, although his expression was hard. "I don't believe that, but thank you for saying it."

Porter filled them in on everything that had happened.

Brooks was in a separate window on the call, and as usual, he was all business. "I traced that call to your phone, Chance. I have the address if you want it. It's in Oxford. So I guess her ex actually might have saved her life. And Ms. Connie's."

Chance hadn't had time to digest the fact that Brian had hired a private investigator to watch her. The psycho had actually saved two lives.

If only they'd made it in time to save the third.

Chance felt like he was having an out-of-body experience as he sat in a chair and Sadie shoved a drink of water into his hand. Sierra was on his other side, checking his pulse and being all Dr. Asher. She gave him some crackers and said, "You need to eat something."

Everyone was talking about the next steps, but he heard none of it. All he could do was look at the crackers and think

of the baby that had been lost. The baby. Pain edged through his heart as if it had already been his own. Had he come to terms with the fact that the baby could've been his to raise?

Chance crumpled the crackers and stood, throwing them on the table. "We're done with this. There is no gold. All this has only caused heartache, and now that Truman's gone, no one's looking for the gold. We're done."

Before anyone could say anything, he stormed out and down the hall.

He was headed to her room when Colt, Nash, and Blaze flanked him.

"Come on, bro. We're going to take you to the ranch," Colt said, tugging him away from the room.

He pulled away. "I can't leave her alone."

Nash put a hand on his shoulder. "Sierra and Sadie won't leave her side. Don't worry. Let's get you cleaned up, and you're going to take a nap before we bring you back. We've got your back, brother—and hers, too."

CHAPTER 28

*K*elly woke, and this time, the pain in her head had spread throughout her body. She moaned.

Two women hurried to either side of her bed, each placing a hand on hers. “It’s Sadie, Porter’s wife,” one said, “and Sierra Shamrock. We know each other, Kelly. We hung out together long ago, remember?”

“Yes.” It was comforting to have them there.

Sierra checked her vitals and called for a nurse. She recommended more pain medicine, and the nurse swapped out something in Kelly’s IV that made her instantly relax.

A different nurse appeared with some food. “Jell-O. Cheese. A piece of toast.”

“You need to eat something,” Sierra told Kelly. “It will help you feel better.”

“Chance.” She wouldn’t eat until she knew where Chance was.

“Our husbands are taking him to the ranch to get cleaned up, but I’ve been told he refuses to rest. He’s coming back right now. Hang tight. He’ll be here soon.”

Sadie took a spoonful of Jell-O and put it to Kelly’s lips. Kelly wanted to refuse, but she took a bite. Despite herself, she started to cry again.

“It’ll be okay.” Sadie patted her hand.

It wasn't okay—it would never be okay again. Kelly was a horrible person. Her grandmother would hate her because she had considered getting rid of the baby, and now the baby was gone. Who was she? What kind of person had she turned into? “My baby,” was all she could say. Then she remembered Truman's other victim. “Ms. Connie. I want to see her.”

Sierra sat back down and took her hand. “You finish eating, and then we'll get you up and take you to her room. She didn't suffer the blows you did. She's shaken, but that old girl is tough. She has family with her. Don't worry. It's all going to work out.”

Kelly tried to stay awake. She wanted to see Ms. Connie—needed to see Chance—but the new medication must have fully kicked in, because she fell asleep again.

CHAPTER 29

Chance sat by Kelly's hospital bed, holding her hand. It was dark, and moonlight shone through the window. Despite his exhaustion, he couldn't sleep. She'd been in and out of consciousness. She was on heavy pain meds right now, and he could only imagine how her physical condition compared to her emotional state.

He was still angry, but it was no longer at the forefront of his emotions. Now he was just sad. He hated that he couldn't bring back the baby, and he felt guilty that he hadn't done more to help.

Kelly's eyelids fluttered open, and she gently squeezed his hand. "Chance."

He sat up more fully. "You need something?"

"No. I'm glad you're here," she said, her voice groggy and faint.

"Of course. I want to be here."

She sucked in a slow breath, then exhaled. "Tell me everything."

It was hard, but he did. He told her about Brian's call and how the private investigator had reported her abduction. About her injuries—she had two broken ribs and a whole lot of bruises, but it was manageable. She would heal. "They want you to stay a couple of days in the hospital. Sierra is the point person over you."

Kelly tried to smile. “Your family is good to me. Sierra and Sadie were both at my side for hours, listening to me cry.” Her voice broke. “Chance, I lost the baby. I’d just decided I wanted the baby, and then I lost it. Do you think God is punishing me?”

His heart ached, and he hugged her as carefully as he could. “God doesn’t work that way. That’s all I know. Sometimes things happen, but blaming God is always a losing strategy.”

She nodded. “That’s right. That’s what my grandmother would say.” She blinked hard. “He’s dead. That man is dead. I heard the shot, so he must be dead.”

Chance pulled back and nodded. “He’s dead.”

“I felt bad for him. He seemed so lost and sad.”

It confused Chance to hear Kelly say this about Truman. Of course, she’d had her own trial of faith in the past couple of years, so maybe it allowed her to see others with compassion, but Chance couldn’t fathom it. In a way, she was stronger than he’d ever be.

CHAPTER 30

One week later

Kelly sat in a rocking chair on Chance's porch. She stared out at the corrals and the river beyond. It was peaceful here. She liked it.

After three days in the hospital, she'd been fed up and refused to stay another second. Chance had offered to let her stay with him. It was undeniable that she still loved him. She hadn't told him that, but any time they shared a meal, they held hands and prayed. Chance had started taking her on short walks, and he always held her hand. The man was gentle and kind and everything she'd always loved about him.

Her one regret was that she'd left when they were young, believing she could find a home somewhere else. For so long, she'd thought home was just a place. She hadn't asked about seeing her old ranch. What was the point? It had been sold. But she'd found that home could be people, too.

Chance had asked her if she wanted to press charges on Brian for stalking and everything. She'd said no. Chance told her she was too forgiving, but the man *had* saved her life.

Chance stepped onto the porch and sat in the other rocking chair, reaching for her hand. "It's a beautiful night."

She looked down at their joined hands. "I can't tell you what it means that you came back into my life. I honestly don't know what I would've done without you."

Chance gently squeezed her hand. "None of that. You know we're like family. I would do anything you need."

When she met his gaze, she felt an underlying tension. Unable to stop herself, she asked, “What would you do? Anything I wanted?”

His eyes got more intense. “Yes. I have feelings for you, Kelly. I haven’t wanted to talk about them, but I have feelings for you.”

CHAPTER 31

Chance's heart ached as Kelly smiled at him with her bruised face. How had he come to love her even more than he had before? Had it happened in a matter of days, or the moment he'd realized she was back in his life?

"Would you kiss me?" she breathed.

His heart thrummed, sending warmth through his body. He leaned over and gently brushed his lips against hers. He wanted this woman. The passion had dimmed to a smoldering heat over the years, but it burned brightly again when given the chance—like a campfire he forgot about until the next morning. He pulled back. "I don't want to hurt you."

Her only answer was to kiss him again, this time more forcefully. She leaned in and cupped his head with her hand, drawing him closer. Their lips moved in that old, familiar rhythm. They had been sixteen when he'd first kissed her after prom. He'd been so scared. Yet now, as their lips parted and she deepened the kiss, he wanted to kiss her for the rest of his life.

She broke away and smiled at him. "I wanted to do that since I first saw you. I mean, right before I threw up." She giggled, but quickly sobered. "I don't know if it's appropriate to laugh about that."

Chance brushed a stray strand of hair out of her face. "I don't think you have to feel bad about any of that. Circumstances were hard, and sometimes in life you have to

laugh your way through hard things. I think it's a good sign we can talk about it."

He swallowed the lump in his throat. He was proud of her. It couldn't have been easy to be in a relationship with someone who beat her up; she'd told him she hated herself for allowing it. He was proud of her for praying to God and deciding to keep the baby. And he was so sad for her that she'd lost that baby. It was like his heart had swelled enough to hold her emotions along with his own.

Kelly caressed his face. "I love you, Chance. I don't know if it's fair to tell you that, but I think I've always loved you. And I was a fool for leaving you. I was a fool for leaving this place and my grandparents and thinking there was someplace better. In the last few days, all I've thought about was how I could create here. I could create my art, my pottery. I could have a life here with you. If you want me." She cleared her throat. "And I wouldn't blame you if you don't. I've messed so many things up."

Tears slipped down Chance's cheeks. "I want you. Woman, I've always wanted you. I still want you."

He leaned in, and he didn't try to measure how long they kissed. He just enjoyed this moment: the cool breeze, this perfect woman, and dreams of a life together.

CHAPTER 32

The next day, Kelly woke up feeling more like herself. Even though not much time had passed since she had broken her ribs, they were healing. After she helped put away breakfast and did chores with Chance, she turned to him and asked, “Aren’t you supposed to go be a sheriff or something?”

He folded his arm around her, his lips brushing hers. These feelings were so new, and she loved it. She’d gone to sleep dreaming about him, imagining life with him on this ranch, together, raising kids and having his family in and out of her life.

Was she really thinking about children again?

He pulled back and stared into her eyes. “I took time off to go to South Port. I’ll be here with you for as long as you need me.”

His words touched her, and she kissed him again. “Then I need you.”

More silence and kissing.

He pulled back. “What were you thinking?”

She felt silly and vulnerable, but she decided to tell him the truth. “I’m only telling you because I want truth between us. And if anything I say makes you uncomfortable, I think we should just talk about it. I’ve been thinking about how it would be to live here, be with you. Have children. And I feel guilty about that, because I lost a child. But ...” Her heart raced, and she turned away. “I don’t know. Never mind.”

“It’s okay to have a life. A vision. It’s okay to let the past go and move on. Someone told me that.”

She shoved him in the shoulder. “Don’t use my words against me.”

He laughed and pulled her back to him, smothering her with kisses.

She pulled back. “Let’s go for a ride.”

“Are you sure you’re feeling up to it?”

With a little sass in her step, she headed toward the horse stalls. “Are you worried you won’t be able to keep up?”

CHAPTER 33

Even though Kelly had been cavalier in insisting that they ride, Chance wouldn't let them go fast. "We won't go if you're going to be reckless," he threatened her.

Kelly swung onto the horse and winced. "Okay, *Dad*. We'll go slow."

He gave her a stern look.

"I mean it. I haven't ridden since the last time I was home and Grandma and Grandpa were here." She sighed. "I miss them so much and I regret selling the ranch."

He mounted his own horse, and then they were trotting down the trail that led to the south side of the ranch. There weren't any mountains to climb, and it wasn't by the river. It was just smooth riding ground. They had done this ride all the time when they were kids, going back and forth from her property to his.

They rode for about twenty minutes, and Chance wrestled with his emotions. He wanted her to be his wife. Every fiber of his being knew that. And boy, was she giving him the impression that she wanted that too. Yet he worried that with losing the baby and recovering from her physical injuries, she wouldn't feel the same way later. Did she really want to stay?

"Those gears in your head look like they're grinding," she said, glancing at him.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

He grinned back at her. “What did you used to tell me? Your thoughts cost more money than a penny?”

She let out a light laugh. “I did say that to you. On prom night, before you kissed me, you offered to give me five dollars for what I was thinking. Which was pretty good money back then, considering we didn’t have much.”

Every part of Chance wanted to beg this woman to marry him right now. “I want you in my life, Kelly. But I don’t know if you’ll feel the same way in a couple weeks. You might want to head back to South Port and settle there. I guess I could schedule time to see you every now and then, but I don’t know.”

“I don’t think a sheriff can be gone from his town so long.”

His heart thumped, and he didn’t know what to say.

She sighed. “I might not want to leave Wyoming again either. I was actually thinking I might call Matt and tell him to stop work on the shop. With the proceeds from my grandmother, I could just pay off the lease if I have to. Or maybe I could talk to whoever owns it and ask them if I can get out of it. The thing that might be hard to get out of is the cottage on the beach, but maybe we could go back and forth over the course of the year and spend time there together.”

Was she saying what he thought she was saying?

“I want to be with you, Chance,” she said. “However that looks, I want us together if you do.”

LATER THAT NIGHT, they got back from the ride and put the horses away. Then Chance made them supper and they cleaned up.

Afterward, he found her sitting on one of the lounge chairs on the back porch. He dragged another chair to sit closer to her and took her hand. “I’ve been thinking about what you said about your cottage and the next year. I just have to say something, and if you don’t want to hear it, tell me. But I think you might.”

“Are you trying to freak me out? I’m feeling freaked out.”

He slid off the chair and got down on one knee. “Kelly, will you marry me?” His heart raced, and he wondered if any man had ever experienced more fear than this.

Tears pooled in her eyes, and she carefully stood, wincing a bit at the pain in her ribs.

“Don’t hurt yourself,” he said. “You don’t have to stand to answer the question.”

She reached down and put her hands on his cheeks, then leaned in and gently pressed her lips against his. When she pulled back, her smile was blinding. “Yes. I’ll marry you.”

CHAPTER 34

The next day was Sunday, and Kelly went to church with the Cross family. When people asked why Chance had come back so soon, Chance just said it was time to come home. Of course, there were already rumors swirling about the Cross family being involved in something with the gold. All of them, including Ms. Connie, had decided to “deny, deny, deny.” Even the hospital staff didn’t know the whole story. They just knew that Kelly had been beaten up and a guy had died.

That was how small towns were: there was gossip, and there were cover-ups. It was easier to cover things up when the sheriff was in on it. The story hadn’t hit national news, and with the Stone family FBI agent making sure none of it got on the internet, things were pretty good.

Many of the townspeople reached out and greeted Kelly. A lot of them knew her from when she’d grown up here. She was surprised at how many things had stayed the same, even though there had naturally been changes. People told her how much they missed her grandmother. That meant a lot to her, even bringing her to tears a few times after the service.

As she and Chance made their way to Porter and Sadie’s for Sunday dinner, Chance turned to her. “Do you care if I tell my family?”

She let out a light laugh. “I don’t know why you haven’t. I thought if they knew, they’d all be congratulating us, but I don’t want to pretend to know how to navigate big families.” She’d always been an only child.

As everyone was getting seated for dinner, Kelly tried to help, but Sadie kept shooing her to sit. Sierra checked her vitals several times, much to her embarrassment. It was fun to have Sierra's parents and aunt there as well.

After they said a prayer and everyone started eating, Chance cleared his throat and said, "I have an announcement."

Everyone got quiet, and Kelly knew she was blushing. When Chance took her hand, she couldn't help but grin at all of them.

Porter nodded to him. "Go ahead, then."

"I proposed to Kelly last night, and she said yes."

The whole table erupted with roars of approval. Sadie squealed, and then everyone was hugging and laughing.

When Blaze hugged her, he said, "I can't believe there's another second-chance romance. I wonder who's going to come back into my life? I can't decide if this gold is a blessing or a curse."

Those words were interesting to Kelly. Would she have met Chance again if they hadn't been searching for the gold? No. He wouldn't have been in South Port.

After they'd done the congratulations and everyone settled down again to eat, Sadie turned to her. "So when's the wedding?"

Chance shrugged. "I guess we haven't talked about that."

Kelly had thought about it last night after she'd said her prayers, something she'd been doing again thanks to Chance. She smiled at him. "Well, this might seem ridiculous, but I don't really want a big wedding. I want all of you there, and that's it. What if we just went down to the courthouse tomorrow? Are you all available?"

There was complete silence at the table, and Chance leaned in and kissed her. She laughed, and then the whole table exploded again. Cheyenne said, "I want to sew a dress for you. Let's go measure you."

Sadie, Sierra, and the men started planning for the party tomorrow night.

As Cheyenne measured her for the dress, Kelly met Chance's eyes. She had always loved him, and she was so grateful to be home. She missed her grandparents, and she would miss their ranch, but she was starting a life with Chance, and that was all that mattered.

CHAPTER 35

If someone had told Chance three weeks ago that he would be waiting for the judge at the courthouse, getting married to the woman who'd broken his heart ten years ago, he would've told them they were writing fiction. Yet here he was, holding Kelly's hands and staring deeply into her green eyes. She looked stunning in her dress, which Cheyenne had somehow created for her perfectly.

Surrounded by his family and friends, he was so grateful and happy. "I love you," he whispered. Everyone was still taking their places beside them. The judge wasn't even in the room yet.

She grinned back. "I love you."

Warmth filled him. He would never let this woman go. Maybe the vows were cliché—in sickness and in health, for as long as they both shall live—but it was true. It was an immutable fact that he would never leave her side. He loved her so much.

The door flew open, and Judge McIntosh entered. Of course, the family knew him. A big grin on his face, he said, "The Cross family. And I heard Chance, our own sheriff, is getting married to his longtime sweetheart." He looked at Kelly. "We're so happy you're home. Do you know that? Your grandparents were the best people. And you're the best people. This is a happy day."

The family surged with excitement, and everyone fell into place around them. Porter and Sadie's daughter, Little Rock, moved to Chance's side and the rest of his brother's filed behind him. Sadie and Sierra and Marissa were behind her.

The judge took his spot in front of them, and he went through the vows.

Chance didn't pay attention to what the judge was saying. All he could do was stare at this beautiful woman. She would be his, and he would be hers.

After Kelly said, "I do," he let out a little whoop and kissed her.

Everyone laughed, and the judge said, "Hey, wait till this is over, *Sheriff*." He gave them a grin as Kelly giggled. "And now I present to you Mr. and Mrs. Chance Cross."

Chance's family erupted into cheers, and a big group hug descended upon them, with him and Kelly at the center. She kissed him, and then everyone else faded away, leaving only the two of them.

CHAPTER 36

*K*elly swayed on the dance floor that Chance's brothers had somehow put together in Porter's backyard. Apparently, all their receptions had been held at the original home. It seemed that the entire town had descended, even though this was more like an elopement.

Kelly was too happy to care. She gazed up into Chance's eyes as he whispered along to the lyrics and sang to her like she was the only woman alive: "I love you to the moon and back. You are my one and only."

If there was ever a weak-in-the-knees moment when she felt like the hero had swooped in and saved her, it was right now. Giddiness swept through her. She had married her longtime love. She leaned up and brushed her lips against his. He held her tighter and then kissed her more deeply.

"I guess our elopement kind of turned into a full wedding," she said against his lips. "But I'm grateful."

Chance let out a light laugh. "My family doesn't do anything halfway. You say the word 'wedding,' and they're going to make it an affair." He looked around. "I can't say I'm sad about having the town here. They are like my family."

"I like that about you, Chance Cross. You feel the need to protect everyone."

He stood a little straighter and puffed his chest out. "So you like the macho type? That's good to know."

She swatted at his arm. “I’ve always liked the macho type. And I guess you like the artsy type.”

He nodded and leaned in to kiss her again. “Of course.”

“I’m excited for our life together.” With a giggle of anticipation, she added, “And I’m excited for tonight.”

He kissed her neck, working his way up to her ear and then ending on her lips. “We’ll start with tonight. The rest will work itself out.”

Out of the blue, a noise sounded.

Chance looked up and the sound of a chopper coming toward the ranch assaulted him.

Porter moved next to his side. “I told them they didn’t have to come, but Sadie did make me tell them about today.”

Kelly laughed. “Ohmygosh, I can’t believe it, Ava texted me congratulations earlier, but I never thought...”

She didn’t have time to finish because the chopper descended, the sound very loud.

Chance laughed, thinking of how much Trey and Ava and the whole family seemed to enjoy a good love story.

The chopper landed and the door flew open. What seemed like the whole Stone clan, plus all of the friends Chance had met in South Port, descended out of it, including their families.

First out was Brooks and his wife Serenity. They were both dressed for a wedding and Chance reflected that the 007 room that was dedicated to him back in South Port was indeed that way for a reason, because right now he looked like he could have walked off of a movie set.

Then there was Trey and Ava and their kids; Micah and baby Trey. Then Marshall and Kat and their children. Followed by Hunter and Cheryse, Trent and Liberty, Dawn and Trevor, Lucy and Matt and their daughter, Tatum. Then Kensi and Tim and their little one. And, then Raine and his wife, Sarah.

At first Porter seemed a bit annoyed, then he laughed and moved to meet the family.

For some of the women in the family, this was the first time all of them had met but they immediately embraced.

Chance held tightly to Kelly's hand, unsure of how she was feeling.

She turned to him, with tears in her eyes. "I guess sometimes families just grow, don't they?"

He grunted out a laugh as Trey and Ava headed their way. "I guess they do."

They took some time, embracing and laughing and hearing everyone wish them congratulations. Chance noted that Raine hung back until the last, with a serious, somewhat sad expression on his face.

Chance figured that, although Truman had caused his own death on himself, it probably wasn't an easy thing for Raine.

Raine held to his wife's hand firmly, then blinked hard, looking like he would cry. He opened his arms to Kelly. "I'm so so so sorry for your loss."

She cried as she embraced Raine. "I'm sorry for yours, too."

Chance opened his arms to Sarah, Raine's wife, and they embraced. She was crying.

He found that he was shedding tears as well. This was a joyful reunion, but also very hard and emotional.

After a bit, Raine pulled back and so did Chance.

Then Raine and Chance embraced.

"I'm so sorry, man. I blame myself. I don't even know—"

"Don't." Chance pulled back and gripped his shoulders tightly. "Don't." He could sense that Raine was blaming himself for the loss of the baby.

"He's right," Kelly said, lightly putting a hand on Raine's shoulder. "Don't blame yourself, everyone makes choices and

Truman was the one who ... attacked me.” Her voice broke and he was suddenly worried that maybe the Stone family shouldn’t have come because he didn’t want her to be hurting.

Sarah took Kelly into her arms, tears washing her face. “I’m so sorry.”

They held each other for a time and Chance found himself crying again.

Suddenly, it felt like both families were surrounding them, taking part in all of this.

Raine put his hand on Kelly’s shoulder. “Can you ever forgive me?”

Kelly sniffed and hugged Raine again. “Nothing to forgive.”

Chance felt overwhelmed by this woman’s goodness and he felt like he was falling in love with her all over again because of how Christ-like she was acting.

He wrapped his arms around both of them and then it was like both families moved toward the center, hugging each other.

Tears washed down Chance’s face and he knew that no matter what happened with the gold, the Stone family and friends would always be part of the Cross family now.

CHAPTER 37

*A*fter three quiet days together alone at Chance's ranch, Kelly woke early—even earlier than Chance.

Quietly, she slipped out of bed and padded into the kitchen, stretching and loving that she felt so good today. Most of the pain from her injuries was gone, but the thought of it still made her wince. She didn't like to think about Truman or how he was dead.

She pulled out a pan and cooked up some eggs for herself and Chance. It amazed her how easy it had been to slip into a pattern of waking up, eating breakfast, doing ranch chores, and then having together time. They talked and talked and talked, holding nothing back. She felt like she was completely caught up on the last ten years of their lives. Plus, they did other things that married couples did, and that was a huge highlight. Even though she'd miscarried, Chance was gentle, and they'd found their own physical love language.

A kiss on her neck startled her. "Good morning," Chance said in her ear, embracing her from behind.

She turned in his arms, forgetting the eggs and relishing more kisses.

Chance turned the heat off. "You would burn the place down."

She laughed and kissed him some more. "Maybe we'll eat after a quick trip back to the bedroom."

Chance laughed and swooped her off her feet. "Don't have to ask me twice."

His phone buzzed, and he hesitated.

“Don’t look at it. Remember, this is our staycation honeymoon.”

“True.” It started to ring, and he said, “I’ll turn it off.”

Kelly deflated. She knew Chance; he would be distracted if someone was trying to get a hold of him. “Just check it.”

He picked it up, checking the text. “Oh, this might be of interest.”

“What?” she asked, uninterested in anything except them and their magical world.

“I just got a text from Ms. Connie. She said if you are feeling okay, she wanted to meet you at Hamilton Ranch. I told her I’d ask you first.”

This news had her perking up. “At my grandparents’ ranch? Is she feeling okay?”

They’d spoken to her at the hospital, and the older lady had already been checking out, saying that nothing could keep her down and the great spirits had protected her.

Chance nodded. “She said she’s right as rain. Do you want to go? Or should I have her come here?”

“Let’s go.”

It wasn’t hard to climb into the old truck with Chance. He was careful with her, and she was healing. She no longer wore the bandage over her eye, which was nice, because she could see better.

They drove up to her grandparents’ old ranch. It had “Hamilton” written at the top of the entrance, and the gates were open. Aside from the missing animals, everything looked the same. The large yard was even in order.

They walked to the front steps, and she could almost envision her grandma and grandpa still there. Her emotions got the best of her. “I miss them, Chance. I miss them so much. I should never have left.”

Chance took her hand and squeezed it.

Ms. Connie opened the door and welcomed them in. “You’re looking so much better,” she said as she hugged Kelly.

The moment was surreal, like nothing had changed. Kelly almost wondered if Grandma and Grandpa would come out at any moment. Even when she had come for the funeral, the place hadn’t looked so nice. “Where are the owners?”

Ms. Connie gestured to the table. “Let’s drink some herbal tea. I made a concoction just for you, the kind your grandma used to make.”

Kelly sat and stared at the familiar cup. She tasted the orange zest concoction that her grandma used to make anytime she was sick. “I don’t understand.”

Reaching down, Ms. Connie heaved a large metal box onto the table.

Kelly recognized that box. “That’s Grandma’s.”

Ms. Connie nodded. “Kelly, you remember how I used to come out on Sundays?”

Kelly nodded and took another sip of tea. “Of course.”

Ms. Connie opened the box and pulled out what looked like a deed for the ranch. “It was decided long ago that if you didn’t want the ranch, I would buy it. For you.”

Kelly nearly dropped her tea. “What?” She reached for the piece of paper.

Ms. Connie pointed to the document. “I did, in fact, sell some of it, but I sold it to—”

“Me,” Chance said, sounding amazed.

Ms. Connie laughed.

“I thought it was the new owners I was buying it from.”

She just smiled. “I know.”

None of this made sense. Kelly’s hand started to shake. “So you bought it for me and put it in my name? But you sold some of it to Chance?”

Ms. Connie nodded. “In fact, I had an agreement with your grandparents that I would make sure you got the land and the house if you came back. *When* you came back. They knew you would, and that I would make sure you got it.” She grinned at them. “But when I heard Chance wanted some of the land, well, let’s just say I hoped my gut was right about you two.”

Tears formed in Kelly’s eyes. “I can’t believe it.”

“Wait, you knew we would be together?” Chance asked.

Kelly’s heart raced. “Grandma knew?”

Ms. Connie shook her head. “No, but me and your grandparents would often talk about how great it would be if you two got married.”

Kelly hugged Ms. Connie, then Chance, feeling warm chills. “Grandma knew.”

Chance looked mystified. “This is insane.”

Ms. Connie looked between them. “There’s another stipulation. I wasn’t sure if I should tell Chance about it, but since he’s your husband now, I figured it was time. The involvement of the Windsong Reservation in the search for gold made me realize I had to let others in on the secret, even if I didn’t want to. You see ... I have held bars of the gold.”

CHAPTER 38

Chance's heart raced. "Bars...of the conquistador gold?"

Ms. Connie raised an eyebrow and took a sip of tea. "One and the same."

Chance and Kelly glanced at each other. Chance wasn't sure what to think.

"What do you mean?" Kelly asked cautiously.

"You know your father used to come out to the reservation and see me a lot," Ms. Connie said, looking at Chance. "Every month, he brought me a bar of gold to melt down." She turned back to Kelly. "And your grandparents would help sell it on the black market."

"What?" they both spat out at the same time.

Chance couldn't have been more surprised if an earthquake swallowed them up just then.

"No!" Kelly gasped.

Ms. Connie shrugged. "I know I'm taking a chance because you're a sheriff, but I don't think your family or anyone else wants the news of this to get out." She ran a hand through her hair. "I don't know how your grandparents used to sell the gold. All I know is that they would give me cash that helped support projects on the reservation and supply money for the new schools—the ones I don't live in. That cash has done lots of good things around the whole Cross Creek area and many other areas around the world."

Kelly threw her hands up. “My grandparents sold the gold on the black market?”

“My father’s bars of gold?” Chance pounded a fist on the table. “He knew where the gold was at. It’s around here somewhere for real?” He stood and immediately pulled out his phone.

Ms. Connie raised a hand. “I don’t know how many people you want to tell. I know you’re involved with this other family, the Stone family. And if the name ‘Windsong Reservation’ was in some bottle somewhere, then that means their father knew. But Chance, you had better think hard before you bring down a bunch of gold seekers around here. Look at all the damage the secret has already done. And until now, you haven’t even known if the gold has been here for sure.”

Chance stared at his phone. There was no way he could keep his brothers and sister out of it. But he did hesitate to tell too many more people. He looked up at Ms. Connie. “You don’t know where it is?”

She shook her head. “Nope. I just helped find people to melt it down, then I gave it to Kelly’s grandparents.”

Chance frowned. “Who melted it down?”

Ms. Connie looked sad. “He’s passed away now, so it doesn’t matter.”

All of them sat in silence for a long time.

Kelly stood. “We aren’t sure how we will proceed, but we’re going to have to tell the Cross family.”

Chance was relieved that she agreed. “Yes, we will. Thank you, Ms. Connie. We have to go.”

CHAPTER 39

*K*elly listened to Chance relate the details about what Ms. Connie had said in the conference room at Porter and Sadie's home.

Everyone was understandably shocked.

Porter said, "Of course, we will want to talk to Ms. Connie." He pulled out his cell phone. "I'm texting her to come to the house right now."

Nash threw his hands up. "So there *is* gold."

"Dear old Dad." Colt laughed and banged his hand on the table. "And Porter didn't even know."

Porter frowned at him. "*You* didn't know."

Blaze stood and moved to the window that overlooked the backyard. "But no one knows where it was. Dad would give a bar of gold to Ms. Connie, and she would melt it down, then give some to Kelly's grandparents, who would sell it on the black market and give the money back in cash for projects." He turned and looked at Kelly. "What business were your grandparents in?"

She had been wondering the same thing since this morning. "I thought they just ran a ranch. I have no idea."

Blaze tapped a finger to his chin. "I remember that after your grandparents passed away, a guy came to the vet clinic. He was asking me a lot of questions about your grandparents. Of course, they were neighbors of ours, and I worked with your grandparents while I was in vet school. Your

grandparents used to have the best mustangs around. I wonder now if one of those mustang buyers helped them sell the gold. Trying to remember the name of that guy. Kevin, maybe. I think he was from Kentucky. Ugh. I'm not sure."

Porter's phone pinged. "Ms. Connie is coming. Let's hear her side of it."

"I think we should have the Stone family on this call," Chance said.

Kelly's heart jumped, and she looked at the family. They stared at each other in silence.

"Porter," Chance said. "They've been with us. They've helped us through all of this."

Porter pursed his lips together. "Yes, they have."

Colt cleared his throat. "Yet we could make the argument that they are the original family that rained all of this pain down on us. Their dad gave the gold to our dad."

Nash frowned. "The Stone family really didn't cause this. They couldn't have known what would happen. Our dad accepted this challenge."

Blaze moved to the table, eyes full of steel. "I'd bet some of those contacts helped them—the ones Kelly's grandparents were selling horses to. I think we need to track that information down first."

Colt wagged a finger. "We still don't know where the gold is."

Kelly's gut twisted. "Why do we have to keep looking? Can't we just leave this all alone?"

Porter let out a light laugh. "Chance, explain to your wife why we can't leave this alone."

Chance took her hand and gave it a little squeeze. "Because as long as someone knows there is gold around here, it leaves the whole family open to attack. Maybe just Ms. Connie, maybe others. We don't know yet. But it leaves us wide open to people who could hurt the people we love." He gazed at her. "That includes you."

Kelly stared back at him, uncertain about what this would all mean to her and them. “Okay, so what do we do?”

Blaze let out a laugh. “We hear Ms. Connie’s side of it, and then it’s my turn, boys. I’ll investigate all of Kelly’s grandparents’ horse contacts.”

“It just feels right to tell the Stones,” Chance said.

“I agree,” Colt said, looking to Porter.

“No,” Nash said. “Don’t you think their family is as tired of this gold hunt as we are?” He scoffed. “Especially Raine and after all that happened. They are doing a funeral, they don’t need to be bothered by this.”

Silence descended on everyone.

Porter sighed. “Fine, we won’t tell them yet.”

Thank you for reading, *Chance!*

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(These are two ‘non edited’ chapters...but please enjoy!

Chapter 1

Blaze didn’t like the fact that he had to call in a back up Veterinarian to run his place. His patients, including the animals, were like family to him and trusting some ‘on call’ vet to take care of them for a couple of weeks didn’t sit right with him. But there was no way around the fact that he needed to check out this ‘horse seller’ in Kentucky. There was no way around the fact that the gold existed. There was no way around the fact that Blaze was the only man for the job of talking to a horse dealer. He had an appointment with Ed Peters early tomorrow morning and he planned on getting to the bottom of how Mr. Peters knew Chase’s new wives’ grandparents. He

had to demand answers on if he had been part of selling the Conquistador Gold on the black market.

His plane landed in Louisville, Kentucky and he tried to distract himself with a game of chess on his phone. As he deplaned, the woman who'd been sitting next to him, a woman who had worn a hoodie and air pods the whole time, butted in front of a bunch of people, claiming she had an appointment she couldn't miss.

Rude.

Blaze waited for more people to deplane, still playing that game of chess against whatever A.I. was playing him. He wasn't sure about this whole artificial intelligence thing, but his brother Nash had turned him onto a chess game that used A.I., telling him that he should try it because real people weren't a challenge and maybe he could soothe himself with a chess competition.

His brother knew him well.

Blaze always played the most competitive level and sometimes even beat the A.I. on this new game he'd been shown. He wasn't paying that close of attention, when someone cleared their throat. "Mr. do you want to get off the plane?"

"Oh." He quickly began moving from the window seat toward the aisle. He grabbed his overhead bag. "Thank you," he said quickly and moved toward the front of the plane. "Thank you," he said again and moved through the front and out to the breezeway. All of the other people were gone and he sped quickly toward the gate. That's when he noticed something on the ground.

He bent and picked it up and noted it was a phone. He looked around and nobody was around. He walked out of the gate and there was no attendant, just people waiting for a flight.

He hesitated, then decided he would go drop it off at baggage claim when he went to get his rental car.

As he walked through the airport, he turned off his 'airplane mode' on his phone and it started buzzing. After sifting through most of the texts from his brothers and different clients, he determined none of them were important enough to respond to at this moment.

Out of the blue, he heard barking and a cop with what appeared to be a drug dog rushed over to him.

The cop looked angry. "Get down on the ground!" He commanded.

Shocked, Blaze tucked the phone into the side of his bag and got down on the ground, putting his hands up. He felt like he was in some kind of movie and wished his brother, Chance, could get him untangled from whatever bad show down was going on.

The dog sniffed all over him and his back pack, then seemed to take off.

The cop rushed off. "Sorry, I guess it wasn't you!"

Blaze got back onto his feet and felt...violated.

He rushed to baggage claim and noted that this wasn't a great start to this trip.

Later that night, after checking into the VRBO that he'd found in St. Louis, he quickly changed and got ready for bed. He spread out on the king-size bed and was grateful he'd chosen to rent a furnished apartment for the week. Sure, maybe he didn't know how long he would need to get to the bottom of this gold thing, but Blaze wasn't the 'hotel' type of guy. He'd stopped and gotten supplies at the local grocery store and then put everything away and gone for a run and done some calisthenics and pushups. He was grateful to be in St. Louis and to be in a huge bed and to have gotten in his exercise for the day; he liked running and when he didn't get it in, he was fussy. At least that's what his brother, Colt, told him.

As he drifted to sleep, there was a buzz and a pinging sound. One not familiar to him. Not a buzz like the buzz from his phone.

Maybe he left on some notifications by accident from his new chess A.I. game. Hmm. He wasn't sure, but he was tired and he would deal with it tomorrow.

Again, the same buzzing and pinging sound. Annoyed, he threw back the covers and headed to his phone, purposefully plugged in across the room on a dresser because he liked to create an atmosphere for good sleep, not for being on his phone. One of the women he previously dated made fun of him for that. She said he gave himself too many rules to follow. He grimaced, thinking about Alisha. Like not cheating on him. Or leaving him at the altar...yes, those were big rules to follow.

He hated even thinking about Alisha. He pushed thoughts of her out of his head and focused.

His phone was not making any noises. He waited. The sound went off again. He remembered the phone he'd picked up and slid into his side backpack pocket. The one he was going to drop at baggage claim before he was sniffed for drugs by a cop. The memory still felt like an assault to him personally.

The room was dark, so he turned on his phone flashlight. He walked to the backpack the side pocket of the backpack and retrieved the phone.

The phone was still lit up from the text and he saw the words,

I truly hate you

They caught his attention and he couldn't help but start to read them.

Even though I know it's not your fault, it feels like your fault. Even though you couldn't help it, I am so angry. Now, I can't even find your phone.

The phone pinged out loud, plus buzzed in his hand.

Unable to stop himself he stared at the next text.

I know it's almost been a year and I shouldn't be so angry, but I am. I miss you. I love you. Good night.

Blaze stared at the last text until the phone turned off. He had his programmed to stay on for a full minute, this one wasn't programmed to stay on that long. He wasn't sure why, but the fact he was holding a dead man's phone felt ... weird.

He turned off the notifications, then put the phone back in his backpack pocket and tried to shake off the weird feeling. He'd go back to the airport and drop it in lost and found tomorrow.

He moved back to his bed. Logically, he knew it wasn't his fault, really, for reading those texts, but ... it felt like he'd just invaded someone's privacy.

He pulled the covers up, and turned onto his side, he stared at the neon clock on the nightstand. Barely past midnight. Shoot, his sleep would be all messed up.

He prided himself on living the way Benjamin Franklin told others to live, 'Early to bed, early to rise makes one healthy, wealthy and wise.' Truthfully, he wasn't sure if Benjamin Franklin really said that. It was something that his father often would quote Benjamin Franklin as saying. Why was he even thinking about this?

His heart still raced and he sat up, commanding himself to take some deep breaths. In one, two, three, four and out, one, two, three, four. 'It wasn't just effective to breathe deeply in labor, but in all anxious situations.' He grinned and thought his joke, that he told to all the people with pregnant animals. At least he could grin at his own joke, even if he was annoyed that he was wide awake.

He was sure, if he was with one of his brothers and made that crack, that they would say something even more stupid back to him like 'what, are you a pregnant woman now, dude?'

He actually laughed. Then he laughed harder thinking about the fact he was having fake conversations with his brothers in his mind. But it got him to relax and be able to think clearly about this whole situation.

So he'd seen a couple of texts from someone to their dead ... husband? He didn't know. Husband? Boyfriend? He wasn't

sure. The fact that the person who used to own the cell phone was now dead ... was the part that had him all ... off.

It wasn't like he'd meant to see them. Heck, he shouldn't have bothered with picking up the phone in the first place. Ugh. He blew out a breath and pushed the covers off, wishing he weren't wide awake and feeling juiced up.

Why did it matter what the texts said on some random phone? It didn't. Yet, he was now drawn to the phone and he wondered if she'd sent any more texts. Wait. Was it even a woman who'd sent the texts?

He pulled the phone out of his backpack pocket and pushed the side button. Immediately it showed one more text.

Oh, my brother is still watching over every, little thing I do. As if I were some mental patient or something. I'm so tired of it.

Gall. Why did it have to have another text. And why was he now scrolling up and reading all of the previous texts?

It seemed like there were texts every day.

All about the same thing, how ticked off this person was at the other person. Okay. This person was grieving. Clearly.

It did feel like an invasion of privacy, but it wasn't, because the person wasn't alive, right? But...it was an invasion from the 'alive' person, right? Whoever they were.

He paused when he got to a picture. The picture was a candid shot. One of two people dancing on a crowded dance floor. But ... the face.

The woman's face was lit up with laughter. Her red hair was long, all the way down to her lower back. She wore a silver dress and was dancing with someone.

His heart raced even more. She was gorgeous. More than gorgeous. She was otherworldly kind of gorgeous. Like...the kind that was photo shopped.

But it was clearly not a photo-shopped photo. The annoying part was he couldn't see the guy. He could tell they were close to the same height and that the guy had black hair.

Off the shoulder. A hippy, urban type for sure. Why was he getting mad at a dead guy? He scrubbed a hand over his face and felt the five o'clock shadow. Blaze liked to be clean shaven. He messed with his prickly facial hair, annoyance trickling through him about this whole situation. Annoyance with himself. He couldn't help but read beneath the photo.

See how happy I was that weekend? Well ... before you left me that night. Before ... you died on me.

He gulped and then shut off the phone. He shouldn't be reading this. Looking at this. Obsessing over a woman who'd lost someone.

An obscenely beautiful woman who clearly still mourned ... her husband?

Arg. He put the phone back in the backpack pocket and hated himself. He rushed back to the bed and got inside of it, pulling the blankets up and shoving his head into the pillow. He turned on his side and commanded himself to go to sleep.

Yet, sleep evaded him. All he could see was her smile and that red hair. Shoot. His mind felt scrambled. She must keep the phone to text it. So she was on board the airplane today?

So she was in Kentucky?

He forced himself to stay in bed and focus.

Gold.

He was here for gold. To find out if Ed Peters had bought gold from Kelly Hamilton's grandparents.

Focus.

The trouble was, the more he tried to focus on the reason he was in Kentucky, the more he thought about her smile.

He would find this woman tomorrow. He would track her location from this phone. Yes, that was it. He would do the right thing and give the phone back.

Then he would focus on the gold.

Yes, that's exactly the thing he would do.

Chapter 2

Eden Cappa stared out of the café early in the morning, into the rain, and wished ... she was still in Denver at the art convention she'd been at last week. She'd gotten in last night and it was like the grief that had finally abated slightly, was back in full force.

She sipped her coffee, the black, no nonsense coffee she liked to drink and thought out the grueling day in front of her. Owning and running a gallery in St. Louis, Kentucky hadn't necessarily been her exact dream.

Sure, she'd always loved art, went to University and studied art, but ... living and working in Kentucky... that choice had made for her a long time ago. Decades, generations, before. She wouldn't stretch her mind back to how many generations of her family had lived in Kentucky. She wouldn't think about her grandmother's stories about the Cappa's and how her family had emigrated from Southern Italy when her grandmother was a little girl and come to St. Louis. They had done what a lot of Italian immigrants had done at that time; start a restaurant.

In fact, her parents still owned and ran 'Cappa's.' The Cappa's restaurant that was hooked to the Cappa Café, that her brother now owned. Along with being a full-time detective, he owned this place. This place was also hooked to the Cappa Gallery that was above the restaurant and café that her parents had insisted on helping she and Tony build after they'd married two years before.

Tony. She pushed away thoughts of him. She couldn't start this day feeling guilty.

After sucking in a long breath, she tried to relax. It'd been almost a year, she had to let it go. She had to.

Happy thoughts. Her therapist told her to have some happy thoughts in reserve to pull out when she needed them. Puppies licking her face from the animal shelter she went to once a week to volunteer at now flooded her mind. She smiled. It was a bonus that Tony had never gone to the animal shelter with her. He'd hated animals he'd always insisted. Which...had

been a huge turn off when they'd first met at the University of Kentucky's art show. But she'd gotten over it. They'd made a treaty that she could go visit animals at the shelter, not own one. Which ... didn't really feel like a treaty to her, more like a concession, but she hadn't pushed Tony.

Three years ago, when she'd been fresh out of school and hired to run the University's art functions. She'd met Tony, the ... 'a European who could donate a lot of the money to the University.' At least that's what her boss had told her when she'd asked about the guy at the Art function.

In her wildest dreams she never thought she'd end up dating 'the European' then marrying him. It had been a wild whirlwind romance that ... she hadn't recovered from.

Well, at least she was functional. For a brief stint her parents and brother had checked her into a hospital. A hospital that had been a prison for her and she still resented them for it. She shivered and took another sip of coffee, smiling to herself that caffeine was just what she needed when she had the dark thoughts.

Obviously, she'd forgiven her parents and brother. Well, she almost had. She took another sip and thought about the hard therapy she'd gone through while in the hospital. About the skills she'd been taught about positive self talk, about ... keeping her thoughts on good things.

A hand patted her shoulder. "Sis, you okay?"

She jolted and startled, looking at the concern in her brother's eyes.

"Fine." The word came out harsher than she meant it. More like 'bug off big brother' and less like 'yeah, I was just thinking stuff.'

He surrendered. "Sorry, I just..." he trailed and she didn't comment that she knew what would come after that 'just.' He just worried she was going crazy and would end up in the mental again? Yeah, that's right. 'The mental' that's what she'd named it in her mind. One time she'd said it to her

mother and her mother had said, ‘I don’t like you calling it that.’

Forget her mother. She didn’t get to censor how she thought about a place she’d forced her into. “I’m fine,” she said slowly this time.

He swallowed, then a sly smile washed over his face. He nodded to the counter and leaned into her. “Check out Mr. Cowboy there. I just got into a little altercation with him in the parking lot. He parked in my spot, that was clearly marked ‘manager’ and I told him to move.”

Without drawing attention, she caught sight of a cowboy hat and some jeans that looked ... well, they looked pretty good on the man, if she were being asked by a friend she might say.

She wouldn’t say it to her brother.

Pretending that she cared about some random stranger and the fact he wore a huge cowboy hat into the café, or the fact he’d parked in her brother’s spot, she nodded. “Wow.” She couldn’t help but roll her eyes.

Her brother grunted. “You’re being rude?”

Instantly, she was annoyed. “So what if I am?”

Her brother owned the café and would check in on it, but he was a full-time detective for the St. Louis police and he seemed to never like anyone and he acted like everyone should bow down to him.

“What’s wrong, Eden?” his tone was low, controlled. “Is being back at the gallery getting to you? Maybe you should take up Sharon on her offer to buy the place?”

Now, she wasn’t annoyed, she was ticked off. She stood. “Okay, now you’re trying to tick me off. No, I don’t need to sell my gallery to your precious Sharon.” She glared at him.

“Well, she’s done most of the work and she says even though you’re telling everyone you’re ‘back at the gallery’,” he said, air quoting, “You only go in for a couple of hours and she runs the place.”

“Oh, that’s what Sharon says?” She gave him a sarcastic frown. “That’s what Sharon says, the woman you’ve barely been dating for three months.”

“What has that got to do with it?”

“She doesn’t know everything, just because you’re dating her.” She stepped closer to her brother, acting like she would have a physical confrontation with him. Which she never would, but she wanted to smack his superior look off his face.

Frankie sighed. “Do you want to fight, sis?”

She gestured to the man at the cash register with the cowboy hat getting coffee. “No but I also don’t care about some guy who took your parking spot and wears a cowboy hat!” She was yelling now.

“What’s the problem?”

To both of her surprise, the guy in the hat was holding his coffee and standing right behind Frankie.

Frankie turned and glared at him. “None of your business.”

She agreed with Frankie, no one should get themselves tangled in a family affair. “Right, buzz off, Cowboy!”

The guy lifted his hand and waved at them. “Look, I don’t want trouble.”

The guy held her eyes for a second, before turning his attention to her brother.

Cat like eyes. Green eyes. Aqua green. A different part of the ocean than her Tony’s color. No. No. No. She quickly turned to grab her jacket and hit her coffee. She cursed, hating that she’d caused another mess for her brother to clean up. She reached for the little napkin on the table and fruitlessly put it in the middle of the spill.

“Shh. It’s fine.” Her brother put his hand up, signaling for her to stop her fussing. “I got it. Jimmy’s got it.” He waved at Jimmy, the manager of the café, who’d been cleaning the glass windows that peered onto main street.

“It’s fine,” Jimmy said.

“Sorry,” she said, hesitating and meaning it. Even though she had forgiven her brother, she still felt nervous around him sometimes, knowing that whatever he observed about her behavior would get back to her parents; it was just the way it was in the Cappa family. She gave her brother a hooded look. “I better go and open up today. Check the books after being gone last week.”

She could feel the Cowboy’s eyes still upon her.

“Sure, sure,” her brother said, lightly leaning in and kissing her cheek. “You go. I’ll see you later. Sorry.”

“Me too.” She felt bad for her behavior and the spill. She turned to Jimmy, who was already hustling toward them, a rag in his hand. “Sorry.”

“No worries, Ms. Cappa. No worries.”

She got to the door and paused, not wanting to look back, but unable to stop herself.

Tony was talking to Mr. Cowboy Hat, but ... Mr. Cowboy hat was looking at her.

Somehow, that felt ... weird. She turned away and rushed out.

Whew.

Who was that?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Taylor Hart has always been drawn to a good love triangle, hot chocolate and long conversations with new friends. Writing has always been a passion that has consumed her dreams and forced her to sit in a trance for long hours, completely obsessed with people that don't really exist. Taylor would have been a country star if she could have carried a tune—maybe in the next life. Follow me on Bookbub, Facebook, Twitter, Insta!

